



Rules of Engagement

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Dreamspinner Press

Published by
Dreamspinner Press
4760 Preston Road
Suite 244-149
Frisco, TX 75034
<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

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Cover Design by Mara McKennen

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<http://www.dreamspinnerpress.com/>

ISBN: 978-1-61581-211-0

Printed in the United States of America
First Edition
November, 2009

eBook edition available
eBook ISBN: 978-1-61581-212-7

To Mom, Dad, and Eddie for their love and support,
and to Nichola—I am once again in your debt.

Chapter 1

THE bartender leaned down to pull a bottle of Bud Light from the refrigerator beneath the bar. As she did, the front of her shirt fell forward, giving me an eyeful of her ample cleavage. Glancing up, she gave me a grin that almost made my heart stop.

“Bud Light,” she said. As I took the bottle, I deliberately brushed my fingers across the back of her hand. Her eyes darted to our hands, then back to me. I winked, and she returned it.

A moment later, she was gone, tending to other patrons, and I smiled to myself as I leaned against the bar and looked around the club. All of the bartenders in this place flirted with their customers. It was just some harmless, playful fun, and usually more than enough to get me spun up and horny. Not that I needed a lot of help with that these days.

Before I realized what I was doing, I thumbed the place where my wedding ring used to be, and that familiar knot of guilt sank deep into my gut, pulling my good mood down with it and dulling the excitement from my brief exchange with the bartender. I had no reason to feel guilty; the divorce wasn’t final, but the marriage was long since over, even if I wasn’t over it.

I sighed into my beer bottle before taking a long drink. Maybe tonight wasn’t a good night to be out on the prowl. At least nights like this were getting fewer and farther between, but they still happened, and it was happening now.

Oh well. I was already out for the evening. I might as well have a good time instead of going home and drinking the wife away.

Some cheering and shouting caught my attention, and I craned my neck to look at the pool tables on the opposite end of the room. A guy in a cowboy hat stared slack-jawed at the pool table, his shoulders slumping and head shaking as if in disbelief. His opponent—a cocky-looking bastard in a half-buttoned denim shirt over a white T-shirt—held his cue in one hand and reached across the table to shake hands. With a smirk on his face, he said something to the cowboy, who then rolled his eyes, slammed his cue onto the rack, and stormed off.

The winner picked the ante up off of the corner of the table and pocketed it. He lifted his eyebrows and spoke to the onlookers, asking a question by the looks of it. Judging by the way most of them avoided eye contact and even backed away, he was looking for another victim. He smirked and ran a hand through his dark hair, which fell to just above his collar. Even the way his hair was kept seemed cocky: perfectly trimmed and managed, but just long enough to say “I don’t give a fuck what you think of it.”

A girl in a blue tank top shimmied out of the crowd and plucked a cue off the wall. She grinned at the pool shark, wiggling her shoulders just enough to jiggle her breasts. I—and damn near every man in the bar—immediately took a drink. The pool shark, though, didn’t seem fazed. He put some chalk on his cue and grinned at her, saying something that brought a little extra color to her cheeks.

He tossed his head to get a stray strand of hair out of his face and looked up at her as he took a shot. When he grinned, the devilish sparkle in his clear blue eyes was visible even from across the room.

From where I stood, I couldn’t hear anything, but there must have been some serious shit-talking, if their expressions were to be believed. Satisfied that this would be more entertaining than wallowing in self-pity, I moved closer to watch the game.

“Go easy on him, Josie,” one of the guys said to the girl.

“Nah,” the pool shark said, leaning over to take a shot. “Give me all you’ve got, girl. I can take it.” The light above the pool table added a soft shadow below his prominent cheekbones and illuminated his hair, picking out hints of copper that made me wonder if he’d had his

hair highlighted. *Since when do I notice these things?* I pulled my attention away from him and tried to focus on the game.

“Maybe *he* should go easy on *her*,” someone else said. “Have you lost a game tonight?”

The pool shark snorted as he took a shot and pocketed the six. “I haven’t lost a game all week.”

“That’s going to change tonight,” Josie said. Though she sounded cocky, the crease between her eyebrows betrayed her lack of confidence as she watched him drop the three.

“Maybe tonight.” He lined up a shot. “But not this game.” As if to emphasize his point, he hit the cue ball and pocketed the one and four in a combo that could only be described as a thing of beauty.

“Distract him,” one of the guys said to Josie. “Show ’im your tits.”

“That won’t work.” The shark looked over his shoulder at the guy who had made the suggestion. “Might trip me up if you show me yours, though.” Laughing as he turned back towards the table, he caught my eye, and we exchanged the briefest glance.

“You know, if you’d let her play, she might beat you,” someone said.

“I will,” the shark said. “As soon as I miss a shot, the table is all hers.” He leaned over the table.

I chuckled. “Spoken like a man who always hits where he’s aiming.”

His eyebrows lifted, as did the corner of his mouth. “When there’s a possibility of being beaten by a girl, you’d better believe I do.” His eyes shifted to the cue ball.

“I could think of worse things than being beaten by a woman.”

He looked at me again. “Oh?”

Shrugging, I lifted my beer to my lips. “Like losing to someone who actually knows how to play.” I sensed Josie glaring at me from the sidelines, but my eyes were locked on her opponent.

When his eyes came up this time, there was something unreadable in his expression, something that lodged the breath in my throat. An instant later, he focused on the game again. He took his shot, and the two narrowly missed the corner pocket. Cursing, he stepped back from the table to let Josie take her shot.

“About damned time,” she said. “Now let me show you what it feels like to be beaten by a girl.” She leaned over the table, straining the seams of her painted-on jeans. She had damn near every man in the bar mesmerized, myself included. When she lined up a shot and paused to adjust her grip on the cue, I went for my beer.

As I tilted the bottle back, I glanced at the pool shark.

He was looking right at me.

There was an intriguing look on his face, something that appeared to be a combination of amusement and cockiness. He seemed to be reading me. Sizing me up. Mentally scrutinizing me, as if trying to decide whether or not to challenge me.

I rolled a sip of beer around in my mouth for a second, and as I swallowed it, I swore he was watching my throat. Then he met my eyes again, and I got the feeling he’d made his decision of whether or not to challenge me.

I knew in that moment that, once he finished with Josie, I would be playing the next game.

Josie managed to drop four balls before she missed a shot. Her—and soon to be my—opponent soundly trampled her after that, knocking in every remaining solid ball before sinking the eight.

“Good game,” he said, extending his hand across the table.

She shook it and smiled, but her smile was thin-lipped with annoyance, and her grip on his hand looked stiff and forced. They exchanged terse pleasantries, and she left.

He looked at me and gestured at the table. “I’ve got plenty left. You game?”

I smirked and took a cue off of the wall. “You’re on. What’s the ante?”

Picking up his beer, he said, “Fifty.”

Fishing the money out of my wallet, I eyed him. "So how long has it been since you lost a game?"

He chuckled as he racked the balls. "A few days. But I have been known to lose on occasion."

"Good," I said. "Then at least I know you're used to it."

His grin widened and his eyes narrowed. "Confidence. I like that."

I set my beer down and put chalk on my cue. "I hope you like losing too."

"You'll have to tell me what it's like."

I looked at him to make a smartass retort, but he wasn't looking at me. He was looking at the chalk. At my fingers holding the chalk. I turned it slowly on the end of the cue and watched as his eyes followed when I set the chalk down.

He cleared his throat and picked up the chalk. "Your break."

I nodded. An unfamiliar tension crept into my gut as I set the cue ball on the table. Lining up my shot, I struggled to focus, forcing myself not to follow the muffled grinding sound of my opponent putting chalk on his cue. Swallowing hard, I furrowed my brow and stared the cue ball down.

I broke, and the twelve dropped. On my next shot, the ten went into the side pocket.

"Looks like you're stripes." He didn't sound in the least bit nervous. As far as he was concerned, he had this game in the bag. *We'll see about that.*

"So I am," I said, eyeing the table and sizing up the available shots. Then I glanced at him. "Don't worry. I'll get mine out of the way for you in just a second."

He snorted as he lifted his beer to his lips. "How considerate."

The cocky side of me wanted to go for a fancy combo shot to impress the gathered crowd, but the competitive side of me knew better than to risk it. Against someone like him, it was best to stick to the simple, straightforward shots. The final score was all that mattered, and

the two fifty dollar bills on the end of the table didn't care how it happened.

I avoided his eyes as I lined up my next shot. In spite of my confidence, he made me nervous. It wasn't just that he was an incredible player; there was something else in the way he looked at me that unsettled me. Something that said he was still sizing me up and not just as an opponent.

Focus. He's just trying to intimidate you. I took a deep breath and made my shot, knocking the fourteen in. As I moved around the table toward the cue ball, I chanced a look at him. Our eyes met briefly, but it was enough to make it difficult to breathe.

Maybe it was just some sort of technique he used to psych out an opponent, but I had never seen anything like it. When his eyes locked on mine for that instant, he startled as much as I did. I wondered if his pulse jumped the way mine did.

If he was trying to make me nervous, it was working.

Blood pounding in my ears, I leaned over the table. Just as I took my shot, someone bumped into me from behind, and the cue ball whizzed past the nine with room to spare. I cursed under my breath.

The pool shark caught the cue. "I'll let you shoot that one again."

"How kind," I muttered, looking over my shoulder to glare at the intruder while I reached out to take the cue ball.

The ball landed gently in my palm, and the soft warmth of his thumb grazed the side of my hand. I looked at our hands and then at him, and I instantly knew that it was deliberate. I shivered and closed my fingers around the cue ball, exhaling as we broke contact.

He swallowed, eyes still locked on me as if daring me to look away first. "Your shot."

"Thanks." I almost choked on that single word. Clearing my throat, I set the cue ball back in its place on the table. Glancing behind me to make sure no one was going to bump into me this time, I set up my shot.

No one touched me, but my hands were still unsteady from that unnerving exchange, and in spite of lining up the perfect shot, the nine

bounced off of the side and came to rest in the middle of the table. Sighing, I stood and looked at my opponent.

“Your shot,” I said.

He nodded, smirking. *Cocky bastard*. I couldn’t believe he’d managed to psych me out, that I’d fallen for his head games and let myself get too rattled to take such a simple shot.

His eyes flicked around the table, looking for just the right shot, probably calculating every possible outcome from every possible angle, analyzing the game the way a chess player did. As he did, his fingers drummed the side of the table, and I’ll be damned if there wasn’t just a hint of unsteadiness in his hand. I furrowed my brow, focused on his hand, trying to decide whether or not it was just my imagination.

The drumming stopped.

The trembling didn’t.

And when I looked up, he was looking at me.

This time, when I swallowed hard, I was sure his eyes followed the ripple down the front of my throat. The tip of his tongue swept across his lips, and he quickly looked away, focusing on the game. I stood back from the table, turning my eyes towards the scattered balls but not actually looking at them.

Whatever he was doing, it wasn’t a game. It wasn’t an attempt to psych me out. If anything, he was struggling as much as I was to stay focused.

“You’re up.” His voice startled me.

Looked around the table, I mentally tallied the score. Four stripes left, three solids, and the eight ball. Christ, he’d managed to drop four while I wasn’t even looking. Maybe he wasn’t as distracted as he let on.

I knocked two in before I scratched. Then he dropped one before missing. Then I got one more. All the while, we avoided each other’s eyes, focusing on the game.

The crowd around us had thickened. From some of the murmurs, people seemed impressed that I was giving the nameless pool shark a run for his money, but others noticed—as I did—that his technique was

faltering. He wasn't playing the way he usually did, the way he had when he stomped Josie and her cowboy predecessor.

I wondered if any of them felt the puzzling tension that didn't seem to have anything to do with the game at hand.

"Fuck," he muttered as the cue ball followed the two into a corner pocket. He fished it out and handed it to me.

This time, I let my fingertips brush the heel of his palm, and he sucked in a breath. In spite of how stuffy and hot it was in the club at that point, I was secretly glad I'd chosen to wear a long-sleeved shirt. Any less, and everyone in the club would have seen the goose bumps he raised on my arms.

I pocketed the eleven, and the score was even: we each had one left besides the eight ball.

I missed.

Then he missed.

Cursing under my breath, I took my next turn. Neither of us were playing nearly as well as we could, but why? What the hell was going on?

I focused on the cue ball, but movement at the opposite end of the table caught my eye. My breath caught in my throat as I looked up just in time to see him take the chalk away from his cue and blow the excess off.

Fucking hell, what is the matter with me?

Forcing myself to concentrate, I knocked the thirteen in. He pursed his lips and raised an eyebrow. The eight ball was sitting in front of the side pocket. It was an easy shot. He knew he was toast.

Assuming I could convince my hands to work, that is. I tried to shoot him a smug look, was just about to talk some shit, when the tip of his tongue swept across the inside of his upper lip. Without thinking about it, I did the same, and he looked at me just as I did. The nervous ripple that ran down the front of his throat turned my knees to water, and the sudden ache below my belt told me *exactly* what this tension was all about.

I tried to breathe. Tried to focus on my shot. Tried to comprehend that it was a *man* having this effect on me.

“Eight ball, side pocket.” My mouth was dry. I concentrated on the cue ball, focused on it, tried to think of anything other than the pool shark and the hard-on he was giving me. Thank God I’d not only worn a long-sleeved shirt to cover up the goose bumps, but I’d left it untucked, which I hoped was enough to save me some embarrassment.

I took the shot, and the eight ball dropped.

The crowd around us broke into cheers, applauding me for beating the pool shark and ribbing him for allowing his streak to be broken. He shook his head in disbelief and picked up the money from the end of the table.

“Good game,” he said. “Fucking good game.” He handed me my winnings and then extended his other hand. “Brandon Stewart.”

“Dustin Walker.” I shook his hand. In the same instant that I let my thumb run across the back of his hand, he did the same to mine. We both tensed and then released each other’s hands and cleared our throats.

“Anytime you’re up for a rematch,” he said, holding my gaze with what seemed like an unusual amount of effort for someone who was usually so cocky. “You know where to find me.”

I swallowed. “I may take you up on that.”

He gestured at the table. “Ready when you are.”

“Actually, I’d better get going,” I said. “But I come here a lot. If I see you again, I’ll gladly take you up on another chance to wipe the floor with you.”

He smirked and winked. “Anytime. Any place.”

We shook hands again. Then I finished my beer and headed for the door, trying to figure out what the fuck had just happened.

Chapter 2

AS I stepped outside, the cool air hit my lungs and my face, nearly knocking me off my feet. The club was always stuffy, but it was the area right around the pool table that had become unbearably warm.

Over and over, I relived that game. The looks. The way he touched me. The tremor in his hands. I had never had that effect on a man, at least not that I was aware of, and no man had ever had that effect on me.

What the hell?

It was barely ten o'clock, but I had to get out of there. One more game would simply have been too much. There was no way I could play another game, or even breathe, in Brandon's intense presence.

I dug my keys out of my pocket and clicked the remote to unlock the doors.

"Hey, Dustin!" Brandon's voice straightened my spine and stopped me in my tracks. I turned around. He was walking quickly but casually. Not in any hurry but certainly not out for a lazy stroll. He had a black leather bomber jacket on now, his hands in the pockets. When he caught up to me, he said, "That was an impressive game."

"Likewise," I said, trying to breathe.

We stood in silence between my car and another for a long moment, avoiding each other's eyes again.

He cleared his throat. “Look, um,” he paused. “There’s a tournament this weekend. Eight ball.” He wetted his lips, sending a shiver up my spine. “I, uh—”

“Oh,” I said. “Well, I’ve never played competitively.”

He smiled. “You should give it a try.”

“Maybe I will. Are you going to be playing?”

“Hell yeah.”

“Maybe I’ll just come watch.” My cheeks burned as I realized what I’d just said. “The game. Watch the game.”

He laughed softly. “I know what you meant.”

“I’ll think about it.” Extending my hand, I added, “I should go.”

“Yeah, me too.” He met my eyes as he shook my hand. “Just thought I’d let you know about the tournament. I forgot about it while we were in there.”

“Thanks,” I said.

His hand was still clasped in mine as we looked at each other in silence. I doubted he came out here just to tell me about the tournament. I wanted to ask why he’d tracked me down, but I couldn’t remember how to speak.

And I couldn’t take my eyes off of him.

Movement drew my attention to our hands, and I thought he was releasing mine, but instead, he turned his hand, grasping mine the same way he would if we were arm-wrestling, and pulled me towards him.

He caught me by surprise and knocked me off balance. I stumbled forward, he stumbled backward, and in a heartbeat, he was backed against the other car, our hands still clasped together between our chests, my other hand braced against the car beside his head. Our hips were separated by a sliver of space, but his knee just barely touched the inside of mine.

Neither of us breathed. Neither moved. The only sound between us was the muffled creak of his jacket when he finally drew a breath. I swallowed nervously, and he did the same. Whatever tension had

developed between us in the club was nothing compared to the electricity crackling in the air now.

“Sorry,” he whispered. “I didn’t mean to throw you off balance.”

“It’s okay.” I paused, furrowing my brow. “What did you mean to do?”

He laughed, his cheeks darkening a little. Meeting my eyes with a shy expression, he said, “Just satisfying a little curiosity.”

My eyebrows lifted. “About?”

“I wondered what you would do.” He held my gaze, but I could tell he was nervous. Much more nervous than he’d been during the game. Probably more nervous than someone like Brandon was accustomed to being. He licked his lips, that simple, subtle gesture making my cock twitch.

Jesus, Brandon, what are you doing to me? “Was this what you expected?”

“I didn’t know what to expect. I still don’t.” His fingers moved slightly against mine, as if his hand wanted to tremble but couldn’t because of my grasp. Taking a breath, he whispered, “Your shot.”

My heart pounded. Something in my mind told me that this was my cue to step back, to break the awkwardness of the moment and return us to a safe, somewhat comfortable distance between two—I thought—heterosexual men. But I didn’t move. I didn’t know what to do.

He sucked his lower lip into his mouth for a second, licking it quickly. I suddenly wanted to taste his mouth, to know what his tongue felt like against mine.

Avoiding his eyes, drawing back only slightly, I started to speak but then hesitated. My cheeks burned.

“My back’s against the wall,” he whispered unsteadily. “All you have to do is step away. Let go and step away.”

Swallowing hard, I looked him in the eye. “You don’t want me to back away, though, do you?”

He shook his head.

Barely whispering, I said, “What do you want me to do?”

“I want—” He hesitated. “I want you to do what feels right.”

I leaned closer to him, inhaling slowly and catching his musky, masculine scent. Goosebumps prickled my skin and my knees threatened to buckle as I brought my hips closer to his. We both gasped when my erection brushed his. I was shaking now, overwhelmed by him, by this moment.

Our faces were close enough that I could feel the heat radiating off of him. When he exhaled, his breath was warm on my skin, and it was all I could do to stay standing.

Finally, I managed to say, “Your shot.”

“Tell me what you want.” The vibration of his voice thrummed in the tiny space between his lips and mine.

“You know what I want.”

“You’re right, I do.” His lips touched mine, and I couldn’t take the distance anymore: I kissed him, just my parted lips against his. We were still for a moment, just breathing each other. When he tilted his head slightly, his chin brushed mine, and the rough texture of his lightly stubbled jaw emphasized the warm softness of his lips.

His tongue parted my lips. As the kiss deepened, I shifted my balance, letting myself sink against his body as I took my bracing arm off of the car. I slid my arm around his waist and moaned softly into his kiss as he pressed his hips against mine. We explored each other’s mouths, and I let myself get lost in his embrace, in *him*.

The creaking of his jacket barely registered in my consciousness as he raised his arm. His hand went to the side of my neck where it paused for a moment before drifting up into my hair, letting his nails gently scratch my scalp. The resulting shiver made me gasp, and I broke the kiss for little more than a heartbeat, but it was too long to be away from the warmth of his mouth, and my lips returned to his desperately and passionately.

His kiss was as gentle as any woman’s, possibly more so. That surprised me for some reason. I don’t know what—if anything—I’d ever expected from a man’s kiss, but the soft, sensual touch of his lips

and the sweet taste of his tongue were more arousing than anything I'd ever experienced.

He tenderly ran his fingers through my hair and down the side of my face. I did the same, exploring the cool softness of his hair and the coarseness of his jaw.

I broke the kiss and rested my forehead against his, holding his face in both hands. His thumbs brushed the sides of my jaw as we stood in breathless silence, no sound between us except for his jacket squeaking with every ragged breath he drew.

My hands were shaking. So were his. Neither of us could draw a steady breath. I was so hard it hurt, and judging by the way he moaned softly when I pressed my cock against his, he was too. Never in my life had I been so turned on, even though all I'd done was kiss him.

And I needed to do it again.

I pulled him to me and kissed him, using the tip of my tongue to draw his into my mouth. The sweet taste of his mouth and his masculine scent made my head spin. I couldn't get enough of him.

Grasping his hair gently, I pulled his head back and dipped my head, kissing his neck the same way I had done to women in the past. A low moan vibrated against my tongue, and he dug his fingers into my shoulders. Kissing my way up the side of his neck, I found the spot just beneath his ear and flicked my tongue across his skin. He pulled me closer and pressed his hips against mine as I sucked his earlobe into my mouth. Then I kissed his neck again, working my way down to the front of his throat.

"Kiss me." His voice was little more than a deep growl that I felt rather than heard.

"I will." My lips never left his skin. I kissed his neck again, running my fingertips down the opposite side.

"Fucking kiss me," he murmured. I grinned against his skin and paused to make a gentle circle with the tip of my tongue.

"Kiss me. I *want* you to kiss me." The amount of need in the word "want" almost knocked me off of my feet, but before I could do what he begged me to do, his fingers tightened in my hair and he pulled my head back. He kissed me, devouring my mouth with a kind of

hunger I'd never before experienced. I pressed him up against the car, needing to be as close to his body as possible. I was dizzy, overwhelmed, completely lost in him. I didn't know what I wanted to do, what I wanted him to do. I couldn't comprehend anything except my need to touch him and taste him.

After a while, he broke the kiss and looked at me, touching my face. Then he dropped his gaze. "*Fuck.*" He sounded frustrated, almost angry.

Alarmed, I said, "What is it?"

He kissed me again, gently this time. Swallowing hard, he whispered, "I don't want to, but I have to go."

Disappointment, relief, and frustration tightened my chest. "Right now?"

He licked his lips. *Christ, that's even hotter now that I know what it tastes like.* "If I don't..." His voice was unsteady. "We'll be here all night."

I nodded and, as much as it killed me, released him, slowly breaking contact with his body. Then he seized my shirt and pulled me to him again, kissing me hungrily. We both tried to draw away, then came back for more. Tried again. Came back. Each time our mouths met, the desire and fervor were even more intense.

Finally, we managed to pull ourselves off of each other.

Leaning against my car, I tried to catch my breath, to calm down, to bring myself back to Earth. I gripped the door handle to keep myself from pulling him in for just one more kiss.

We stood in silence for a moment. Then he came toward me. I avoided his eyes, afraid I'd completely lose control if I so much as looked at him again.

"I'd like..." He paused. "I'd like to see you again."

Swallowing hard, I said, "Me too."

"Dustin."

I closed my eyes.

"Dustin, look at me."

Willing myself to stay in control, I raised my head and looked at him. The ache below my belt intensified, and when our eyes met, I barely suppressed a frustrated moan.

“I’ll be at the tournament on Saturday,” he said.

“I know.”

“Will you be there?”

Wild horses couldn’t drag me away, I wanted to say, but all I could manage was a nod.

He smiled. Then he touched my face and kissed me. It was just a soft, gentle kiss this time, his lips barely touching mine, but the electricity was still palpable in the air. I had no idea how he could stay so calm and in control in that moment, but when he broke the kiss, just a split second before he finally pulled away, he released a ragged breath against my lips and his fingers twitched against the side of my face.

I held my breath. If he didn’t pull away, I wasn’t going to be able to hold myself back. I needed him. I needed him in ways I couldn’t fucking comprehend.

He took his hand away from my face and I released my breath. There was less room between us than there had been earlier, when I’d thought he was too close, but now it seemed too far. Too far, but still too close.

“I’ll see you on Saturday,” he said.

“Saturday,” I said with a nod.

He smiled, and some of that cockiness I saw in the bar crept back into his expression. “Are you going to be playing?”

I laughed in spite of the maddening tension. “We’ll see.”

“Good night, Dustin.”

“Good night, Brandon.”

And he was gone, leaving me standing on shaking legs, leaning against my car, listening to his footsteps fade into the night, wondering what in the hell just happened.

THE treadmill shifted to a faster interval, catching me by surprise. I cursed, adjusting my speed, and reminded myself for the hundredth time to pay attention.

But by the time the interval changed again a minute later, dropping to a steady jog as it had a dozen times since I started my run, I was a million miles away and almost stumbled again.

Fuck it. I was too distracted for intervals. I changed the program on the machine to finish out the last three miles of my run at a brisk but steady jog, leaving my mind free to wander wherever it pleased.

Specifically, to one Brandon Stewart.

Grabbing my towel off of the bar, I wiped sweat off of my face, all the while replaying everything that had happened the night before. Trying to figure out what exactly *had* happened. Was I really attracted to a man? Had this ever happened before, and I somehow didn't notice?

The gym was a setting that tended to lend itself very conveniently to flirting and checking people out. In over five years as a personal trainer, I had admittedly checked out more than a few women. Looking back, I'd also had countless opportunities to do the same with men, but aside from occasionally stopping to admire a particularly interesting tattoo, I couldn't remember ever giving a male client a second look.

Even now, as I continued my run, I looked around the cardio room, trying to find a man who piqued my interest. None.

For that matter, I couldn't remember a woman who had ever driven me to distraction the way Brandon currently did. My ex-wife certainly never had. The last girl I had dated left me with a smile on my face and a few scratches on my back for good measure, but even that long weekend of furniture-splintering sex hadn't left me in this kind of stupor.

Maybe I was gay. Or bisexual. Or... something. Hell, at this rate, I was wondering if I were simply Brandonsexual.

All questions about my sexuality aside, there was something else that bothered me about this development with Brandon: my divorce.

I'd filed almost six months ago. Though it was a relief to be out from under Stephanie's thumb, I still caught myself comparing every

woman I dated to her. I found myself looking for women who were as different as humanly possible from Stephanie. If a woman so much as smiled the way Stephanie did, I wanted to—and often did—run in the opposite direction.

So was my attraction to Brandon just an extreme attempt to get over my ex?

He was as different as anyone could possibly get from Stephanie, at least physically. From gender right on down to eye color, I couldn't get much further from her than Brandon.

As far as I could tell, his personality was completely different too, but aside from some pool table banter and the flirting in the parking lot, I hardly knew him. I knew he was sarcastic, witty, and obviously intelligent, judging by the way he played and the way he spoke. He was cocky, but not obnoxiously so. In fact, it was a rather attractive quality, a way of carrying himself that said, "This is the way I am; if you don't like it, fuck off." It was confidence more than arrogance.

But beyond that, I knew nothing about him. My first impression, though, was that he was nothing like my catty, controlling, manipulative ex-wife.

So was I just attracted to Brandon because of what he *wasn't*?

I wasn't just attracted to Brandon, though. I was *drawn* to him. Moth to a flame, that was me to Brandon. Even from across the room, he'd intrigued me, and I could only half-heartedly convince myself that it was his crowd charisma or his billiards prowess that pulled me to that table. There was something about him, and judging by the way his game had faltered and the nervous but ballsy way he'd pulled me up against the other car, he felt it too.

So this is what chemistry feels like.

And if I was just looking for something to shift gears from Stephanie, why Brandon? Why now?

The treadmill beeped and started slowing down to the cool-down phase. Trying to concentrate on my workout, I finished the cool-down, wiped down the treadmill, and headed upstairs to the weight room, pulling on my weightlifting gloves.

In the weight room, as I added plates to a barbell, someone nudged my arm. I jumped, having been completely lost in my own thoughts. I looked up to see Tony, one of my regular clients.

“Whoa, sorry to scare you,” he said.

“Don’t worry about it.” I took one of my earbuds out. “Just had the music on a little loud. What’s up?”

“Hey, I hate to bother you during your workout, but....” He paused.

“I’m on the clock either way,” I said with a shrug. “What do you need?”

“You showed me how to do handstand push-ups last time, and—” He cut himself off, scowling. His face flushed a little. “Man, I just can’t get it right.”

“No problem. They’re tricky. Come on, I’ll show you.”

“I’m okay when I’m still using the wall for support,” he said as he followed me over to one of the areas by the wall. “But as soon as I come away from the wall, I can’t keep it together.”

“Just takes practice,” I said. “It’s all about balance.” I folded my arms. “Show me what you’re doing.”

He scowled again. Then he took a breath and went into a handstand. He wobbled slightly but then recovered. As soon as he started going down, though, he lost his balance and dropped his feet back to the floor. “See?”

I nodded. “Yeah, you’re not focusing on keeping your core solid on the way down.”

His eyebrows furrowed. “Really?”

“Yeah. As soon as you start coming down, you put all your focus on your arms and shoulders, then your core relaxes, so you lose your form. You can get away with that to some degree when you’re using the wall for support, but not freestanding. Now watch.” I put my hands on the floor and kicked up into a handstand, breathing slowly and evenly as I tightened my abs and held the stand for a second to stabilize. Once I was steady, I lowered myself, concentrating on

keeping my back and abs tight, almost letting my face touch the floor before pushing back up. I did three reps before I dropped my feet back to the floor and stood.

“You son of a bitch, you make it look too easy,” he said with a good-humored scowl.

“Do it a few hundred times and it gets easier.” I chuckled. “But seriously, you have to watch your core, just like you do when you’re lifting. Let it go, and you’re going to lose your balance or get hurt.” I gestured towards the floor. “Try it again.”

He did nothing for a second, so I assumed he was processing what I’d told him. When he went into a handstand this time, he held it together, lowering his body and rising again with relative ease. He was still a little unsteady but didn’t lose his balance. After a few reps, he stood and laughed. “Yep, you were right. Thanks, man.”

“I’m always right.”

“Yeah, yeah, yeah,” he said. He shook my hand, and I headed back into the weight room.

Over my shoulder, I said, “You’ll be doing five sets of twenty at your next session, so practice.”

“What?” His voice was almost shrill with panic.

I looked at him and laughed. “Just kidding. But keep practicing.” As I walked away, I put my earbuds back in and let myself wander back into my own little world. Strangely enough, as I finished putting plates on the bar for a dead lift, I found myself thinking of my brief exchange with Tony.

For all I knew of what women liked, Tony was attractive. He was well-built and, even when he was sweaty and disheveled at the gym, well-groomed. There was certainly nothing about him that would make someone cringe, as far as I could tell.

Picking up the barbell, I started my first set of dead lifts.

I had several female clients who had progressed to handstand pushups, and while I did my absolute level best to be completely professional when I worked with clients, I couldn’t help but look at them in a decidedly *unprofessional* way during that particular move. It

was an extremely powerful move, one that engaged almost every muscle in the upper body. There was something incredibly sexy about a woman with that much strength, stamina, and balance.

By all rights, given my sudden interest in the male gender, watching Tony perform a handstand push-up should have at least elicited *some* sort of response.

Nothing.

Absolutely nothing.

As I set the bar back on the rack and stood, an image of Brandon in a handstand pushup flickered through my mind, sending a shiver down my spine.

After last night, I had no idea if I was gay or straight. I had no idea if this had anything to do with doing everything I could to avoid being with another woman like my ex-wife.

The one thing I knew for certain was that I was, without a doubt, *very* attracted to Brandon Stewart.

And I didn't want to wait until the tournament to see him again.

Chapter 3

AS SOON as I walked into the club on Friday night, my eyes swept over the pool tables in search of Brandon. Three of the tables were occupied; one was empty. No gathered crowd. No Brandon.

I sighed and headed for the bar. He was probably taking a break that night, given that the tournament was the next night. That, and he probably had a life outside of the clubs, unlike me.

Taking a seat at the bar, I ordered a Bud Light. The bartender on that night was a man, so I didn't flirt with him like I did the females. *Right. Because I would never find a man sexually attractive.* The memory of Brandon's kiss flickered through my mind, and I shivered.

"Anyone sitting here?"

I turned to see a barely-dressed brunette gesturing at the barstool next to me. "No," I said, smiling. "It's all yours."

She grinned and sat beside me. Her breasts jiggled a little beneath her low-cut top, and I shifted in my seat as my jeans suddenly got tighter. *Well, I'm definitely not completely gay.*

I chuckled and picked up my beer.

"What?" she asked.

"What?"

"You laughed."

"It was nothing, just...." I shook my head before sipping my beer. "Nothing."

She cocked her head, an amused look on her face. "I don't think I've seen you here before."

"I've been around," I said. I extended my hand. "Dustin Walker."

"Sophia D'Agostino," she said, taking my hand. I watched her eyes as we shook hands. Taking a chance that her expression was as flirtatious as it looked, I brushed my thumb along the back of her hand just before I released it.

Her spine straightened and her smile widened. I returned the smile.

"So, can I buy you a drink?"

"Vodka martini," she said. "And thank you."

I flagged the bartender down and ordered her drink.

Some commotion turned both of our heads towards the pool tables, and my heart stopped.

Brandon.

The other bar patrons greeted him, cheering and talking shit. A few guys puffed their chests out and grabbed cues, evidently telling Brandon they were going to beat him. As he pulled his cue out of its case and put it together, he just grinned.

That cocky, sexy grin. I remembered what it felt like against my mouth, and I couldn't breathe.

He looked in my direction and didn't look surprised to see me. Didn't seem put off by the woman I was obviously talking to. He just gave me a slight, almost imperceptible nod. A silent, "Yes, you're exactly where I expected you to be."

The temperature in the room skyrocketed. I went for my beer, desperate for something cold. It may as well have been hot water for all it cooled me and all I tasted.

"I don't know why people bother challenging him anymore," Sophia said, laughing as we both turned back to the bar. "They might as well just give him fifty bucks and leave."

"He loses once in a while."

She snorted. "I haven't seen it happen."

Laughing, I said, "I made it happen."

She blinked. "You beat him?"

I nodded, lifting my beer to my lips. "Couple nights ago."

"Very impressive," she said.

"He might have been having an off night." I shrugged.

"Maybe." Her eyes flicked past me, glancing over my shoulder and lingering for a moment before meeting mine again.

"Happens to the best of them." I glanced past her at Brandon, who was currently bent over the table, lining up a shot, and cleared my throat. "You ever tried playing him?"

She wrinkled her nose. "I'm not that great at pool."

"Just takes practice," I said.

Her eyes flicked past me again.

Taking advantage of her momentary disengagement, I glanced at Brandon, watching him pocket the eight ball and make himself fifty dollars richer. His back was to me, but I knew he had that grin on his face. I could feel it. It was like the man's facial expressions were tied to the damned thermostat. *My* thermostat, anyway.

Shifting on my barstool, I turned my attention back to Sophia. I opened my mouth to speak when the bartender stepped up to us.

"For the lady," he said, handing her a Bud Light. "From the gentleman at table four."

My breath lodged in my throat.

Sophia looked at the bottle with a mix of amusement and disgust. "I don't *drink* Bud Light." She picked up her martini.

"I'll take it," I said. "He must have thought my beer was yours."

"It's all yours," she said. "So he saw your beer but didn't see me talking to you?"

Oh, I guarantee he saw you talking to me. "Honest mistake, I'm sure." I picked the bottle up and looked at Brandon. I gave him a mock salute and took a sip.

He ran his tongue across his lower lip, smirked, and went back to his game.

Honest mistake, my ass.

I continued talking to Sophia for a while, but it was obvious we were both just trying to pass the time. Something—someone, most likely—behind me had her attention. A certain someone by the pool tables had mine. Sophia was attractive, but I'd have been an idiot to think she was interested in anything beyond this conversation.

I drained my beer. "Look, I'm going to head out. I've got an early day tomorrow."

She smiled and didn't seem in the least bit offended. I had a feeling she was looking for a quick escape to pursue whoever had been catching her eye over my shoulder.

As I picked up my jacket, I looked at Brandon. He had just finished his game and was collecting his winnings. He looked at me, as if he expected me to be looking at him just then, and his eyebrows lifted.

My heart jumped. Swallowing hard, I turned back to Sophia. We didn't bother exchanging numbers, but I paid for her drink, kissed her on the cheek, and started toward the door.

I glanced at Brandon on my way out to see if he was starting another game. Quite a few challengers had gathered, and the shit-talking was loud and enthusiastic. I had to crane my neck to find him in the crowd.

His back was turned as he put his cue in its case and picked his jacket up off of the back of a chair before disappearing into the crowd, probably going to pay his bar tab.

My heart jumped into my throat. Was I imagining it, or was he timing his exit to coincide with mine?

I went outside and slowly, casually walked across the parking lot, all the while listening for his footsteps behind me.

DISAPPOINTMENT tugged at my gut as my car came into view. I glanced over my shoulder for the hundredth time, but I was alone in the parking lot.

Oh well. Maybe I just imagined the looks. And the drink. My imagination must have just conjured that drink out of thin air. Maybe he was done playing pool but planned to linger for a beer or two.

I fished my keys out of my pocket and unlocked the door from a few feet away. As I came around the SUV parked next to my car, I stopped dead.

He was leaning against the driver's side door of my car, his hands in his pockets and that spine-melting grin on his face. "Hey, stranger."

I swallowed. "Hey." I glanced over my shoulder at the club. "How the hell did you beat me out here?"

He laughed. "I can move quickly if I see something I want."

My mouth went dry. We looked at each other in silence for a moment, and I very nearly had to put a hand on the car to keep my balance. He was only a few feet away now with nothing dividing us but taut space. Now that I was this close to him, I couldn't move.

He shifted his weight and wetted his lips. Then he smirked. "No luck with the girl?"

"No." I laughed. I managed to convince my legs to move and started toward him. "She wasn't my type."

"Really? You seemed pretty into her."

We were close enough to touch now, and I stopped, taking a breath and catching his masculine scent in the air. "Not really. Just wasn't clicking." My fingers brushed his, and I made no move to take my hand away. "Particularly not after some jackass sent her a drink."

He grinned, closing his fingers around mine. "What an asshole." His other hand landed gently on my hip.

"I know." I slid my hand around to his lower back and pulled him toward me, struggling to breathe as our bodies touched. "You would almost think he was trying to get between us."

"Maybe he was." He ran his thumb down the side of my hand. "But who wouldn't try to get to such a good-looking woman?"

“I got the impression he wasn’t after the woman.” Tilting my head, I kissed the underside of his jaw.

He exhaled, his hand drifting under the back of my shirt. “What man wouldn’t be after a woman like that?”

I sucked in a breath as his fingertips touched my skin. “A man who sends a beer to a woman who’s drinking a martini.”

“My mistake,” he whispered.

I raised my head. Our lips were nearly touching. “An honest mistake, I’m sure.”

“Terrible mistake. I hope I didn’t scare her away from you.”

“She was just something to keep me entertained until something better came along.”

His breath warmed my lips as he whispered, “And did it?”

“Did it ever.” And I kissed him. All week long, I hadn’t been able to get his kiss out of my mind, and it was better than I remembered. Every gentle touch of his lips and insistent sweep of his tongue raised goose bumps on my arms and sent shivers up my spine.

He moved his hips from side to side, letting his erection brush over mine, and I knew there was no way I could stop at just a kiss tonight. I wondered if I could even make it out of that parking lot without satisfying my desperate, painful need for him.

He kissed my neck and ran his fingers across my back under my shirt. “Got any plans for the rest of the night?”

My knees shook and I held him closer. “If I did, I just cancelled them.”

He laughed, his breath whispering across my neck. “My place is about ten minutes away.”

“I don’t know if I can wait that long.”

“Is that right?” He didn’t wait for an answer before he kissed me again. Then he whispered, “Neither can I.”

Before I had a chance to comprehend what he’d said, his hand slid between us, squeezing my cock through my jeans. I groaned,

letting my head fall back. He kissed my neck and squeezed me again, then let his fingertips trail along the fly of my jeans, the soft vibration of his nails on denim driving me wild.

“Jesus,” I breathed.

Against my neck, he said, “I’ve been thinking about you all week.” He squeezed me again. “And I’ve had a hard-on ever since I walked into the club tonight and saw you.” His fingers found the zipper pull, and I gasped as he drew it down slowly. My heart nearly stopped and my breath caught in my throat as he wrapped his fingers around my cock.

“Brandon—” I tried not to choke on my own voice. “*Here?*”

He glanced around the deserted parking lot. “There’s no one around.” Kissing my jaw, he sounded more desperate when he whispered, “You’d think I could wait another ten minutes to touch you...” He stroked me gently, slowly. “But I can’t. I can’t fucking wait.”

“Oh God,” I murmured, my body trembling against his.

He looked at me and wetted his lips. “There are so many things I want to do to you.” He stroked a little faster, a little harder. “And before tonight is over, I fully intend to do them.”

The touch of his hand and the promise in his words were almost too much. I put a hand on the top of the car door to steady myself, but when Brandon kissed the inside of my forearm, I very nearly collapsed.

He laughed and kissed me, stroking my cock between us. Nearly groaning, he said, “I want to suck your cock. I want to taste you.”

I rested my forehead against his, my entire body shaking with anticipation.

“I want to taste you when you come.” He squeezed and stroked me right to the edge. “I want to suck you off, but I’m not going to this time.”

“You’re going to make me come right here if you keep doing that,” I said through my teeth, struggling to breathe, to stand.

“I know,” he said.

Furrowing my brow, I tried to figure out what he was saying, tried to understand the words.

“This time,” he whispered, leaning in close enough to let his lips touch mine when he spoke, “I want to *watch* you come.”

As soon as he said it, I came, and I came hard, a groan lodging in my throat as he kept stroking me, kept squeezing me, as he said, “Oh fuck, I want more of that.”

I let my head fall against his shoulder as the tremors subsided, and he kissed the side of my neck, raising even more goose bumps on my skin. It took a minute for the world to stop spinning around me. When it finally did, I lifted my head and looked at him. As soon as our eyes met, the world shifted again. Never in my life had I seen an expression so full of ravenous, insatiable lust.

He kissed me gently, touching my face. “My place. *Now*.”

Chapter 4

I FOLLOWED Brandon to his apartment. He had said it was only ten minutes away, and the clock on my dash concurred, but I was sure we'd been driving for hours by the time we pulled into the parking lot.

My hands shook as I put the car in park. Getting the key out of the ignition might as well have been brain surgery. I started to get out, but something pulled me back, and I cursed as I reached down to unfasten my seatbelt. *Jesus Christ, man, get it together.*

When I finally managed to get out of the car, I caught Brandon's eye. The corner of his mouth pulled up, taking my pulse with it. My heart was pounding in my ears as I followed him across the parking lot, and the gentle pressure of his hand on the small of my back made me stumble.

"Sorry," he said, grinning at me in the low light.

I smiled. "What can I say? You're making me trip over my own feet."

He licked his lips as he pulled his keys out of his jacket pocket. "Then I guess you would be safer off of your feet, wouldn't you?" He put the key in the door.

Every nerve ending tingled. I knew why we were there, but hearing him say that just before we crossed the threshold into his apartment was unsettling. Arousing. Terrifying. It made perfect sense. It confused the hell out of me.

I followed him down the hall, praying that my feet would stay under me.

The click of the bedroom door closing behind us put me on edge. The entire drive over here couldn't have gone any slower. I wanted this, I wanted to be here, but now that I was here, my heart wasn't just pounding with excitement.

Putting his arms around my neck, he kissed me. I put my hands on his hips and drew him to me, not sure if I was more afraid of being too far away from him or too close to him. His fingers ran through my hair, and I sucked a breath in through my nose.

His hands trailed down my back, pausing just above the waistband of my jeans. Cool air hit my back as he slowly pulled my shirt up, but it was the sudden warmth of his palms on my skin that made me gasp. My head fell back and his lips were instantly on my neck.

A moment later, he lifted my shirt off and kissed my neck as his hands explored my back and chest. His fingertips trailed along the edge of one of my tattoos.

"I had a feeling you had ink," he whispered. He sucked my earlobe between his lips, making my breath catch.

I swallowed. "What made you think that?"

"Just a gut feeling." He turned his head and flicked his tongue across my shoulder. I brushed his hair off of his neck and kissed the exposed skin, shivering as he released a soft, almost inaudible moan.

A hint of ink peeked out beneath the back of his collar. I drew a small circle with my tongue at the base of his neck, then said, "So you have some too, I see."

He raised his head and kissed me. "Want to see them?"

My heart thudded. My mouth was dry, so I simply nodded. He stepped back, pulling my breath with him.

When his shirt was gone, I couldn't decide what mesmerized me more: the elaborate, colorful tattoos on his biceps, or the hairless, perfectly toned chest and abs. In any other situation, the professional

side of me would have been thoroughly impressed by how fit and sculpted he was. At that moment, though, all I could think of was how badly I wanted to touch and taste his skin.

He turned around, pulling his hair out of the way so that I could see the full tattoo, an elaborate dragon that covered most of his upper back and shoulders. I ran my fingers across it, not sure if I were more intrigued by the grooves and ridges of the tattoo, the powerful muscles beneath, or the heat of his skin against mine. I flattened my hands against his back and ran them down his sides. Grasped his hips. Before I realized what I was doing, I pulled his hips back against me, pressing my erection against his ass.

He gasped. So did I. I held him against me and he leaned back, sliding a hand around the back of my neck and turning his head to kiss me. The warmth of his back against my chest made me dizzy.

Without separating from me any more than he had to, he turned around in my arms and pulled me closer, kissing me passionately. I put my hands on his hips. Then his back. Then his face. Then his back again. I just couldn't get close enough to him.

Breaking the kiss, he was breathless and shaking when he looked at me. His tongue swept across his lower lip as he released an unsteady breath. The look on his face, that desperate, lustful look, and the knowledge that it was *me* that turned him on like that, was the most arousing thing I had ever witnessed.

He reached for my belt and I reached for his, both of us cursing as we struggled with the buckles.

As his belt jingled free and I went for his zipper, I froze.

Brandon stopped. Looked at me. Scrutinized me the way he had when he'd sized me up before challenging me to that fateful game of eight ball. His brow knitted with concern. "What's wrong?"

I dropped my gaze.

He touched the side of my face. "You've never done this, have you?"

"I, um." I chewed my lip. "Not with...."

"Not with a man?"

My cheeks burned. Looking anywhere but at him, I laughed in spite of—or maybe because of—my sudden nervousness.

Touching my chin, he turned me to face him, forcing me to look him in the eye. His expression was completely serious. “Do you *want* to do this?”

“Absolutely,” I breathed. The only thing stronger than my uncertainty about what I was doing was my certainty that I wanted to do it.

He smiled. He drew my face to his with his fingertips and kissed me gently. “I’m glad you told me.”

My cheeks were on fire now. “So you would know why I was being so clumsy?”

“No.” Grinning against my mouth, his lips barely left mine as he whispered, “Because now I’ll be sure to take my time and make it memorable.” His tongue parted my lips, and his hands went back to my belt.

Willing my own hands to stay steady, I unbuttoned the top of his jeans and found the zipper pull. The front of his jeans was stretched tight over the thick erection beneath, and I let the backs of my fingers follow the rigid outline of his cock as I drew the zipper down. His mouth silently encouraged me, his kiss intensifying each time I touched him through his clothes.

Hesitant, uncertain, I slid my hand through the open fly, and when my fingers closed around his cock, he gasped hard enough to pull the breath out of my lungs. I stroked him slowly, gently, as curious and fascinated as I was aroused. A moment later, his hand was on my cock as well, stroking me just as he had in the parking lot.

He broke the kiss but didn’t pull away, just breathing against me. Finally, he swallowed hard and said, “Why don’t we get the rest of these clothes out of the way?”

Need trumped uncertainty and I nodded, ignoring the nervousness in my gut as we released each other and quickly got rid of the rest of our clothes. Together, we lay on his bed, the slow, tender kissing and touching completely belying the feverish desire that sizzled between us.

Perhaps I'd just never given it much thought, but it surprised me how sensual and gentle we were together. I'm not sure exactly what I expected. All I knew was that this surprised me. Everything about it surprised me.

I was on my back when he raised his head and said, "Nervous?"

"No," I said. He raised an eyebrow, and I laughed. "Yes."

He smiled. "Just tell me if you want me to stop."

"That's the one thing," I said, pausing to kiss him, "that I *don't* want you to do."

"Good." He kissed my neck, then my collarbone, and then down the center of my chest. When his tongue circled my nipple, sending delicious chills up my spine, I suddenly understood why women liked that so much. He paused to do the same to my other nipple, his eyebrows lifting as he looked up at me with an unspoken "Is this okay?" I smiled, and he flicked his tongue across my nipple.

I ran my fingers through his hair as he trailed soft kisses down my abdomen, letting the tip of his tongue run between the grooves of my six-pack. Everywhere his mouth touched—my abs, my sides, the groove between my hip and my thigh—reacted as if it were an erogenous zone, as if merely being touched by Brandon's mouth *made* it erogenous.

He ran his hand down my thigh while his lips lingered on my hip. I held my breath, gripping the bed sheets as my body tensed.

He sat up and looked at me as he trailed his fingertips down the shaft of my cock. It was the lightest, softest touch imaginable, and it nearly brought me up off of the bed.

"Oh my God," I whispered, closing my eyes as each slow sweep of his fingers sent electricity up my spine. Every reaction to everything he did, no matter how gentle, was more intense than the last, and I was completely unprepared for the barrage of powerful tremors that shivered through me when his tongue touched the head of my cock.

I couldn't breathe, couldn't move, simply surrendered as he held the base of my cock in one hand and slowly, *so fucking slowly*, took it into his mouth. He deep-throated me; then he ran his tongue up and down the shaft and around the head before deep-throating me again.

This wasn't a means to an end for him, a step he grudgingly took to get to the real action—he devoured my cock like he'd waited all his life to do it.

I grasped his hair gently, not pushing him or impeding his movement, just needing to touch him, needing to feel every perfect motion as he sucked me. It was so intense, so overwhelming, that tears welled up in my eyes.

More than anything, I wanted him to feel the same thing. I'd never gone down on a man, hadn't the faintest clue if I could even do it, but I needed him to feel what I was feeling.

"Come up here," I whispered.

He slowed his motion and looked up at me, still stroking me with one hand. Licking his lips, he didn't question me but came up to kiss me. I put my arms around him and held him close. Then, holding him against me, I rolled us over so that I was on top.

He didn't seem the least bit surprised as he grinned up at me. "Taking charge?"

I shrugged, kissing his neck. "Maybe." The dusting of stubble on his throat was smooth, as if it hadn't been long since he'd shaved, but it was still just rough enough to be tantalizingly foreign against my lips. It gradually gave way to the smooth skin above his collarbone as I worked my way down to his chest, circling his nipple with my tongue, just as he had done to me. I glanced up at him for reassurance or guidance, I wasn't sure which. In spite of the number of times I'd done that for a woman, I somehow expected to do it wrong, to be clumsy and uncertain, but when he closed his eyes and moaned, my doubts evaporated.

Kissing my way down his sides and his abs, I took my time, lingering here and there to savor his moans and the taste of his skin. Every time he tensed and shivered, every time he released an unsteady breath, my cock ached with need for him. The more I turned him on, the more he turned *me* on. By the time I flicked my tongue across his hipbone and started toward his cock, I was close to coming myself.

Trying to push my doubts and uncertainties aside, I closed my lips around the head of his cock. I was cautious, hesitant, watching and listening to the way he reacted to my every touch. Just as the lightly stubbled skin of his neck had fascinated me, so too did every inch of his cock. I explored it all, marveling at the way the textures of his skin felt different against my lips and tongue. While my lips registered the more pronounced ridges and contours, my tongue found the minute contrast between the smooth shaft and the softer skin of the head. The rhythmic pulsing against my tongue made my mouth water; it was like I could taste his heartbeat as his body responded to my touch.

He propped himself up on one elbow and watched me, his lips parted and his eyes half-closed. Running his fingers through my hair, he said, “Oh fuck, that’s good....”

I smiled and ran my tongue up the shaft of his cock, intoxicated by the taste and warmth of his skin. I took the head into my mouth, then a little more, slowly rising before taking more. I wasn’t ready to try deep-throating, but I loved the way his cock felt in my mouth and I wanted more.

“Jesus, are you sure you’ve never done this?” His voice sounded like little more than a moan.

Running the tip of my tongue around the head of his cock, I caught the tiny, salty-sweet drop of pre-cum. “I think I’d remember if I had.” And I took him into my mouth again, stroking with one hand as he had done to me.

His fingers tightened against my scalp. “Then you’re a fast fucking learner.” He groaned and his hips lifted slightly, his cock twitching in my mouth. “Christ, Dustin, you’re gonna make me come.”

My own cock ached as he said that, and I stroked him faster, taking as much of him into my mouth as I could comfortably manage. My heart pounded and my balls tightened, my entire body reacting as if I were on the verge of an orgasm. The more I sucked him, the closer I was to coming. Giving him a blowjob turned me on as much as receiving a blowjob ever had.

He moaned. “Oh fuck, you’re going—” His body tensed. “Wait, wait,” he pleaded.

I stopped, looking up at him as I swept my tongue across my lips. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing.” He was panting, his hand trembling as he ran his fingers through my hair. “But I want you to fuck me.”

My breath caught. I swallowed.

“Please,” he whispered. “I *need* you to fuck me.”

I couldn’t remember how to speak. The very thought of being inside him nearly made me come right then and there. We both moved to our knees and kissed hungrily. I don’t know whose body was trembling more, but we were both breathless and unsteady.

Brandon broke the kiss and leaned across the bed to the nightstand. He grabbed a condom and a small bottle of lube. Then he looked at me with a raised eyebrow. “Ever done this before?”

“Yes.” I paused and cleared my throat. “Not with a man, though.”

He laughed as he handed me the condom. “Same idea.”

Tearing the condom wrapper with my teeth, I managed to get it on quickly in spite of my badly shaking hands. Brandon put some lube on his hand and kissed me as he stroked my cock.

“Careful,” I said.

“Why?” he asked, smirking.

“Keep touching me like that and you’ll make me come.”

He released me so abruptly it took my breath away. “Can’t have that,” he said with a grin.

“Turn around,” I growled playfully. He gave me a wink and did as I asked. Putting my hands on his hips, I paused just to look at him. I was used to the soft, hourglass shape of a woman viewed from this angle, but Brandon was no less sexy; his broad shoulders and back tapered perfectly to his narrow waist, the muscles rippling as he supported his weight with his arms. I ran my fingers over his tattoo, my breath catching as his back arched and his skin quivered beneath my touch.

“Jesus,” I whispered.

He looked over his shoulder. "You okay?"

"Oh yeah," I said. "Just enjoying the view."

He laughed softly. Then he pushed back against me, pressing his ass against my cock.

My fingertips made slow, soft circles on his lower back. "Impatient, are we?"

"You're damn right."

I teased him with my cock, pushing just slightly against him, grinning to myself as he shivered. Pushing a little harder, I let just the head of my cock slide into him before pulling back again. It was all I could do to keep myself in control. I wanted him so bad it hurt, but I wanted to draw this out, to tease him.

"Jesus, Dustin." He was almost whimpering. "I can't wait. Fuck me."

"I will." I gritted my teeth, fighting to stay in control. I gave him just a little more of my cock before pulling back. "But I like watching you like this." *Knowing you're as close as I am to losing it.*

His shoulders shook and he leaned back against me, but I withdrew enough to keep him from taking more than I wanted to give.

"You're a tease." His voice was tinged with frustration and amusement.

"Just taking my time."

Without warning, he slammed himself back, and I was all the way inside him. I gasped, holding his hips against me as I tried to remember how to breathe.

I'm sure he intended to keep the bantering going at that point, but like me, he had lost the ability to string together a coherent thought. "Oh God," he said. "Oh my God...."

I pulled out slowly and slid back in, turned on beyond belief by the sight of myself disappearing into him. "Jesus," I whispered. I had watched myself fuck women in the past, had been enthralled by the sight of my cock slipping in and out of them, but this—this was different. It wasn't even because it was a man.

It was *Brandon*.

I was inside *Brandon*.

A deep groan escaped my throat. Leaning forward, I kissed the center of his back, slowly drawing the tip of my tongue up his spine as I took long, slow strokes inside him. He moaned, moving his hips in time with mine. I put my hand on the bed behind his and slid my other around his waist. He released a hiss of breath as my fingers wrapped around his cock.

“Oh fuck,” he groaned. Then he took a breath and said, “Fuck me hard.”

“You want it hard?” I nipped the back of his shoulder.

“Everything you’ve got,” he growled. There was nothing in his voice but pure, unadulterated lust, and I had never wanted someone so badly in my life.

“With pleasure.” I sat up, grabbed his hips, and fucking *railed* him. I drove my cock into him, trying to keep myself from coming, but my orgasm was approaching fast. Digging my fingers into his hips, I bit my tongue, trying to hold back. This couldn’t be over yet. Not yet. Not so soon.

“Oh my God,” he moaned, slamming his hips back into me, meeting me stroke for stroke. “Jesus, Dustin, your cock is fucking incredible.”

“Fuck, Brandon...,” I gasped. “Oh God, I’m gonna come....”

“So am I, so am—” His entire body tensed, and he threw his head back. “Oh... *fuck*...”

I couldn’t take it anymore. I pounded him as hard as I could, driven by his shudders and helpless moans, until I pushed as far into him as possible and held his hips still, held him to me while I came. “Oh my God, Brandon...”

We didn’t move for a moment. I was so overwhelmed I wasn’t even sure what to do next. All I could do was convince myself that I still could—and needed to—breathe.

Finally, holding onto him for balance, I pulled out. I got rid of the condom, and we collapsed together on the bed, facing each other on our sides.

“I still can’t believe you’ve never been with a man before.” He kissed me gently.

I laughed. “I still can’t believe I’ve *just* been with a man.”

He smiled. “I hope you can be persuaded to be with a man again.”

“I think I could be persuaded.” Pursing my lips, I watched my fingers trail along the edges of the tattoo on his bicep. “So, I assume this isn’t your first time with a man?”

“No, no, it isn’t.” He paused; then he chuckled. “I’ve been with women too.”

“Oh?”

“Fuck, yeah,” he said. “One of the perks of being bisexual.”

“Guess that makes it twice as easy to find a date.”

He snorted. “Just means I have to deal with twice as much bullshit *trying* to find a date.” An amused look crossed his face. “I can’t say I’ve been anyone’s first in a long, long time, though.”

I laughed. “I suppose there aren’t too many virgins pushing thirty.”

“You’d be surprised,” he said. “A lot of guys don’t figure it out until later. I dated a guy once that didn’t realize he was gay—not bi, mind you, *gay*—until he was almost forty.”

“Damn, that must have been an eye opener for him.”

“No kidding.”

Watching my fingers on his tattoo again, I was silent for a moment before I looked at him. “So how the hell did you know I was—well, whatever I am—before I did?”

“You mean when I came onto you in the parking lot?”

“Yeah.”

Shrugging, he said, “I didn’t. I saw someone who was attractive, and I went for it.” He paused. “I wanted you the second I saw you, but it took me a while to figure out whether you’d be receptive to it. It’s

always a risk approaching a guy that could be straight, because sometimes the response is a bit more hostile than just a rejection.”

I cringed. “I can imagine.” Then I ran my fingers through his hair. “So what gave it away?”

He smiled. At first I thought it was the cocky, knowing look I’d come to expect from him, but there was something distant in his eyes for a moment. Something nostalgic. Finally, he said, “When you went for the eight ball. Your hands were shaking, and you kept licking your lips.”

“I was doing that the whole game.”

The smile turned into a grin. *Ah, there you are, my cocky friend.* “You had that game in the bag,” he said. “It was an easy shot. You could have dropped that ball with your eyes closed.” He wetted his lips. “I’d never seen someone so nervous when he knew he was going to win.”

I laughed. “I had a feeling you were sizing me up. I just didn’t know why.”

“You’re right.” He leaned in to kiss me. “I was.”

“So you knew, when you came out to the parking lot—”

“I didn’t know what was going to happen.” His smile turned almost shy. “I was just hoping.”

I touched his face and drew him in for a long, gentle kiss. “I hope you weren’t disappointed.”

“No.” He ran his fingers through my hair. “I’m definitely *not* disappointed.”

Chapter 5

WHEN I walked into the club the next night, most of the crowd was centered around the pool tables. I vaguely remembered a few faces from the night I met Brandon, but they definitely remembered me.

“Hey! The challenger is here!” one guy in a backwards baseball cap said.

“Oh, sweet!” said a blonde who was, I was fairly certain, the girl who had challenged Brandon right before my game with him. “Maybe someone *else* will win for once.”

“We’ll see, won’t we?” I said, chuckling as I shouldered my way through the crowd to the signup sheet. As I put my name down and signed the “I understand the rules and all of that bullshit” blank next to it, I scanned the list. There were about a dozen players already signed up, and second from the top was Brandon. My heart jumped when I saw his name. I had to laugh. In the column where he’d written his name, his handwriting was perfect, but his signature was little more than a “B” followed by a hint of an “S” and a sharply angled line. The kind of quick, to-the-point signature that said, “Yeah, yeah, yeah, I read the fucking rules, whatever.” Flawless on one side, flippant on the other. *How very Brandon.*

“I suppose I should have left that second place spot open for you.” His voice startled me.

Looking over my shoulder, I grinned. “I don’t know. I think your name looks pretty good right where it is.”

There went the cocky grin. “You just want to be on top, don’t you?”

I winked. “Always.”

He clapped my shoulder, a perfectly platonic heterosexual gesture except for the quick, deliberate brush of his thumb across my arm. “May the best man win, then.”

“Assuming you don’t let me win again, right?”

He snickered. “Dustin, you won that one fair and square. I may lose sometimes, but not without a fight. I never *let* anyone win.”

“You’d never throw a game if the stakes were high enough?”

“Please. I’d fight to the last ball even if my own mother’s soul was on the line.”

“Cutthroat son of a bitch.”

“You better believe it. Come on, let’s grab a beer before the tournament starts.”

A few minutes later, the jukebox abruptly cut off, and the bar manager picked up the mic from the karaoke setup. “This is your last chance to sign up for the pool tournament.” He sent a very pointed glare in our direction. “Which we’re considering renaming the ‘Pay to Get Fucked in the Ass by Brandon Stewart’ tournament.”

I bit my tongue so hard I almost drew blood.

“Come on, Joe, I don’t win every time,” Brandon called across the room before sipping his beer.

“Right, right,” the manager said. “I think there was that one time last summer that you lost.”

“Hey now,” someone else said. “Some bastard beat him the other night. Anything’s possible.”

“Yeah, but is he here now?” Joe asked. “The ones that beat him never show up when it fucking counts.”

“Right here!” Brandon said, gesturing at me.

My cheeks burned as the entire room looked my way.

“Well then,” Joe said with a satisfied nod. “Maybe we have a contender, after all.”

I raised my beer and nodded. “I’ll try not to humiliate him too badly.”

Joe laughed. Then he continued. “You’ve all read the rules. Remember, slop counts, except for Brandon.”

“Hey! What the hell?” Brandon said.

“Just trying to make it fair for everyone. Now shut up, or I’ll make you shoot with your damned feet.”

“Fuck,” Brandon muttered into his beer bottle. We exchanged quick glances and laughed.

Joe went on, “This is a double elimination tournament. You lose twice, you’re out. We’ll be running all four tables until we get down to the semifinal, and the final will be on table one. Beat Brandon at all, in any game, and your next beer is on the house. Questions?” No response. “Let the games begin, then.”

I nudged Brandon. “Man, there’s free beer involved now. I’m going to have to wipe the floor with you.”

“Bring it on,” he said.

As the tournament started, we moved to our assigned tables. My first game was two tables over from Brandon’s, which was probably just as well. He would be enough of a distraction when I was playing him. I didn’t need him psyching me out during my other games.

My first two games were easy wins. The first was a college kid who probably would have played better had he been sober. It didn’t bode well for a successful game of eight ball when a player had to use the table to hold himself upright. My second opponent put up a fairly good fight until a fancy—but incredibly risky—combo shot sent the eight careening into the side pocket.

The third game was also a bit of a challenge. Never mind the fact that she was a much better player than the other two, she made a point of letting the front of her shirt fall forward—*way* forward—every time she leaned over to take a shot. By the skin of my teeth, I managed to beat her, but it was a close game.

Brandon played her in the next round. I wondered if he would have a hard time—so to speak—against her like I did. Of course, being Brandon, he beat her soundly without batting an eye, though he did send a few well-timed glances down the front of her shirt while she played.

We each lost one game—Brandon to the college kid that had evidently sobered up a bit, and me to Brandon—but we both won in the semifinals. He played circles around his opponent while I struggled against a guy who looked like a lumberjack and played like a pro. By the time I finished that game with another narrow win, I was sweating bullets while the unshakeable Brandon Stewart casually sipped his beer and chatted with two of the eliminated players.

Before we faced off in the final, he pulled me aside and said, “You know it’s nothing personal when I beat you, right?”

“It was nothing personal when I beat you. It won’t be this time either.”

He grinned. Then he lowered his voice. “When this is over, you game for a little one-on-one?”

I smiled, pretending that the very thought of touching him again didn’t make my knees shake. “Your place or mine?”

“You choose.” He sipped his beer. Dropping his voice to an almost inaudible whisper, he added, “As long as there’s a bed, you, and no clothes, I’ll be there.”

With that, he walked back to the pool tables, leaving me trying to catch my breath and wishing my beer was about fifty degrees colder. I took a long drink, trying unsuccessfully to think of something other than last night and what was in store for me tonight.

“We’re down to the final game,” Joe announced, bringing me back to the present. “And we’ve got newcomer Dustin Walker taking on Brandon ‘when will he ever fucking lose’ Stewart.” He looked around the room and stopped when he found me. “No pressure, Dustin.”

Raising my beer bottle and nodding, I said, “No, no pressure at all.” *Especially not after a certain someone made me think about—oh, Brandon, you son of a bitch.* I caught his eye as he put chalk on his cue.

Grinning, he put the chalk down and winked at me. I groaned and sipped my beer. Beating him the night I met him had been tough enough. This was going to be the longest game of eight ball in history.

Picking up my cue, I headed to the table, where the ref handed me the rack. As I racked the game, I said to Brandon, “I hope you don’t think you’re going to psych me out.”

“No, I don’t think I’m going to psych you out.” He leaned over the opposite end of the table, his lips twisting into that mouthwatering cocky grin. “I already *have*.”

I took in a breath through parted lips before I could will myself not to let him see my reaction.

Chuckling, he set the cue ball on the table. “May the best man win.”

“You’re evil,” I said with a laugh as I picked up the rack.

“You already knew that.” He leaned over the table.

“But with each passing day,” I said, trying not to stare at the way his long, slender fingers bridged the cue, “I’m learning just how deep those wells of evil really are.”

He winked at me but said nothing. A moment later, his cue snapped forward, and the balls broke. I heard two drop, but only saw one.

“Twelve and four,” the ref said.

“Hmm, so do I go after stripes or solids?” Brandon said, rubbing his chin and pretending to be in deep thought. Then he smirked and lined up a shot. “Might as well go with solids.” Looking at me, he added, “Then it’ll feel more consistent when I go to drop the eight ball.”

I rubbed my eye with my middle finger. Chuckling, Brandon mouthed, “Later.”

He dropped the seven and the one before scratching. He cursed under his breath as soon as he hit the cue ball, knowing the shot was doomed before it was halfway across the table. As we walked past each other on his way to the sideline and my way to the table, we exchanged a fleeting glance. He said nothing, did nothing, just looked at me with a totally neutral, casual expression. He added no flourish or flirtation to it, but it was enough to make my hands unsteady. *All part of your evil plan, isn't it, Stewart?*

More than ever, I was hellbent on winning this game.

Fortunately for me, Brandon's attempts to psych me out worked in my favor: as I tried not to think about him, I focused harder on the game. By the time this turn was over, I'd dropped three. As the game wore on, we were neck and neck, each with two left on the table.

Brandon knocked both of his in. He gave me a cocky look and said, "Dustin, why don't you call the pocket for the eight ball? I'd hate to think I won this on my own."

"Fine," I said, trying to glare at him, but laughing instead. "Side pocket."

He raised an eyebrow. "Well that's easy." The eight was a simple shot away from either side pocket. He leaned to take his shot.

"Wait, wait, wait," I said. He looked up. "Side pocket... on that table." I gestured at one of the other tables.

The rest of the crowd laughed. Joe said, "You know, since it's Brandon, I'm half-tempted to go along with this."

"All right, fuck you all," Brandon laughed. He pointed his cue at one of the pockets. "Eight ball, side pocket."

I gritted my teeth, knowing I was completely fucked. Ah well, it was a good run.

His cue jerked forward. "*Shit!*" he said the second it struck the cue ball. The eight ball shot across the table and narrowly missed the side pocket, bouncing harmlessly back into the center of the table.

Thrilled to see their perennial winner possibly meeting his first tournament loss in ages, the crowd cheered.

Brandon scowled, shook his head, looked at me with a smile, and gestured at the table. “Your shot.”

“No pressure, Dustin,” Joe said on the mic. “But you damn well better not lose.”

“No, no pressure at all,” I said, laughing and rolling my eyes. Surveying the table, pretending every eye in the room wasn’t burning a hole in my back, I tried to focus on my strategy. The eleven was an easy shot, sitting fairly close to the corner pocket, but the nine was some distance from the opposite corner. Might as well get the harder one out of the way.

I lined up my shot, took it, and watched with satisfaction—and relief—as the nine dropped.

“Nice shot,” Brandon said. “But have fun with *that* one.” I looked at the table and cringed. I’d completely misjudged where the cue ball and the eight ball would land. Now the eleven and the eight both teetered precariously on the corner pocket. The eleven was slightly in front; even the tiniest nudge on that ball could knock the eight in, costing me the game.

I ran a hand through my hair and blew out a breath. “Fuck.”

“You could have Brandon shoot it for you,” some smartass in the crowd said.

“No way,” Brandon said. “I’m not touching that.”

I gave him a stunned look, but his eyes were fixed on the table. He shook his head, wincing. When he met my eyes, his expression said, loud and clear, “better you than me.” I didn’t know if it was an attempt to psych me out or if he really didn’t envy my predicament. If it was the former, it was definitely working.

“Well,” I said. “Don’t have much of a choice, do I?” I considered a few different angles before I took my shot, hoping for the best. It was a common mistake for beginners to hit a ball too hard when it was so precariously positioned, knocking it away from the pocket rather than into it. In this case, my best chance was to do just that: hit them hard and hope that both, or at least the eight, rolled away rather than in.

It worked. Both the eleven and the eight flew in opposite directions away from the pocket. The cue ball, however, dropped.

Brandon whistled. “Nice shot.”

I glowered at the cue ball as I pulled it out of the pocket and handed it to him. I’d sacrificed my turn—and likely my chance to sink the eight ball—but at least the game was still on.

“I’m serious,” Brandon said, clapping my shoulder as we passed on my way to the sideline. “That was impressive.”

“Thanks,” I said. We exchanged smiles.

Joe elbowed me. “Nice run.”

“It’s not over yet,” I said with a shrug. The crack of the cue ball hitting another ball, followed by the hollow *thunk* of a ball dropping into a pocket made me pause. “Okay, *now* it’s over.”

The crowd cheered for both of us, and a moment later, Brandon’s arm was around my shoulders. “Good game.”

“Likewise.”

Whispering so low I could barely hear him over the cheering around us, he said, “I’m horny as hell. Why don’t we get the fuck out of here?”

AS SOON as we were in bed, we couldn’t pry ourselves away from each other. I wanted to suck his cock, I wanted him to suck mine, but I was lost in the sweet taste of his mouth. I hadn’t made out like this since I was a teenager, and every minute of it just got hotter and hotter.

He was breathless when he broke the kiss and said, “Fuck me. I want you to fuck me.”

“I will, but I don’t want to stop this.” My voice shook.

“I don’t want to stop either,” he whispered, holding my face with trembling hands. “But if you don’t fuck me right now....” He trailed

off, exhaling as he pressed his hard cock against me. “Jesus, Dustin, I need you to fuck me.”

There was no way in hell I could even think of resisting, not with the desperate hunger in his voice.

We sat up and I moved away from him just long enough to get the condom and lube. Even as I put the condom on, we couldn’t stop kissing. I wanted to be inside him, I wanted to fuck him until we both came, but his kiss turned me on like nothing else.

He started to turn around, but I caught his shoulder. “Wait,” I said, kissing him gently. “I want to see your face.” I reached past him and grabbed a pillow. “Put this under your hips.”

“You *have* done this before, haven’t you?” He smiled, putting the pillow behind him.

I winked. “A time or two.” He kissed me, and I lowered him to the bed slowly. I sat up, letting him wrap his legs around my waist as I pressed my cock against his ass. Watching his eyes, completely mesmerized by the look on his face, I slowly pushed into him. I gave him just a little, waiting for him to relax. When he did, I slid further in.

“Oh fuck, that feels good,” he said.

“And it looks incredible,” I said, holding his leg against my hip as I ran my hand up his trembling abs. “I love watching you like this.”

He closed his eyes and licked his lips. My mouth watered; I needed to taste his kiss again. Leaning over him, I slid my hand under his neck and kissed him. He put his arms around me, rolling his hips back and moving with me as I fucked him. I moved from the hips, taking faster, deeper strokes as he relaxed and accommodated me. The more I kissed him, the more I needed to fuck him, and the more I fucked him, the more I kissed him.

“Jesus Christ,” he moaned against my lips. “Oh God, Dustin, fuck me. Fuck me hard.”

I sat up and held his hips, slamming into him as hard as I could. His back arched, and the cords stood out on his neck as he begged for more, and I gave him more.

Holding one of his legs against me for balance, I let go of his hips and wrapped my fingers around his cock.

“*Holy fuck!*” he cried. “Don’t stop, Jesus Christ, don’t... fucking... stop....”

I tried to keep fucking and stroking him, but my rhythm faltered. I could barely breathe, could think of nothing but how incredible he felt and how fucking sexy he looked. A violent shudder shook me against him and I gasped, losing my rhythm completely. He overwhelmed me, drove me completely into oblivion, but I didn’t want to stop until he came.

“Dustin.” He sounded like his teeth were chattering. “Dustin, look at me.”

I hadn’t even realized I’d closed my eyes, but I opened them and looked at him, nearly coming just from the palpable lust in his eyes.

“Fuck, I’m gonna come,” I moaned.

“Do it,” he whispered. “Fuck me until you come.”

“I want you to come first,” I said through my teeth.

“I want to watch you lose control,” he said, almost moaning. “Don’t hold back, Dustin.”

I didn’t need any further bidding. Holding onto his hips, I fucked him with everything I had, gasping as my balls tightened and my breath caught and—

“Oh... *God!*” I drove my cock into him and came, every inch of my body shaking with a powerful orgasm. “Oh God, oh my God....” Completely overwhelmed, I was almost whimpering.

“You are so fucking hot when you come,” he moaned.

“So are you,” I growled. “And I haven’t seen you come yet tonight.” I pulled out and moved back on the bed. Then I leaned down and *devoured* his cock.

“Oh Jesus,” he moaned. “Oh God, just like that....” His cock seemed to get thicker, harder, and I knew he was close. I stroked him as fast as I could, licking and sucking him like it was the most incredible

thing I'd ever tasted, because it *was* the most incredible thing I'd ever tasted.

Just when I thought there couldn't possibly be any way to make this even hotter, his cock twitched against my tongue. Then again. If I hadn't already come, that feeling alone would have sent me into the stratosphere.

"I'm—" He gasped. "Oh fuck, fuck, Dustin, I'm—" He cried out, and a second later, his cock twitched again and hot, salty-sweet liquid shot across my tongue.

Up until that moment, I hadn't really thought about what it would be like for him to come in my mouth or how I would react, but when it happened, all I could think of was how incredible he looked and felt and tasted and sounded when he came.

When I looked up, wiping the corner of my mouth with my hand, he had his hand over his eyes. His lips were parted, his chest rising and falling rapidly as he struggled to catch his breath.

I sat up and quickly got rid of the condom, then collapsed on the bed beside him.

Still holding his hand over his eyes as if shielding them from the light, he licked his lips, swallowed, then said, "Are you *sure* you've never sucked a guy off before?"

I laughed, running my fingertips across his chest, watching his skin quiver beneath my touch. "I think I'd know if I'd ever had a cock in my mouth."

He moved his hand away then, looking at me. I swear to God, the man had tears in his eyes. It probably would have concerned me, but I remembered the way mine had welled up when he went down on me for the first time. I wasn't alarmed. I just couldn't believe I'd had that effect on him. He smiled. "You're fucking incredible."

"I don't know, I think I'm still a bit awkward." I kissed him gently. "Might need to practice a bit."

"Please, I've been with guys who are way more experienced, and they don't have a clue." He paused. "But if you want to practice, I'll gladly let you practice on me."

“Really? You’d do that for me?”

“Let you fuck me and suck my cock until you refine your technique?” He rolled his eyes and gave an exasperated sigh. “Well, if I must. I’ll manage somehow.”

“Such a humanitarian.”

“I’m doing it for the good of mankind.”

“Whatever the reason, I just ask one thing.”

His eyebrows lifted. “What’s that?”

I kissed him, then whispered, “Keep doing it.”

Chapter 6

MY WIFE had never been a fan of physical intimacy—not with me, anyway—and probably would have been perfectly happy if I’d slept someplace else. If we somehow managed to come together in our sleep, she made sure to separate herself from me as soon as she was awake, usually by way of an elbow to my chest.

In the months since my marriage had ended, I’d gone out with a few women, had a few one-night stands and even a few multi-night stands. One of the things I’d discovered along the way, something completely new to me, was the morning after. Specifically, waking up with my arms around someone and her body close to mine. The first time I woke up like that, I could have stayed that way for hours. It was heaven, plain and simple. Pure heaven.

Nothing, however, compared to waking up to the warmth of Brandon against me.

My arm was draped over his waist, his fingers loosely intertwined with mine. His hair was cool against my face, his back warm against my chest. Every time I inhaled, I caught his familiar masculine scent and the faint, mouthwatering smell of sweat and sex.

The fact that I was with a man instead of a woman didn’t even register. Nothing about this moment seemed strange or foreign. It was perfect.

I nuzzled the side of his neck and kissed his shoulder, smiling against his skin as he responded with a soft murmur and a shiver. He

squeezed my hand, and I ran my thumb along his finger. He stirred a little, and my first reaction was disappointment, thinking he was pulling away. Out of habit, I anticipated the elbow and disgusted “get *off* of me,” but neither came. Instead he moved closer to me, bringing our joined hands up to his lips.

“Morning,” I whispered, kissing his shoulder again.

“Morning.” The warm softness of his lips against my fingers took my breath away.

He rolled onto his back and smiled at me. Propping myself up with my elbow, I rested my head on my hand. I touched his face, running my fingers along the coarse stubble of his jaw. He did the same, and I bent to kiss him gently.

He looked at me, then laughed.

Cocking my head, I asked, “What?”

He shook his head. “I was just thinking.”

“About?”

“I just think it’s funny.” He ran his fingertips along the underside of my jaw. “We’ve made it into bed twice, and I still don’t know a thing about you besides your name.”

I chuckled and looked around the room. “Well, now you know where I live.”

“Yes, and you know where I live,” he said. “And I know what kind of car you drive.”

“You won’t tell anyone, will you?”

“Our little secret,” he said in a stage whisper.

“Good.” I stroked the side of his face, then let my hand rest on his chest. “So what do you want to know?”

He shrugged. “Anything, really. I just want to get to know you.”

“So you haven’t looked me up online to see if I’m some sort of sexual predator?”

“Dustin, you can’t fool me.” He winked. “You’re not a sexual predator.” Trailing a finger along my collarbone, he wetted his lips. “If anything, I was the predator.”

“So that makes me sexual prey?”

“It makes you *my* prey.” He kissed me lightly, then let his head fall back on the pillow. “So let’s start with the easy stuff. Job?”

“Personal trainer.”

His lips parting, he looked at my arms, then my abs. “That explains a few things.”

“Obviously you’ve spent some time with one of my colleagues,” I said, running my hand over his gorgeous six-pack.

“I may have to fire him.” He winked.

“I’m always game for new clients.” I returned the wink. “Okay, same question.”

“You wouldn’t believe me if I told you.”

“Pro billiards player?”

He snorted. “Come on, I’m not *that* good.”

“Well, I assume you’re not a hitman or a member of the KGB.”

“Not anymore, anyway,” he said with a casual shrug.

“Pornographer?”

He laughed. “If I were, I’d cast you.”

“Dirty bastard.” I paused for a quick kiss. “Come on, tell me.”

“I’m a biochemist.”

My eyebrows jumped. “Seriously?”

“Seriously.”

“So, what exactly do you do? You’re not designing weapons for bio warfare or anything, are you?”

“Only in my spare time, but that’s more of a hobby than a profession.” He chuckled. “I teach at the university and one of the community colleges. Doesn’t pay quite as well as working in a lab, but”—he shrugged—“I enjoy it.”

“I never would have guessed.”

“Most people don’t.” He smiled. “Guess I don’t strike most people as a science geek. The last guy I dated didn’t believe me until I showed him my degree.”

“So what does that take? A master’s?”

“Doctorate.”

“You have a—*doctorate*?”

He nodded. “I just thought it would be fun to have crippling amounts of student loan debt for the rest of my life and figured it would be hot to have a few extra letters after my name.”

“Oh, you’re right about that. It *is* hot.” I grinned. “Dr. Brandon. Damn, that sounds sexy.”

“Just don’t call me ‘Doc’, or I may have to hurt you.”

“Doc with a Cock.”

He snorted with laughter. “Okay, that’s a new one.” Our fingers laced together on his chest. He looked at me quietly, opened his mouth to speak, then paused.

“What?” I asked.

“Never mind,” he said. “I didn’t want to get too personal.”

“Brandon, we’re naked in bed after fucking all night,” I said. “I don’t think there’s such thing as ‘too personal’ anymore.”

“Okay, you’ve got me there.”

“So go ahead. Hit me.”

“Ooh, so you’re into spanking?”

“That’s not what I meant.”

He laughed. Then his expression turned more serious. “Okay, so if there’s no such thing as too personal....” He paused, looking at me as if he was already searching for my answer. “How long were you married?”

The question caught me by surprise. “How did you know I was married?”

He laughed and put his hand over mine, letting his fingertip trace where my wedding ring had been. "When you're nervous, you always go for that spot. I've never seen any man do it who isn't or wasn't married." Then he paused. "You're not still married, are you?"

"No, thank God. Well, it's not final yet, but it's over." I looked at our hands and chuckled. "Remind me never to play poker with you."

He grinned, shrugging. "I'm a people watcher."

"So I see."

"So what happened?"

"With?"

"Your marriage." He hesitated. "If you don't mind my asking."

"Not at all." I let out a breath. "Honestly, it was over before it started."

"Really?"

I nodded. "Unfortunately, it took me ten years to figure it out."

"Ten years?" He shifted his gaze for a second, furrowing his brow, and I could tell he was calculating it in his head.

"I got married when I was eighteen."

"Ah, okay," he said. "I was starting to wonder how you looked so young."

Grinning, I kissed him lightly. "You and your silver tongue."

He smiled. "So anyway, what happened?" His eyebrows lifted a little. "Not trying to pry; I'm just curious."

"Well, I guess you're entitled to know a thing or two about me now that you've gotten me into bed."

"I know more than a thing or two about you now." He trailed a fingertip across my nipple and made my breath catch. He gave a satisfied chuckle, then returned his hand to its place over mine on his chest. "Go on."

"Tease." I cleared my throat. "Anyway, she was a bitch. Really. Treated me like shit."

"And you married her because...?"

My face burned. "Because I let my parents twist my arm into it."

He winced. "Ouch."

I shrugged. "I let them talk me into joining the military too."

"Wait," he said. "You... you were in the military?"

I nodded.

"Branch?"

"Marines."

Holding up a finger, he closed his eyes. "Hold on, give me a minute."

"What? Why?"

He gestured for me to be quiet, then exhaled and opened his eyes. Smiling, he said, "Just had to picture it for a second."

"You know, I have pictures if—"

"Yes, I want to see them."

"Utilities or dress blues?"

"Yes."

We both laughed. Then I said, "So yeah, I did four years in the Corps and ten years chained to her."

His smile fell. "So what ended it?"

I thumbed my ring finger out of habit. Realizing what I was doing, I glanced at him to see if he'd noticed. He had. He squeezed my hand gently.

"If you don't want—"

"She cheated on me."

His eyebrows jumped. "What woman in her right mind would cheat on you?"

I rolled my eyes and laughed, certain I was blushing. "I don't know, but she did." I swallowed, trying to push the bitterness back. "I don't know how long she was doing it, but I suspected it for a while."

"So did she come clean?"

I shook my head, swallowing again as emotion tightened my throat. As much as I was glad to be out from under her thumb, the way things ended still hurt. Barely whispering, I said, “I caught her.”

“Oh Jesus.” His thumb moved back and forth on the back of my hand. “That must have been....” He trailed off, shaking his head.

“Yeah, it wasn’t pleasant.” I absently drew tiny circles on his chest with my fingers. “I thought she was cheating and figured out that she was spending an awful lot of time online, so I made a fake account, found her on some site or another, and responded to an ad she’d put up.”

“Wow, she had an ad up?”

I rolled my eyes. “Yep. Said she was single, looking for some hot action, the works.”

“Now that is brazen. And fucking cold.”

“You’re telling me. Anyway, I thought finding the ad would be enough, but even that didn’t convince me that she was really doing it, so I responded to it. We kept e-mailing for a while. A long time, actually. I don’t know, I guess I was just in denial, kept telling myself I needed more evidence that she was really doing it. Or maybe I could figure out from her e-mails what she was missing. What I was doing wrong. And honestly....” I trailed off, and my thumb went to my ring finger again.

He squeezed my hand. “What?”

Taking a deep breath, I said, “In a way, I guess I kind of enjoyed flirting with her again. Even though she didn’t know it was me, and I knew what she was doing—” I cut myself off, swallowing hard. “It’s pathetic, I know.”

“Understandable, I think,” he said. “After that long, I’d probably have done the same thing in your position.” We were both quiet for a moment. Then he said, “So did you eventually call her on it?”

“Not exactly.” I closed my eyes for a second. “She wanted to meet up, so I....”

“Jesus Christ, Dustin,” he said.

“I agreed to meet at a hotel. Told her to wear something sexy.” I laughed bitterly. “You’ve never seen a more stunned expression on a woman’s face than when she opened that door.”

“I can’t even imagine.”

“The really sad part was that I showed up a little bit early, and another guy was leaving the room as I was coming down the hall.”

Brandon’s eyes widened. “You’re shitting me.”

“Nope.”

“Damn. I know what it’s like to be cheated on, but that....” He shook his head.

“Yeah, not the most pleasant day of my life. But it gave me the balls to finally get the fuck out.” I freed my hand just long enough to scratch the back of my neck, then laid it over his hand, letting our fingers lace together. “So there’s my sob story. What happened with you?”

“When I was cheated on?”

“Yeah.”

Rolling his eyes, he grumbled, “Which time?”

“Ouch.”

He shrugged. “It’s life. Happened a time or two in my early twenties. The last one, though....” His eyes took on a somewhat distant look for a moment.

I ran my thumb along the side of his hand. “What happened?”

“One of my ex-girlfriends came to stay with me for a while. Going through a nasty divorce, needed a place to stay. We were still friends, so I didn’t think much of it.” He clicked his tongue and his lip twisted into a scowl. “Then I came home early and caught her with my boyfriend.”

My jaw dropped. “You can’t be serious.”

He nodded. “Dead serious. Last I heard, they’re still together too.”

“That’s fucking brutal.”

“You’re telling me.” He sighed. “I mean, he and I were probably on the way out anyway. I was getting ready to defend my dissertation, so I was wrapped up in all of that. Wasn’t really putting the effort into the relationship.”

“That doesn’t justify cheating, though.”

“No, definitely not,” he said.

The arm supporting my head was falling asleep, so I moved onto my back. Brandon followed, putting his forearm on my chest and resting his chin on it.

I ran my fingers through his hair. “Sounds like our women—and men—were cut from the same cloth.”

“Yeah, no shit.” He was silent for a moment. “I assume this all went down fairly recently? With your ex?”

“About six months ago.”

He pursed his lips. “So then it’s probably a safe assumption that you’re still on the rebound.”

“You could say that.” It took me a second to figure out where he was going with that train of thought. Then guilt tugged at my gut, as if I should have told him all of this sooner. Running my fingers down the side of his face, I said, “I’m done with her, but yeah, still on the rebound.”

“I can only imagine,” he said.

“I guess I should have told you sooner, but—”

“Dustin, you don’t owe me any kind of explanation. Up until last night, this was just a one-night stand.”

My heart pounded. “And after last night?”

He grinned. “Now it’s a two-night stand.”

I laughed and lifted my head to kiss him. “I wouldn’t mind going for a three-night stand.”

Moving a little closer, he kissed me and pressed his hips against mine, silently letting me know that we were very much on the same page. “Another night like last night and I might need medical attention.”

“We could play doctor.”

He laughed as his hand slid under the covers, his fingertips drifting down my side. “Or we could just see how much we can fuck before neither of us can move.”

I started to come back with something witty, but he wrapped his fingers around my cock, and I forgot how to speak.

GUILT tugged at my gut as my cell phone beeped on the counter while I stretched before my morning run. I told myself I’d read the new message as soon as I was done with this stretch. Okay, after this stretch. Definitely after *this* one.

I didn’t need to look to know that it was from Brandon. The knot in my stomach grew each time the phone beeped to remind me that his text was still unacknowledged. It wasn’t that I didn’t want to talk to him. Quite the contrary—every time his name showed up on the screen, my heart jumped.

That was the problem, actually.

I wanted to be with him so bad it hurt, but I’d never been this wrapped up in someone before. The fact that he was a man—the first man I’d ever even considered in a sexual fashion—only complicated matters. I wanted him. Badly. I just wasn’t sure if I *wanted* to want him like this.

Our messages were getting fewer and farther between, which was mostly due to moments just like this, when I hemmed and hawed for ages about even reading his message. He’d suggested getting together a few times but had mostly let the subject drop a day or so ago after I gave a few non-committal replies and half-assed excuses.

I was an idiot. Of course I wanted to be with him, so why the fuck was I putting him off?

With a sigh of resignation, I gave in and flipped my phone open, trying to decide if I was more nervous or excited to hear from him.

His message was a benign response to an equally benign message I'd sent the night before. The conversation had dwindled to the point where it was obvious we were only sending messages to keep the interaction going, even if we really had nothing to say. There was plenty to say, of course. We just weren't talking about any of that. The messages were exchanged to keep the connection, small talk that had long since run its course but continued anyway, as if we each waited for the other to say, "Let's get down to the nitty-gritty subjects."

I was fairly certain that he was waiting for me to break the ice, that he was following my lead. Every response was an opportunity either to move forward or let this dwindle into silence. *Your shot*, each message said between the lines.

With neither the balls to move it forward nor the stomach to just let it disappear, I again sent back something non-committal and bland.

I considered carrying my phone with me on my run but thought better of it and left it on the counter. If it beeped with a response, which it likely would, I'd probably trip over my own feet.

Jogging around the lake beside my apartment as I did every other morning, I let my mind wander to Brandon. There wasn't much point in resisting; ever since I had met him, my mind's default state was Brandon. Anytime I didn't have to focus on something—and sometimes even when I did—he was on my mind.

This client probably needs to work on her core a bit more, so I'll put her on this program. I wonder what Brandon's doing right now.

My attorney wants more money. What else is new? Christ, how did Brandon learn to kiss like that?

To do today: Grocery shopping. Pay bills. Brandon.

Every time he suggested getting together, I balked. It didn't make sense to avoid him when I wanted him like this, but the very fact that I did want him like this scared me. I'd never experienced such easy intimacy with someone, this kind of instant connection.

Though he seemed comfortable with the fact that I was on the rebound and he didn't push for any kind of relationship right off the bat, I couldn't deny that part of me wanted this to be more. I wasn't ready for a relationship. Was I?

And, as much as I didn't want to admit it, I balked at the idea of being gay. I had always been the one to call people out, particularly one of my brothers, for being homophobic, but I had never dreamed that I was defending myself when I defended gays and bisexuals. I wasn't sure what to make of this whole thing.

Clearly, I was attracted to Brandon, but that attraction to him—to a man—came out of left field, and it unsettled me. If anything, it was just strange to be reconsidering my sexuality at this age. It was one thing to be confused and bumbling through all of the idiosyncrasies of sexuality at fifteen; it was another thing entirely to be looking down the barrel of thirty and going through all of that bullshit *again*.

It wasn't Brandon I was avoiding. It was myself.

Movement beside me caught my attention just before a voice said, "Morning, Dustin."

"Hey Sharon, Bill," I said, smiling politely. They were old family friends and lived in the condominiums across the lake. Like clockwork, we usually ran into each other on our morning jogs.

"You know, I meant to tell you," Sharon said. "I was talking to your mother about this lovely girl that works for Bill."

Deep inside, I cringed but tried not to show it.

She went on, "She's a sweet girl. I think you'd like her."

"I appreciate it," I said. *About as much as I'd appreciate a root canal with no anesthetic.* "I'm just... I'm not really looking right now."

"Really? But your mother said—"

"I know, I know." I tried not to roll my eyes, tried to stay polite. "She means well, but I'm just not quite ready for anything yet." *Anything except for Brandon. Oh, what you two would say if you knew about that little tidbit of gossip.*

"Oh, Dustin, that's too bad," she said. "Are you sure? I could give you her phone number." There was genuine sympathy in her voice, but it still set my teeth on edge. I was so damned tired of everyone trying to hook me up with their daughter, niece, granddaughter, landscaper, and parole officer.

“Come on, now, Sharon, leave him alone,” Bill said, rolling his eyes. *Thank God, someone’s on my side.* “Besides,” he elbowed her playfully, “maybe he’s already got a girl and just isn’t telling anyone.” *Fuck you. Fuck you both.*

I really couldn’t hold it against them, so I just smiled. “Nope, not seeing anyone right now.”

“Well, if you change your mind, just let me know,” she said.

“I will,” I said through my teeth. Fortunately, their condos were coming up, so we said our goodbyes and I kept jogging alone.

And as soon as they were gone, my mind went right back to Brandon, where it remained for the rest of my run.

When I walked into the apartment, I gave my phone a wary look but didn’t pick it up. As I went to the refrigerator for a bottle of water, I listened, waiting for the inevitable beep.

Nothing.

Leaning against the opposite counter and taking a long drink, I didn’t take my eyes off the phone.

Silence.

As I went about my day, my attention kept drifting back to the phone. For the last few days, that damned beep had set my nerves on edge, driven me crazy.

Now the silence was killing me.

Chapter 7

ON MY way to work on Friday morning, my mother called. I groaned and put on my Bluetooth. “Hey Mom.”

“Hi, sweetheart.” The whine in her voice underscored her cheeriness, and I gritted my teeth, wondering what I was in for this time. The divorce? Her lack of grandchildren? The color of my damned car?

“What’s up?”

“I’m just calling to see how you’re doing. I’m worried about you.”

I rolled my eyes. *No different than the last seventeen times you asked, except that I’ve fucked a man now.* “I’m fine, Mom.”

“Good, good. Say, listen, you remember my neighbor, Frances, right?”

“Sure I do.” *And I’m willing to bet money she has a single daughter, friend, co-worker—*

“Her niece is coming to town next week, and she’s such a nice girl. Frances and I were talking, and—”

“Mom, please.” I gripped the steering wheel and ground my teeth. “I really don’t want to meet anyone right now.”

“But Dustin, you can’t just....”

Yes, Mom, I can. I shook my head and ignored most of what she said. I'd heard it all dozens of times. Even as I pulled into the gym's parking lot, parked my car, and headed inside, she kept talking. I muttered the occasional "uh huh" and "yeah" to convince her I was listening even though I wasn't as I walked into the office and clocked in.

"Mom, I really have to go," I said.

"But, Dustin, really—"

"I'm at work, Mom. I have clients waiting. I'm sorry, I really have to go."

She released her usual melodramatic sigh, but I'd long since developed an immunity to it. "Well, all right, I'll let you go, then."

"I'll call you later."

"Should I tell Frances that you'll meet her niece?"

I closed my eyes, fighting the urge to sigh and let her know how annoyed I was. "Mom, please, I'd rather not."

"But—"

"Gotta go, Mom. I love you."

"I love you too, baby," she said. "Goodbye."

"Bye, Mom." I hung up the phone and swore under my breath as I took off the Bluetooth.

"Mommy dearest again?" Kate, my co-worker and close friend, appeared in the doorway, arms folded across her chest and an expression on her face that was halfway between amused and sympathetic.

I rolled my eyes. "Who else would it be?"

"That woman isn't going to let up until you find someone, is she?"

"No, definitely not." I paused, drumming my fingers on an appointment book. "On the bright side, at least she was just trying to play matchmaker today instead of haranguing me about my divorce."

She grimaced. "Yikes, I can imagine."

"No, trust me, you can't." I picked up my gym bag.

“Don’t know how you put up with it, then.”

“Years of practice,” I said with a laugh as I slung my bag over my shoulder. “And once I meet someone, she probably won’t let up because it won’t be Stephanie.”

“Can’t win, can you?”

“Nope.”

“So have you met anyone?”

“Oh, you know, been out a few times.”

“The shade of red on your cheeks tells me otherwise.”

No sense trying to get it past Kate. She could read me better than anyone. Well, better than *almost* anyone. I swallowed hard and nodded. “Yeah. Well, I did, but....” Staring at the floor, I ran a hand through my hair. “I don’t know. I’m not sure where it’s going.”

“Well, you just met her, I assume.”

My head snapped up. I barely stopped myself from correcting the reference to “her.” “Yeah, I, yeah. I just met her.” It seemed strange to refer to Brandon this way. Not just because I was lying about the fact that I’d actually met a man, but the mere idea of being with a woman suddenly seemed foreign, the way being with a man would have seemed absurd not long ago.

“You okay?”

I looked at Kate. “Yeah, I’m fine.”

“Good God, what did this girl do to you last night?” Laughing, she elbowed me. “Space cadet.”

I chuckled, but then my humor faded.

“What?”

Taking a breath, I said, “I think I might’ve blown it with her.”

“How do you figure?”

“I don’t know, I guess I got cold feet, something.” Shaking my head, I exhaled. “I guess I thought things were moving a bit fast, so I pulled back. Now I haven’t talked to—” I caught myself. “I haven’t talked to her in a couple of days, and....”

“So try calling her.” She made it sound like it was the obvious solution, the answer only an idiot would overlook, and she was probably right.

I sighed. “After this long, I doubt she’ll want to talk to me.”

Kate shrugged. “It’s only been a few days. Worth a try.”

“I don’t know, I’m worried about letting myself get too involved,” I paused. “You know, this soon after....”

“Look, Dustin,” she said. “Don’t let a good woman get away because she had the misfortune of meeting you while you’re on the rebound. Rebound shit doesn’t usually work out, but....” She shrugged. “Sometimes the right person comes along at the wrong time.”

“Isn’t that the truth?” I started for the door again, then paused. “Do you ever wish you could have a look ahead, you know, see how the relationship will be six months or a year down the line? See if it’s even worth it?”

“Not a chance,” she said without hesitating.

“Really?”

“Really. If I knew how a lot of my relationships would have turned out, I never would have gotten involved in them.” She leaned against the desk. “And I would have missed out on some of the best times in my life.”

I looked at the floor between us for a moment, chewing on what she’d said. “Good point. I hadn’t thought of it like that.”

“You know me, ever the philosopher,” she said. “Now go get changed. You’ve got a client waiting.”

AFTER a week, my uncertainty about what was going on with Brandon wasn’t keeping me awake nearly as much as my need to see him. We hadn’t spoken in a few days, not since the last bland, non-committal text message I’d sent. He hadn’t replied. I hadn’t initiated any more contact. A week ago, the intimacy had scared me. Now the silent distance was killing me.

I chewed my lip as I drove past his car in the club's parking lot. For a fleeting moment, I considered leaving, uncertain if I could face him, particularly after I'd cold-shouldered him for the last few days. *No, no, I'm staying. I have to see him.*

I parked the car and got out, glancing at his car again as nervousness tightened in my gut. Over and over, I played out the possible scenarios in my head. He could be pissed. He could be cold. He could be completely receptive to me. Maybe he understood. Maybe he thought I was a jackass.

Whatever he thought, I needed to find out.

Taking a deep breath, I walked through the front door of the club and immediately looked towards the pool tables.

And there he was.

Leaning over the pool table, his head barely turned, but his eyebrows lifted as he looked at me. My pulse jumped, and a second later, my blood turned to ice when I took in the rest of the view. He wasn't just leaning over the pool table; he was leaning over a petite blonde, showing her how to bridge. The way his other hand rested on the small of her back reminded me of the way he'd touched me on the way into his apartment the first time we'd fucked.

For a moment, I couldn't decide if I was jealous or aroused.

Judging by the sudden tightness in my gut—and below my belt—it was probably a little of both. As much as it killed me to see that he'd moved on to someone else, there was something incredibly sexy about the way they looked together.

I went to the bar and ordered a Coke instead of a beer. It wasn't alcohol I needed, just something cold. Something for my mouth to do. Might as well save the money and go cheap.

Surreptitiously watching them from the bar, I pulled an ice cube into my mouth and rolled it around on my tongue.

Their backs were to me now. She watched him intently as he gestured toward the table, saying something I couldn't hear. Still resting on her back, his hand looked comfortable, relaxed, not the least

bit reluctant in his touch. As she leaned over to take a shot, her shirt pulled up, revealing part of a delicate, colorful tattoo.

Brandon looked down at his own hand. Let his fingers drift over the tattoo and the bare skin around it. She glanced at him, grinning, and he smiled at her.

Then he looked at me. Right at me. The corner of his mouth turned up and his fingertips dipped just under the hem of her shirt.

She jumped, missing her shot, and gave him a playful glare, drawing his attention back to her. Laughing, he raised his hands and eyebrows, feigning innocence, making her laugh. She slid an arm around his waist and giggled as he squeezed her ass.

When she kissed him, giving him just a quick peck on the lips, the ice in my mouth was suddenly not nearly enough to keep me cool. I didn't even taste the Coke as I took another long drink. The new ice on my tongue didn't do a damned thing, but it kept my mouth busy.

I had no right to be jealous—Brandon was certainly not mine by any means, especially after I'd cold-shouldered him for the past few days—but that didn't stop me from being jealous.

And turned on. His very presence aroused me, but there was something deeply erotic about watching him with the blonde. Every time he touched her, my body reacted as if he'd touched me. He ran his fingers up the middle of her back, and my arms prickled with goose bumps. He gently brushed her hair over her shoulder to get it out of her face while she took a shot, and my scalp tingled at the memory of his fingers running through *my* hair.

When she bent to take another shot, he leaned over her. Looked right at me. With a devilish, cocky grin on his face, he moved his hips suggestively against hers. It was enough to distract her from her shot and very nearly knock me out of my chair.

He licked his lips, then turned his attention back to her. I pressed the ice cube against the roof of my mouth, but it didn't help. When I'd walked into the club, I had been prepared to be knocked back, rejected, something. I figured it would hurt.

I didn't expect him to taunt me with someone else. I didn't expect to be this aroused and jealous and *holy fuck how is it possible to be this frustrated and still breathe?*

More than ever, I wanted him, but he was out of my reach. I knew it. He knew it. And he wasn't letting me forget it.

They finished their game—or lesson, I guessed—and Brandon reached for his jacket. I crunched an ice cube between my teeth, allowing myself to indulge in some disappointment and jealousy as he put his cue in its case.

On some level, I had known it was coming, but watching it happen was killing me. Brandon put his arm around her waist and they headed for the door.

I turned back to the bar before the door closed behind them. *Well, I wanted to see him. Now I saw him. And watched him walk out with someone else. Fuck.* I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger.

Releasing a breath, I leaned back in the chair and looked around the club. As long as I was there and painfully turned on, I figured I might as well see if anyone else was in a similar predicament.

A leggy blonde by the jukebox caught my eye. She looked at me and smiled, making a provocative gesture out of raising her beer bottle to her lips.

In my mind, I knew she was hot, sexy, and probably more than willing, but my body didn't respond to her. My pulse was already soaring, and I was definitely hard, but none of that had anything to do with her. My mind said, "Go!" My body said, "Meh."

A redhead bent over the pool table, her blouse falling forward and giving me the perfect view of her cleavage. She looked at me and winked.

Nothing.

Continuing my visual sweep of the room, I paused and checked out a pair of broad shoulders that barely fit into a tight, white T-shirt. He was inked, ripped, and had narrow hips that probably would have fit perfectly into my hands.

Still nothing.

Fuck it. The sexiest woman—or man—alive could have come walking through that door with “Fuck me, Dustin” written on her (his) forehead, and I wouldn’t have felt a damned thing. The only one I wanted had just left with a pretty, petite, *lucky* blonde.

I fished another ice cube out of my glass, paid for my drink, and walked out of the club, wishing it was Brandon’s tongue on mine instead.

WALKING across the parking lot, I tried to ignore the memories Brandon and I had made in this very place. I stared at the pavement, hands in my pockets, berating myself over and over for giving him the cold shoulder all week. How many times had women done the same thing to me? After three days of no contact, I assumed she wanted nothing further to do with me and moved on. Just like Brandon was doing.

“Fucking idiot,” I muttered as I pulled my keys out of my pocket.

“Come on, don’t be so hard on yourself.”

I stopped so fast my shoe squeaked on the pavement, and I nearly choked when I suddenly swallowed the half-melted ice cube. My jaw dropped.

Leaning casually against my car, hands in his jacket pockets, he grinned at me.

“What are—” I furrowed my brow. “I thought—”

Shouldering himself off of the car, he came towards me, his presence sucking the breath out of my lungs as he closed the distance between us. A foot or so in front of me, he stopped.

I swallowed. “I thought you were leaving with her.”

He shrugged and shook his head. “Too drunk for my taste. I poured her into a cab and sent her home.” He paused, narrowing his eyes in a way that made my knees weak. “I like my women sober.”

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. “And your men?”

“Sober and wound up.”

I shivered. “How did you know I’d be out here?”

“You had to leave eventually.”

“Were you going to wait for me all night?”

“If I had to.” He put his hand on my hip, our first physical contact in over a week, and I suddenly wished I had more ice to suck on. “But I knew I wouldn’t.”

“Why’s that?”

The tip of his tongue slowly swept across his upper lip. “I saw the look on your face. I knew when I left that you wouldn’t be far behind me.”

“Why? Did you think I was going to come find you?”

“No.” He was so casual, so matter-of-fact. “But I knew you didn’t have a reason to stay.”

He had me dead to rights. I laughed. “Cocky bastard.”

His hand moved to the small of my back, and he drew me towards him, tilting his head and leaning into me, so close I could feel his breath on my lips. “I was right, wasn’t I?”

“Right on the money.” I kissed him, still not believing that he was there, that I was touching him. The familiar taste of his kiss, the coolness of his hair between my fingers, the heat of his body against mine: everything was there, but I could barely convince myself it was really happening.

He broke the kiss and looked at me, touching my face as if he was drinking me in the same way I drank him in. As I looked at him, guilt crept into my mind, and I looked away, my face burning.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I exhaled. “Look, I didn’t mean to blow you off. I—”

“It’s okay.”

“Really, it’s not that I didn’t want to talk to you, I just, I was—”

“Overwhelmed?”

I looked at him then and nodded. “Yeah.”

He smiled. It wasn’t an arrogant, cocky look, but a warm smile, as if he understood. “It’s okay. Really.” His thumb brushed over my cheekbone. “You’re not the first guy to get a bit freaked out over this kind of thing.”

“Right,” I said. “But I felt like I was giving you the cold shoulder. I wasn’t trying to be a jerk.”

“I understand. I’m serious.” He rested his hand on the back of my neck, a gesture that was as comforting as it was arousing. “Look, I didn’t think you were being a jerk. I just figured you needed to sort things in your own mind, so I backed off.” He shrugged. “I figured you knew where to find me, so I’d wait and see if you came to find me.”

“And when I walked in tonight, you knew that’s why I was here.”

His smile was almost shy, but that twinkle was in his eyes, that knowing look.... “I had a hunch.”

Putting my arms around his waist, I said, “You were right.” I kissed him. I couldn’t find the words to tell him that it wasn’t “this kind of thing” that had me freaking out. It wasn’t just that I needed to come to terms with my attraction to a man. It was *him*. But he didn’t need to know that, not right now. Then I looked at him. “So if I hadn’t shown up tonight, would you have taken the blonde home?”

He grinned and winked at me. “She was just something to keep me entertained until something better came along.” We both laughed. Then his expression turned serious. “I’m really glad you showed up tonight.”

“Me too.”

He paused, clearing his throat and avoiding my eyes. “Look, if this, whatever it is we’re doing, if we’re going too fast....” He looked at me, wetting his lips in a movement that seemed more nervous than flirtatious. “Just say so.”

I exhaled, rubbing the back of my neck and looking at the car, the pavement, the streetlights, anything but him. “What—” The words stuck in my mouth. “What *are* we doing?”

“I don’t know. I really don’t.”

I chewed my lip. Blood pounded in my ears.

His hand drifted up my back. “Whatever it is,” he said, “do you want to stop?”

Meeting his eyes, I pulled him into a kiss. “Absolutely not.”

His body relaxed against mine, the tension in his muscles dissipating the longer we kissed, as if my touch reassured him that I didn’t want him to leave. Barely breaking the kiss, he whispered, “Tell me what you do want.”

I rested my forehead against his, stroking his hair gently. “I want....” The words stuck in my throat.

He looked up at me, his brow knitted as he waited for me to speak.

My lips touched his as I said, “I want to fuck you again.”

The shiver that ran up his spine pushed his body against mine, and I held him tighter, tasting him, breathing him. His hand shook as he touched my face.

“Let’s get out of here,” he whispered, pressing his hips against mine so I could feel how hard he was.

“Not yet.”

His lips parted in surprise. “Not yet?”

Guiding him back, I leaned him against my car. “I want you so bad it hurts.” I slid a hand between us. “But I can’t leave yet.”

He gasped as I squeezed his cock through his jeans. Swallowing hard, he said, “Fuck, Dustin, I want you now, I need—” He sucked in a breath as my fingers found his zipper pull.

I drew his zipper down slowly, letting my fingertips follow the outline of his erection. “There’s something I need to see before we go.”

“What’s that?” A helpless sound, almost a whimper, escaped his parted lips as I closed my fingers around his cock, stroking it slowly, just like he had done to me in this very parking lot a lifetime ago.

“I need—” I paused, overwhelmed by the feeling of his hard cock in my hand.

Moaning, he let his head fall back, and my lips were instantly drawn to the exposed skin of his neck. Kissing his throat, working my way up to his jaw, I said, "I need to see you come."

He held my shoulders, digging his fingers in almost painfully as I stroked him. Faster. Harder. He moved his hips in time with my strokes, as if he were fucking my hand.

I lifted my head and watched his face, my own cock aching as his face told me that what I was doing was right. His eyes closed tighter, his lips pulling into a grimace that was almost one of pain. His head fell forward, as if he was trying to watch what I was doing, but his eyes were still closed.

His cock twitched in my hand. "Fuck, oh fuck," he breathed. "Keep doing that. Just..." He gasped. "Like... *oh fuck!*" He threw his head back, his eyes flying open and his entire body tensing between mine and the car. A moan escaped my own throat as hot semen hit my wrist and forearm. More than before, I needed him. I needed his naked body against mine, and I needed to be inside him. I was so turned on I was certain that I'd come the second he touched my cock, but I didn't care.

He grabbed my face and pulled me into a hungry, breathless kiss. "Let's get out of here," he said, his voice unsteady, and kissed me again.

"Your place?"

"Let's go."

Chapter 8

AS SOON as his front door closed, we were in each other's arms, kissing frantically as we struggled out of our clothes. Stumbling over clothes and each other, we started down the hall.

When he wrapped his fingers around my cock, my knees buckled, and I reached for the nearest piece of furniture for balance. He glanced to the side and grinned. "This will work as well as anywhere."

I looked down, realizing I had grabbed his pool table for balance. He took advantage of my momentary distraction and used his body weight to push me up against the table. Before I could think, he dropped to his knees and my cock was in his mouth. All the way in his mouth.

Grabbing the table with my other hand, I braced myself, trying to stay standing. "Oh God," I moaned. I had already been close to climaxing before we even made it through the door, but his mouth was going to put me over the edge. Everything he did was perfect. Fucking perfect. He knew just where and how to flick his tongue, squeezing with his lips here, circling with his tongue there, and he knew exactly when to deep-throat me to nearly knock my legs out from under me. When his hand joined, stroking in time with his mouth, I couldn't hold back.

"Oh God, oh God, I'm—" But the words melted into a groan that crescendoed into a roar as I came. And still he sucked me, fucking me

with his mouth until I couldn't take anymore and somehow found the words and the will to beg him to stop.

I was breathless and shaking when he stood. He wiped the corner of his mouth with the back of his hand, and I grabbed him, pulling him into a deep kiss. The sweet-saltiness of my own semen on his tongue made me weak.

"Let's go to the bedroom," he whispered.

I nodded, licking my lips as I savored the taste of his kiss. Of myself. I followed him into the bedroom, where we kicked off the last of our clothes before collapsing into bed together.

Lying on my back, I pulled him on top of me, putting my arms around him as we simply kissed for the longest time. Somewhere in the back of my mind, I still couldn't believe that I was back in his arms. When he'd walked out of the club with the blonde on his arm, I had been sure he was gone. Yet here he was. Here I was.

He lifted himself over me and pressed his cock against me. The thought of sucking him just as he had done to me made my mouth water. I put my hands on his hips and raised my head to kiss him.

"I want to suck your cock," I whispered. It should have been surreal and weird to say things like that, and maybe it would have been with any other man, but with Brandon, it only made sense. The very thought of not wanting to suck his cock was absurd.

"Do you?" he asked, his grin softening into another kiss.

"Yes. Now." I licked my lips, my hands shaking against him. "*Please.*"

"I love it when you get like this." He dipped his head and kissed my neck again. "When you're so turned on you're shaking."

"And you called me a tease."

"You are a tease." Sucking my earlobe into his mouth, he added, "And so am I." He kissed below my ear, making a slow, spine-tingling circle with his tongue.

"Get on your back, or I will *put* you on your back," I growled.

He laughed, nipping the side of my neck. "I dare you."

"You dare me?"

“I do. If you want it that bad—” His shoulders rippled as he shifted his weight and kissed the other side of my neck. “Come and get it.”

“I wouldn’t want to hurt you.”

He snorted, the sharp breath hissing across my throat and making me shiver. “I’d like to see you try.”

I relaxed my grip on his hips. Exhaling, I said in a resigned tone, “I can’t. I don’t want to hurt you. Really.”

He furrowed his brow, searching my eyes as if to see if I was serious.

“Really.” I avoided his eyes. “I don’t want to hurt you.”

He laughed, but his stance relaxed slightly. “Dustin, you’re not going to hurt me. I like it a bit rough sometimes.”

“I know, but—” I grabbed his shoulders and threw my weight into him, flipping both of us over in one quick motion. In the next instant, he was flat on his back, his arms pinned beside his head, his eyes wide.

“What the—”

I laughed, lowering myself enough to kiss him but keeping my mouth just out of his reach. “You shouldn’t let your guard down like that.”

He craned his neck, trying to kiss me, but I stayed out of his reach.

“You’re in bed with a Marine.” I kissed the underside of his jaw. “Don’t forget it.”

“Oh, believe me,” he growled, his entire body squirming beneath mine, “I *haven’t* forgotten.”

“Good.” I kissed him, then worked my way down his neck to his chest. My mouth watered at the mere thought of having my lips around him, but I took my time. I savored every inch of his body, circling first one nipple with my tongue, then the other, drawing the tip of my tongue along the grooves of his abs, watching his muscles quiver as I did. I kissed the top of his hipbone and let my fingertips drift down his

abs, watching as even my gentlest touch made his back arch off of the bed.

I pressed my lips to his lower abdomen, as close as I could get to his cock without actually touching it, then again on the other side, letting my jaw just barely brush the hard shaft, grinning as his hips lifted toward me.

He propped himself up on his elbows and watched me, exhaling as I drew my tongue around his cock on his abdomen without touching it.

“Jesus, you’re a tease,” he said.

“And you love every minute of it.”

He moaned, reacting as if I’d touched him again, but I hadn’t done a thing. Then I realized it was my breath on his skin when I spoke. I blew on his skin, and he let his head fall back, his muscles trembling from just my breath.

Still watching his face, I blew on the base of his cock, slowly working my way up to the head. The look on his face—his lips parted, his eyes wide—had every inch of my body covered in goose bumps. I had always enjoyed watching a lover get turned on, watching the simplest touch send her into orbit, but every time Brandon tensed or shivered or even caught his breath, I felt like I’d found the holy grail. The only thing in the world that could possibly be sexier than Brandon turned on was Brandon in the throes of an orgasm.

Just the memory of his face when he had come in the parking lot sent chills down my spine, and I wanted to see it and feel it again.

I ran my tongue around the head of his cock. His hand was in my hair as I took more of him into my mouth, and every twitch of his fingers told me I was doing something right. I swept my tongue along the shaft, squeezed him with my lips—everything he had done for me. It was still unfamiliar to me, something I had only done a few times, but if I did anything clumsy or awkward, Brandon didn’t let on.

Raising myself over him, I steadied his cock with my hand, taking him into my mouth as slowly as I could, tasting and memorizing every ridge and contour of him. I wasn’t quite deep-throating him. Pushing my limits, yes, but I wasn’t ready for that yet.

A familiar ache caught my attention. Christ, it hadn't been that long since he'd sucked me off against the pool table, but I was already hard again. *No one* had ever turned me on like this.

I ran my tongue up the shaft of his cock and circled my tongue around the head a couple of times. Then I moved up to kiss him, but before I even had a chance to position myself over him, he lifted himself up and met me halfway, kissing me passionately. Together, we sank onto the bed, arms around each other, tongues intertwined.

As badly as I wanted to fuck him, I couldn't stop kissing him. His kiss drove me insane. Every touch of his lips and taste of his tongue made me want him that much more, but it made it that much harder for me to pull myself away, even if it was just long enough to get a condom.

Without breaking the kiss, I reached for the nightstand, fumbling blindly for the bottle of lube and a condom. My hand was shaking as I found the handle on the drawer, but I managed to get it open and finally found what I was looking for. Even then, with condom and lube in hand, I couldn't make myself stop kissing him.

Brandon's lips barely left mine as he breathlessly whispered, "Fuck me."

I turned to tear the condom wrapper with my teeth, moaning softly when he raised his head and kissed my neck as his hands ran up my back. Goose bumps prickled my skin, and I closed my eyes, shivering as he kissed beneath my ear.

"Oh my God, I want you to fuck me," he said.

I tried to speak but forgot how when he sucked my earlobe into his mouth. I turned my head, gently nudging him away, but as soon as his breath warmed my skin, I couldn't resist and kissed him again.

Shifting my weight onto one arm, I rolled the condom on with an unsteady hand. When it was on, I lifted myself off of him, hesitating once, twice, and again to completely pull away. Eventually, my need to be inside him overshadowed my need to kiss him, and we finally managed to change positions. I opened the bottle of lube as Brandon turned onto his hands and knees.

Whatever nervousness I had about being with a man had *nothing* on the anticipation that made my head spin and my hands unsteady as I pressed my cock against Brandon's ass. Just hours ago, I'd wondered if this was wrong, but as I held onto his hips and slowly pushed into him, I knew that the only thing that could possibly be wrong was the fact that I'd waited so long to do it again.

"Oh my God, that's awesome," Brandon moaned, pushing back against me and drawing me deeper.

I wanted to tell him how much I loved it, but speech was lost to me, especially as the view—broad shoulders, muscles rippling under the dragon tattoo, the tremors running through him every time I took a stroke—mesmerized me. Strokes turned into thrusts, and he whispered my name, begging for more.

He shifted his weight onto one arm. Then his hand came up and grabbed mine, pulling it around his waist to his cock. I rested my other hand on the bed, bracing myself as I thrust from the hips and stroked his cock.

"Jesus Christ," he murmured.

"Like that?" I whispered, kissing the back of his shoulder and making him shiver.

"I love it," he said. "Fuck, don't stop...."

"I won't, don't worry," I growled, fucking him harder, stroking him faster. Every tremor that rippled through him, every breath he couldn't quite draw properly, every helpless sound he made, every bead of sweat that rolled between the grooves of his muscles, all of it aroused me like nothing I'd ever experienced.

"Oh God," he groaned. His back arched against my chest and he tightened around my cock, nearly taking me over the edge with him. "Oh God, Dustin...." I fucked him even harder, his moans and shudders sending me even higher.

He turned slightly, reaching over his shoulder, sliding his hand around the back of my neck as I leaned in to kiss him. As soon as I tasted his tongue, I didn't stand a chance. My orgasm caught me by surprise, and I broke the kiss with a gasp and a shudder. He rocked against me, fucking me from below. I tried to keep contact with his

lips, tried to breathe, but all I could do was surrender to an orgasm that was too intense to be real.

As the last few shivers worked their way up my spine, I closed my eyes and let my forehead rest on his shoulder. "Oh my God," I whispered.

"That was hot."

"You're telling me." Withdrawing slowly, I got rid of the condom, and we both melted onto the bed.

"I'd suggest a shower," he said, "but my knees are shaking too much to stand up."

"Mine too. Give me a few minutes."

"Will do. But in ten minutes, you have to do it again."

"Careful what you wish for. Turn me on like that again, and you might not be able to walk tomorrow."

"Promise?"

"I'll let you know in a few minutes."

THE next morning, neither of us was in any hurry to move, so we killed most of the morning lounging in bed and talking.

Running his fingers across my abs, he said, "So what made you go into personal training?"

I shrugged, playing with his hair. "I'm a gym rat, so it was a job that let me spend most of my time there."

"Had nothing at all to do with checking people out when they're working out?"

"Oh, that played into it." I laughed. "And believe me, I've checked more than a few people out."

"Have you? I figured you'd be nothing but professional." He winked.

“Please,” I said. “Maybe it’s just a ridiculous fetish, but I think it’s hot watching someone work out.”

“Really? Do tell.”

My cheeks burned. “It’s stupid, I’m sure, but....” I cleared my throat. “Think about it: they’re hot, they’re sweaty, they’re out of breath—”

“Just like when they’re having sex.”

“Just like when they’re having *wild, dirty* sex.”

He blinked. “I think I chose the wrong line of work.”

I laughed. “I once did a training session with a girl I was dating. Oh my God, it....” Trailing off, I shook my head. “It’s a good thing we did it in my apartment instead of the gym.”

His lips parted. “Oh *really*?”

I couldn’t imagine how many shades of red I was turning. “It didn’t help that we were flirting while she was lifting, but the more she did, the hotter it got. When she caught me checking her out while she was doing pushups, we....” I laughed. “We decided to forego weightlifting and go straight into cardio.”

Brandon laughed. “That sounds fucking hot.”

“You have *no* idea. I fucked her right there on the floor, then we went into the shower and finished each other off.”

“You know, I’m starting to seriously consider changing personal trainers.” He ran his fingertips across my chest.

I laughed and nipped his shoulder. “Like I could get through a session with you.”

“Oh honestly, you could,” he said. “I’m sure you could behave as a professional the entire time.”

“You overestimate my ability to think with my brain in the presence of sexiness.”

He kissed me, then laughed. “Believe me, I understand.”

“Oh?”

“I made the mistake of letting myself get a wee bit of a crush on an undergrad once when I was in grad school.”

“So?”

“So,” he said, “he ended up in one of my classes. Thank God he didn’t know that I wanted to jump his bones, but he and everyone else must have thought I was a bumbling idiot. Try lecturing about protein synthesis when all you can think of is the sexy guy in the front row.”

“I guess it’s an occupational hazard for both of us, then, isn’t it?”

“You could say that.” His eyes sparkled. “So, when can I come in for a training session?”

“Don’t you dare,” I laughed.

Leaning over me, he kissed the underside of my jaw. “Or what?”

I grabbed his shoulders and flipped him onto his back. “Or I may have to put you in your place.”

He grinned. “Oh, right, I’m in bed with a Marine. How could I forget?”

Releasing his shoulders, I moved onto my side, propping my head up on one arm. “Keep it up, and I’ll make sure you don’t forget.”

He winked. “Promise?”

“You really have a thing for Marines, don’t you?”

“You’re damn right I do.” He gave me a devilish look. “I don’t suppose I could talk you into your uniforms again, could I?”

“You might be able to talk me *out* of them.”

“Pfft, what fun is that?” he laughed. “I’ll warn you right now: I have a serious thing for men in camouflage. Especially camouflage pants.”

“Really?”

“Absolutely. I don’t know why. I don’t care why. It’s fucking hot. But...” He paused, chewing his lip.

“What?”

He shook his head. “No, you’d probably laugh.”

“Try me.”

His cheeks colored a little. “Would you laugh at me if I told you that I have even more of a thing for dog tags?”

I blinked. “Really?”

“Yeah. It probably borders on a fetish, to be honest.” He laughed. “A set of dog tags on a chest like—” He paused. “Well, on a chest like yours. I can’t help it. Gets me every time.”

“I’ll have to remember that.”

“Please do.” His fingertip traced the edges of one of my tattoos. “And ink. God, I love ink.”

“You?” I gasped. “And here I thought you would disapprove of tattoos.”

“Oh I do. I disapprove of them so much, they make me hard.”

I laughed. “What other little fetishes do you have hidden up in that mind of yours?”

“That’s pretty much it. Ink, camouflage, dog tags.”

“So if I got a tattoo on my chest of a set of camouflaged dog tags, you’d—”

“Probably hurt you.”

“I’ll keep that in mind.”

He chuckled. “Well, as long as we’re confessing our dirty little desires....” His expression was surprisingly serious, almost shy. “Listen, I want to ask, but....”

“What?”

“I know this is all new to you, being with a man, all of that, so I won’t push it, but I have to say....” He paused, looking at me as if waiting for some kind of reaction or resistance. “Would you ever consider....” He dropped his eyes for a second, then looked at me and said, “Switching?”

Puzzled, I cocked my head. “Switching? You mean—*oh*.” I swallowed, suddenly completely tongue-tied. “I’m—I’ve never....”

He laughed and ran his fingers up my arm. “If you’re not comfortable with it, it’s okay. But if you decide you want to, just say the word.”

“You want to enjoy the ride once in a while too?”

“It’s not that,” he said. “I like giving and receiving. But honestly....” He pushed himself up onto his arms and moved closer to me, kissing me lightly. “I want you to feel what it’s like when you fuck me.”

I swallowed. “Really?”

“Dustin, it’s fucking incredible,” he said. “I’m serious. There’s nothing like it.” He kissed me again, this time lingering a moment longer. “I want you to feel what you make me feel.”

My heart thudded. I was curious, I had to admit, but that was a bit farther out of my comfort zone than I was willing to go just yet. “If I change my mind, you’ll be the first to know.”

“Sweet.” He kissed me gently as he nudged me onto my back. “But between now and then....” His hand drifted down my side, and his erection pressed against my hip.

“Again?” I laughed against his lips.

“You don’t want to?”

I put my arms around him. “I didn’t say that.”

Chapter 9

MY ELDEST brother, Rick, was getting married in a week, so I took him out on Friday night for his bachelor party. Tristan, our younger brother, met us there with several friends.

“Ready to put on the ol’ ball and chain?” Tristan asked as we walked into the strip club.

“Hey now, it’s my last hurrah as a free man,” Rick laughed. “Let’s not talk about my life sentence tonight.”

“At least you can drink at your own bachelor party,” I said.

“Oh please.” Tristan rolled his eyes. “It’s not like you *didn’t* drink at yours.”

“I never said I didn’t, just that I wasn’t supposed to.”

“Certainly didn’t stop you,” Rick said, shoving me towards the table.

“Just don’t tell Mom,” I said. We laughed and joined the rest of his friends at a table beside the stage. There were a couple of guys I’d never met, but I knew Troy and Steve from high school, and Dan’s family had been friends with ours since time immemorial. These were, for the most part, familiar faces.

In spite of their familiarity—or maybe because of it—I felt very, very out of place that night. Though I didn’t feel in the least bit guilty about my relationship with Brandon, I suddenly felt like I was hiding some sort of dirty, shameful secret. It didn’t help that I knew Dan and

Tristan were more than a little homophobic. Part of me was afraid that if they looked close enough, they'd see "I'm gay" written across my forehead.

"The show isn't for another half hour," Tristan said, glancing at his watch. "Anyone up for a game of pool before it starts?"

"I'll play," I said. It would be something to do besides sit there and hope no one noticed what—or who—I was thinking about. We got up and headed across the club to the pool tables, and as I racked the game, I was starting to regret the decision to play. It certainly wasn't going to do a damned thing to make me stop thinking about Brandon.

Everything about pool was Brandon now. The first time I had seen him, he was leaning over a pool table with his long, slender fingers bridging the cue on the familiar green felt. Someone at another table took a shot, and the distinctive *crack* immediately sent me back to my first game with Brandon. The hairs on the back of my neck stood up as I remembered that palpable tension between us. It—

"Yo, Dustin," Tristan waved a hand in front of my face. "You okay, man?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine." I lifted the rack off of the table and turned around to get my beer.

"You sure?" He leaned over to take his shot, but he lifted his eyebrows and gave me a concerned look.

"I'm good, don't worry," I said, pausing to sip my beer. "Just been a long fucking week."

"I hear ya." His cue snapped forward and the balls broke, but nothing went in. Scowling, he said, "Your shot."

I took a long swallow of beer, pretending that my mind hadn't replaced Tristan's voice with Brandon's smug, cocky way of saying "Your shot." *Come on. He's not here. Just focus.*

As I took my turn, Dan came up to the table, beer in hand. "So how have you been, Dustin?" he asked. "I haven't seen you since... you know...." His mouth twisted as if he couldn't bring himself to say the word.

“Since the divorce?” I said. It annoyed me to no end that everyone beat around the subject as if the very word was some sort of evil incantation. I certainly wasn’t the first person in the world to get a divorce, and I doubted I’d be the last. My friends and family had no qualms about trying to relieve me of my single status, but avoided *That Word*.

“Yeah, since the divorce,” Dan said, quickly taking a drink of his beer as if he didn’t like the taste of the word.

“I’m fine.” I furrowed my brow as I focused on knocking the four into the corner pocket.

To Dan, Tristan said, “Man, you should hear our mom. Every five minutes, she’s trying to hook him up with someone.”

“Anyone cute?” Dan asked with a smirk.

“A few,” I said, chuckling. The four dropped. “You’re stripes, Tristan.”

My brother nodded and thumbed the neck of his beer bottle. “Well, at least when she’s hounding you for a new girl, it keeps her occupied enough that she’s not after me and Olivia for a grandkid.”

“Oh for fuck’s sake, is she *still* on you guys about that?” I looked up from my shot.

He rolled his eyes and nodded again. “She’s backed off a bit since Wesley was born.” Our sister, the youngest of the four of us, had a three month-old son, the coveted first grandchild.

“Maybe she’ll start hounding Rick and Lisa too,” I said. “Now that she can’t harp on them about getting married, it’s time to apply the grandkid pressure.”

“Christ, your mother needs a hobby,” Dan said.

“No shit,” Tristan and I said in unison.

I scratched, so I stepped away to let Tristan take over.

“You know what else Mom is freaking out over?” I said, watching Tristan stare the cue ball down. “As if her own kids don’t give her enough to do, now she’s freaking the fuck out over Nathan and Tonya.”

“Nathan and Tonya?” Dan said. “What happened with them?” Our families had all been close friends growing up. We had all known Tonya’s family since we were kids, so I was surprised that Dan didn’t know.

“You didn’t hear?” I said. “They’re getting a divorce too.” Raising my beer bottle to my lips, I added, “Must be something in the water.”

“Yeah, but I can’t blame her for freaking out over *them*,” Tristan spat. He dropped the twelve and stood, eyeing the table. Something twisted in the pit of my stomach, and I raised my eyebrows.

“Why’s that? What happened?” Dan asked.

“He left her for a *guy*,” Tristan said, his lip curling with disgust.

I swallowed hard. “What? I hadn’t heard about that.”

“Yeah,” Tristan said. “Mom found out from Tonya’s folks. Guess the bastard had been in the closet the whole time and just decided to tell her that he was queer.” I flinched but didn’t say anything. Tristan’s aversion to homosexuality had always grated my nerves, but it was hitting too close to home now.

“Who the hell would leave *her* for a man?” Dan said. “Christ, what an idiot. Well, he certainly had us all fooled.”

“Unless he just didn’t figure it out until later,” I said, regretting that I’d ever brought it up.

Tristan snorted. “That’s crap. How does someone *not* know they’re a fag?”

“You’d think the ‘not being attracted to a woman like a normal dude’ would clue him in,” Dan said, wrinkling his nose and sipping his beer.

“Or wanting to take it up the ass,” Tristan said. “Fucking freak.”

Clenching my teeth, I forced myself to stay calm. As much as I hated listening to them talk like that, I was afraid that any defensiveness on my part would tell them more than I was ready to let them hear.

I cleared my throat. “Well, whatever keeps Mom occupied and off my back.” *Until and unless she hears about Brandon.*

Tristan laughed as he took his shot, then cursed when the fourteen missed the side pocket. “You’re one of her top priorities, Dustin.” He clapped my shoulder as I moved towards the table. “And as long as that keeps her off of *me*, it’s all good.”

“Fuck you,” I laughed.

“Think you’d have to talk to Nathan about that,” he said. He and Dan laughed, but my blood turned to ice. I pretended to be extra focused on my shot. They obviously didn’t know, or they would have been hostile toward me, but I couldn’t shake the nagging worry that all it would take was one wrong move on my part and they *would* know.

Troy came up to the table. “Hey guys, the show’s starting soon.”

“Yeah, naked women!” Dan said, waving his beer around.

“Still has that novelty, doesn’t it?” Tristan said, elbowing him. “Funny how that happens when you don’t see it often.”

“Asshole,” Dan muttered.

I put my cue back on the wall and followed them to the table with the other guys.

As the show started, we moved from our table to the chairs around the stage. Nervousness gnawed at my gut. I hadn’t even looked at a woman since I had started seeing Brandon. Would I still be attracted to them? If I wasn’t, would the guys know?

The lights went down, and a blonde in ridiculously high heels came out onto the stage.

As soon as she started dancing—her scarlet red G-string and bra showing much more than they hid—I was as mesmerized as any other guy beside the stage. Reaching into my pocket for my wallet, I shifted, trying to get comfortable in spite of my hard-on.

Well, that answers that question.

BY THE time I left the strip club, I was horny as hell and felt more distant than ever from my brothers and our friends. They'd bought me almost as many lap dances as we bought Rick, and each time, I couldn't help but wonder if they knew something, if they were looking for some sign of what I was hiding. Rationally, I knew there was no way they could possibly know about Brandon, but logic never did shit to ease a paranoid mind.

It wasn't until the next night, though, that I realized just how wound up I was around the guys.

Brandon and I met for dinner at a restaurant near the university, and as soon as he walked in the room, my mood changed. His mere presence gave me a sense of calm, the ability to exhale as my mind said, "Ah, there you are." It was that relief, that calm, that told me just how spun up I'd been since I showed up at the strip club almost twenty-four hours before.

His arrival also ignited a different kind of tension that set my nerves on edge. A half dozen lap dances couldn't hold a candle to the hunger and promise behind that grin when he saw me from across the restaurant.

"Hey, sorry I'm late," he said, extending his hand as he came to the table. Since we were out in public, we kept our physical contact strictly platonic. Brandon knew I wasn't quite comfortable with being outwardly affectionate with people around, and being this close to where he worked, it was probably for the best.

"No problem, I was a bit early." I smiled, grasping his hand.

He held my gaze and hand a second longer than social protocol dictated before winking and taking a seat across from me. After we'd ordered and made some small talk, he said, "So how was the bachelor party?"

"Enjoyable, if you're into such brazen acts of drinking and debauchery in public places."

"Which I am."

Lifting my glass, I said, "Then you would've loved it."

"I assume you had a good time, then?"

I grinned above the rim of my drink. "Absolutely." *Aside from the homophobic jackasses I associate with.*

"Which club did you go to?"

"The one down on Main, the one called...." I paused, drumming my fingers. "Damn, what was that place called?" I made a frustrated gesture in the air. "The one, damn it, the one with the big neon cat for the sign."

"Cressida's?"

I snapped my fingers. "Yes, thank you. Cressida's."

He leaned forward, resting his chin on his hand. "How is that place? I haven't been there."

I shrugged. "It's not bad. Booze was expensive; lap dances were cheap."

Nodding with approval, he said, "Well, as long as the lap dances were cheap." He sipped his water. "Are the dancers hot?"

"Some of them," I said. "There was this one brunette, oh my God. The way she moved, she reminded me of a cat."

He let out a breath. "I think I may have to pay this place a visit."

"Trust me, if she's there, she's worth the cover charge and then some."

"What about the others?"

"Some of them were hot, some were so-so." I laughed. "One of them made me think of you."

His eyebrows lifted. "Oh really?"

"She was wearing dog tags."

"Ooh, now that's hot."

"She gave them to my brother," I said. "I thought about asking if I could bring them back to you as a souvenir, but I wasn't about to try to explain my way out of that one."

Clicking his tongue, he pretended to pout. "Oh come on, they were *dog tags*. Surely that's worth an awkward discussion with your brother?"

“Sorry,” I said, shrugging.

With a huff, he set his glass down. “Fine, fine. No dog tags for poor Brandon.”

I laughed. “I’m sure you’ll cope.”

“Somehow, I think I will.”

Our meals came, and the conversation meandered. All the while, I couldn’t help but watch everything he did—the way his lips moved or when he occasionally paused to shake a strand of hair out of his face or how he steeped his fingers and furrowed his brow when concentrating on something either of us said—and wish I could touch him, just for a moment.

He rested his hand on the table, running the back of his thumbnail up and down his glass, drawing my attention to it. It was all I could do not to put my hand over his just to make some sort of physical contact.

“What’s wrong?” he asked.

I realized I’d been staring at his hand. For how long, I didn’t know. Wetting my lips, I said, “You’ve had a lap dance or two in your day, haven’t you?”

“One or two. Maybe.” He put his hands up defensively. “But I was forced. It was entirely against my will.” He smoothed the air with both hands, a “don’t worry, it’s cool” gesture. “And I closed my eyes through the *whole* thing.”

I laughed. “Yeah, right.”

He winked. “Yeah, I’ve had a few.”

“Only a few?”

“Only a few—” He coughed to mask the additional “dozen”. Then he gave me a devilish grin. “Why do you ask?”

Folding my hands on the table, pretending I couldn’t feel the heat from his hands, I leaned closer, lowering my voice. “You know that frustration? Like you want to fuck the hell out of her right then and there, but you can’t?”

He picked up his glass and nodded. "I most certainly do." My temperature skyrocketed as he sucked an ice cube into his mouth and rolled it around on his tongue.

Taking a deep breath, I somehow managed to continue. "And the fact that you can't touch her makes her that much hotter?"

He crunched the ice, nodding slowly. "We want what we can't have."

My eyes flicked towards his hand on the table, then back at him. He stopped chewing his ice. Looked at his hand. Looked back at me.

His Adam's apple bobbed slightly as he swallowed hard. Then he smiled and leaned toward me. "But you know as well as I do"—he was almost whispering—"that you will get to touch later."

"I know," I said. "And that's making it much, much worse."

BRANDON kicked the front door shut behind us. It had barely closed before I had him up against it, kissing him passionately, my hands tangled in his hair. He met my kiss with the same breathless fervor, pressing his hard-on against mine as he pulled me closer to him.

"How the hell am I supposed to keep my hands off of you for hours at a time?" he whispered as I kissed his neck.

"Fuck if I know," I said against the skin beneath his ear. The shiver that ran through his body raised goose bumps on mine. I sucked his earlobe into my mouth, then murmured, "But another minute of it and I was going to come unglued."

He took my face in both hands and raised my head so he could kiss me again. Just before our lips met, he growled, "Then you're a hell of a lot more in control than I am, because I'm *long* past coming unglued."

His desperate, hungry kiss made my cock ache and almost knocked my knees out from under me. He was breathless and trembling, grasping my shoulders, my clothes, the back of my neck, whatever he could get his hands on. "Christ, Dustin, I've been dying for this all night." His voice was as unsteady as his hands.

Kissing his neck, I said, "Bedroom?"

"Now."

Kicking off shoes and letting jackets fall haphazardly in the vicinity of the couch, we hurried into his bedroom. As soon as we were there, we struggled with clothing, our fingers barely managing the intricate tasks of unbuckling, unbuttoning, and unzipping. It probably took mere seconds for us to get out of our clothes and into bed, but it may as well have taken all night.

Our mouths never separated as I pulled him down on top of me. There were so many things I wanted to do to him, to that hard-on that was right against mine, but I couldn't get enough of his kiss. I tangled my fingers in his hair and explored his mouth, every taste of his tongue making me crave more.

He squeezed my hips with his thighs, pressing his cock against mine. Then he broke the kiss just long enough to say, "Fuck me, Dustin."

"With pleasure."

"Stay there," he said, reaching for the nightstand. "Stay *just* like that." He tore the condom packet with his teeth and my blood suddenly ran cold.

"Wait—"

Brandon froze. "What?"

I eyed the condom. "You're not...."

He followed my eyes, and the alarm in his expression faded. "That's not what I meant. You're still going to fuck me." He rolled the condom onto me and reached for the lube. "I promise you, I'm not going to push you to let me fuck you."

I swallowed. "Yeah, not quite ready for that yet."

He sat over me and leaned down for a kiss. "Trust me, Dustin," he whispered. "I'll follow your lead on that. I certainly wouldn't throw it at you in the heat of the moment."

"Much appreciated," I said, running my fingers through his hair and kissing him.

“But when you’re ready,” His lips barely left mine as he eased himself onto my cock. “And not a minute sooner....” He closed his eyes, moaning softly as my cock slid into him. “Just say the word.”

I tried to speak, but as he rocked back and forth, taking my cock into him, rising, taking it again, I couldn’t remember what I wanted to say. My hands rested on his hips, moving with him as he rode me. Lost in the intense sensations, I tightened my grasp, unintentionally breaking his rhythm.

He gently took one of my wrists and pinned my arm beside my head. Then he did the same with the other. “Just lay back and enjoy it,” he said, fucking me with a slow, even rhythm. Still holding my wrists, he bent to kiss me. “Tell me how it feels.”

Raising my hips to meet his, I found and joined his perfect rhythm. I took a breath. Lost it. Drew another.

“Tell me,” he whispered. “Tell me how it feels.”

“Oh God....” I tried to free my arms so I could touch him—I wasn’t sure where I wanted to touch him, just that my hands ached for his skin against them—but he held them, keeping me passive and surrendered to him. “Jesus,” I moaned. “It feels incredible.”

He dipped his head so that he was whispering right into my ear, his hot breath on my sweaty skin sending me into orbit as he said, “You feel fucking perfect this way, Dustin.”

I sucked in a breath as my back arched beneath us. Though he was moving too slowly to make me come—something I had little doubt he was doing intentionally—it was intense, taking my breath away each time he took me all the way into him. I wanted it to last all night, but if I didn’t come soon, I was going to lose my mind. It felt too good to stop, too intense to keep going without that release I so desperately craved.

A helpless moan escaped his lips, vibrating against my neck, and I knew he, too, was losing control. A shudder ran through him, and his hands momentarily loosened around my wrists. I took advantage and wrenched my arms free, putting them around him and holding on as I thrust upward, desperate to fuck him as fast and hard as humanly possible.

He threw his head back and groaned, matching his strokes to mine. Our voices crescendoed and our movements quickened, but at the same time, everything seemed to happen in slow motion. Even as he rode me faster, as I lifted my hips to meet him thrust for desperate, insatiable thrust, time slowed down. Every stroke took a perfect, blissful age. My fingers moved so slowly down his back that I felt every last groove between his quivering muscles, and the bead of sweat rolling down his temple seemed frozen in time.

My orgasm started just as slowly, building until the need for release was almost painful, reaching the point of unbearable and still intensifying, still just out of reach, just beneath the surface. Then I heard my name, heard him moan just before his body tensed and hot liquid hit my chest, and in a single heartbeat, time sped up, and the tension inside me broke. Only his body over mine kept me from levitating off of the bed as the powerful, pulsing release surged through me. Someone cried out, someone cursed, someone moaned, but I could no longer tell his voice from my own.

Then everything was silent except for our rapid, uneven breathing and my blood pounding in my ears. Even the stillness was intense, the air electrified and our bodies shaking.

“Oh my God,” he said, lifting his head to kiss me.

“My sentiments exactly,” I said, still breathless.

He raised his hips to let me pull out but made no move to change positions. We simply held each other, kissing lazily.

“This,” he said after a moment, “is what happens when you make me keep my hands to myself for hours on end.”

I stroked his hair, tucking a strand behind his ear. “If that’s the case, I may have to do it more often.”

“I wouldn’t, if I were you.”

Sliding my hand around to the back of his neck and pulling him down for another kiss, I whispered, “And why not?”

“Because one of us might get hurt next time.”

“That could be fun.”

“One of us being *you*.”

“Kinky.”

He laughed, then kissed me. “Dustin, Dustin, Dustin, whatever am I going to do with you?”

“Same thing you always do with me.” I ran a finger up the center of his back, grinning as he closed his eyes and shivered. “Get hot, naked, and sweaty.”

“Sounds good to me.”

Chapter 10

JUST barely waking up somewhere in the night, I realized we weren't touching anymore. Without thinking about it, I sought the warmth of his body, putting my arm over his waist and lying beside him. Momentary panic swept through me, almost rousing me completely as I expected him to elbow me and shove me off, but he didn't. His hand drifted over my forearm, then his fingers loosely interlaced with mine.

I exhaled and rested my head beside his to go back to sleep. His hair was cool against my face, still damp, so it must not have been too long since we'd gotten out of the shower. My drowsy mind drifted back to that shower and the passionate sex that had led up to it.

Half-dreaming, I could almost imagine that I was in that moment again, Brandon on top of me, his sweaty hair between my fingers, my cock deep inside him as he rode me to a powerful orgasm, his voice barely more than a helpless moan as he said my name.

Before I realized it, my body was reacting to the memory, and I started to pull away as my cock hardened against him, but his grasp tightened on my arm. I thought he was still asleep, that he had just unconsciously reacted to my movement, but when he touched his lips to my hand, I knew he was awake.

I kissed his shoulder and pressed my erection against him. He murmured softly and pushed back, flicking his tongue across my fingertips.

Sleep slurred my words as I whispered, “I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

He guided my hand down to his own very erect cock. “Do you hear me complaining?”

Wrapping my fingers around him, I stroked him slowly and kissed the base of his neck as I pushed my cock against him. “I don’t feel so bad, then.”

“I like what you’re feeling right now,” he said.

I nuzzled his neck. “Guess I just can’t get enough of you.”

“You can have as much of me as you can handle.” He gently pushed my hand away just long enough for him to roll over and face me. Then he put my hand back on his cock and wrapped his fingers around mine.

“Careful what you wish for,” I said, stroking him slowly. “You may never sleep again.”

“I’ll cope.” His lips found mine. “Jesus, I love what you do with your hands.”

I exhaled. “You’re not so bad with yours.”

His forehead touched mine, and he whispered, “Do that—” His voice caught. “Do that a little faster.” My hand moved faster, and I was rewarded with a ragged, warm breath across my lip and a shiver that moved his body closer to mine. He kissed me again, his own hand stroking me faster.

“Oh my God,” I breathed. “That’s—” The words lodged in my throat as he tightened his grasp. “Fucking hell, that’s perfect.”

How long we kissed and touched in the darkness, I couldn’t say. Time was irrelevant when Brandon was against me. I had never lost myself in someone the way I lost myself in him every time. Every. Fucking. Time.

His mouth suddenly broke away from mine, and he exhaled hard, his body tensing as his erection twitched in my hand. “Oh fuck...”

My hand moved faster, barely able to keep a steady rhythm as he did the same to my cock. I screwed my eyes shut, my mouth alternating between seeking his lips and tensing into a grimace.

He squeezed my cock, his unsteady rhythm emphasizing just how close he was to the edge. His back arched, pushing his body towards me. "I'm gonna come, oh fuck, I'm..."

I kissed his neck, and his voice vibrated against my lips. "Come," I whispered. "Come, Brandon." My whole body was shaking with anticipation not of my orgasm, but his. Everything he did as he moved closer to the edge—his breath catching, his body trembling, his cock pulsing against my fingers—turned me on.

My only regret in that moment was that the lights were off. What I wouldn't have given to see his face, but my memory filled in the gaps, and in my mind, I saw him as well as if it were daylight. His eyes closed, his lips parted, the flush in his skin that only served to intensify the blue of his eyes when they flew open in the moment of release.

"I'm—" He tensed, gasping. "Oh fuck. Oh... fuck..."

As soon as his hot semen hit my chest and abs, I couldn't hold back anymore. I took in a breath, and my hips moved in time with his strokes until a violent shudder straightened my spine, and I moaned, "Oh God, I'm coming..."

As the shaking subsided, I let my forehead rest against his, our breath mingling as both of our orgasms faded.

"Sorry I woke you up," I murmured.

"All's forgiven," he said breathlessly.

"I suppose we could use another shower," I said, stroking his hair gently. "What do you think?"

"If we do, we'll just end up fooling around again."

"I'll take that as a yes, then."

LEANING against the bathroom counter, I watched Brandon finish shaving. I looked in the mirror and ran my fingers over my stubbled jaw. "I could use a shave myself."

"I don't know," he said, glancing at me before he drew the razor up the side of his neck. "You look good with some eighty grit stubble."

“More like thirty grit at this point,” I said, letting my fingers scuff loudly across it to emphasize my point.

He laughed and rinsed his razor before meeting my eyes in the mirror. “Well, if you need it, I have an extra.” Without waiting for a response, he dug into a drawer and pulled one out, handing it to me and sliding the can of shaving cream across the counter.

As I put the shaving cream on, I eyed the razor. “Shit, I haven’t used one of those since I was in the military.”

“Electric?”

“Yep. Decided it wasn’t such a good idea to keep anything sharp in the bathroom in case my ex-wife had one of her tantrums.” I watched in the mirror as his eyes widened. “I’m kidding. She was a bitch, but she wasn’t that bad.”

“God, I hope not.”

“If she was, I’d have been dead a long, long time ago.”

He smirked, glancing at me as he touched up a missed spot on his cheek. “Don’t tell me you antagonized her.”

“Well, the last three or four years, let’s just say I didn’t put up with her bullshit as much as she would have liked.” I took the razor out of its package. “If I knick an artery, you’ll call the paramedics, right?”

He splashed water on his face and reached for a towel. “You’ll need the paramedics if you get blood all over my bathroom.”

“You’re such a compassionate son of a bitch.”

“That’s me all over, you—” He paused. “You know, I’m used to using one of those....” Our eyes met in the mirror again, and his eyebrows lifted.

It took me a second to figure out what he was asking. I turned to meet his eyes.

He shrugged. “I mean, I’d understand if you don’t want me coming at you with something sharp, but—” He stopped when I handed him the razor. Gently plucking it from between my fingers, he grinned. “It’s always easier on someone else anyway.”

“I would think so, since you don’t have to do it backwards in the mirror.”

“No, it’s not that.” He slid his hand around to the back of my neck, and his brow knitted as he reached for my face with the razor. “It doesn’t hurt me if it bleeds.”

My eyes widened, and I stiffened as he drew the blade across my skin.

He looked up and chuckled. “Just kidding.”

The blade scraped against my jaw, a sensation I was no longer accustomed to since I had gone electric. It should have been disconcerting, having someone else running a razor, particularly a brand new one, over my face, but it didn’t bother me. As with anything involving Brandon, it probably should have seemed absurd and weird, but it didn’t. Quite the contrary.

“Turn this way a bit,” he said, nodding towards my left. I turned my head, and he furrowed his brow as he started below the sideburn. “Have you ever thought about growing a goatee?”

“I had one for a while,” I said. “The princess hated it.”

He snorted. “I suppose your opinion on such trivial subjects didn’t matter?”

“Nope.”

He ran his thumb up the side of my jaw, making sure it was smooth. “I think you’d look good with one.”

“I may grow one out again. Eventually.”

“If I beg and plead and give you puppy dog eyes, will you?” He batted his eyes at me.

“I might require something a bit more persuasive,” I said with a wink. We both laughed.

“I’m willing to negotiate,” he said. “Look up.” I did, and he gently lifted my chin with his free hand. “You know, you’re the first guy who’s ever let me do this.”

The razor scraped up the front of my neck. I fought the urge to swallow nervously. Without moving my jaw any more than I had to, I said, “I take it you’ve offered a time or two.”

“I’ve offered, but most guys aren’t thrilled about having someone else putting a razor to their neck.”

“Well, when you put it like that....”

He laughed. “I know it sounds a bit weird, but I’ve always wanted to do this.”

I looked at him, as much as I could without lowering my chin. “Really?”

He nodded. “Like I said, it’s weird. But....” he shrugged. “I don’t know, there’s just something incredibly....” Trailing off, he turned away for a second to rinse the blade.

“Intimate?”

He paused. “Yeah, that’s the word.” He touched the side of my neck and started to bring the razor up again. “It’s not uncomfortable, is it?”

“No,” I said. “No, it’s fine. I don’t think I would have let anyone else do it, to be honest with you.”

He smiled, but said nothing.

I can think of a few things I might let you do that I wouldn’t even consider with anyone else. I swallowed hard.

“What?” he said.

“What?”

“You’re thinking something.”

A glance in the mirror confirmed my suspicion that my cheeks had turned red. “Just....” I watched him rinse the razor one last time, then shook my head. “Nothing.”

Handing me a towel, he said, “Really?”

I cupped my hands under the faucet and splashed water on my face, then stood and dried it with the towel he’d given me. “I was just thinking that this is hardly the first thing I’ve let you do that I wouldn’t let anyone else do.”

He smiled. “I guess that’s true, isn’t it?”

Putting my hands on his waist, I leaned in to kiss him. “I kind of like it when we do some of those other things.”

Running his fingers over my freshly shaved skin, he said, “You *kind of* like it?”

My fingers trailed up his back, exploring the edges of his tattoo for the hundredth time. “I really like it. In fact....” I dipped my head to kiss his neck. “I wouldn’t mind doing it again.”

“You wouldn’t mind?” he laughed. “You’re going to have to do better than that, Dustin.”

I backed him up against the wall and pressed my hips against his, grinning when he half-gasped, half-moaned against my mouth. I growled, “I could just drag you back to bed and fuck you, if that works better for you.”

“That’s more like it.” He kissed me, wrapping his arms around me. When he looked at me again, he pursed his lips, obviously trying not to smile. “Unless, of course, you’re all talk.”

I laughed. “All talk?”

“Yeah. All talk.”

I nipped his shoulder and dug my fingers into his hips. “Those are fightin’ words, Dr. Stewart.”

He gave a theatrical sigh. “All bark, no bite.” He dragged the edges of his fingernails up my back.

“C’mere, you,” I growled and kissed him, steering him out of the bathroom and back into the bedroom. “All bark, no bite? You know that isn’t true.”

As he pulled me down onto the bed, he said, “Prove it.”

I did.

“HOW’S Lisa holding up?” Rick asked, looking up from adjusting his bowtie as I walked into the room.

“In true bride form: nervous, stressed, and ready to be done with it all.” The room was stuffier than the rest of the church, so I shrugged off my tux coat. “But I think she’ll be fine.”

He nodded and turned back to the mirror, scowling as his bowtie refused to cooperate. “Can’t say I blame her.” Looking at me in the mirror, he asked, “How does she look?”

“Rick, if I have to tell you what your own woman looks like—”

“Oh fuck you. Come on. Tell me.”

I cringed. “Dude, you don’t want to know.”

“What?” He turned around, eyes wide.

“Seriously.” I raised my palms, shaking my head and grimacing. “Just... I can’t....”

He blanched. “Dustin....”

As much as I tried to keep a straight face, his horrified expression made me crack a smile. “She looks great.”

“Asshole.” He laughed and looked in the mirror again, fixing his boutonnière. “Tell me someone’s keeping Mom busy?”

“She’s occupied for now,” I said. “But you can’t escape her for long.”

“Damn it,” he said. “She’s just the person I want to deal with today.”

“Tell me about it,” I muttered. “At least you’re off the ‘when are you going to get married’ hook.” I put my foot up on a chair to dust my shoe off. If the military had instilled anything in me, it was an obsessive need to make sure my dress shoes were perfectly shined and polished.

“Jesus, she didn’t waste any time pushing you back out on the prowl, did she?”

I glanced up at him, scowling, then looked down again as I retied my shoe. “No, definitely not.”

“Yeah, but it’s only been what, six months since—”

I held up my hand and shook my head. “Rick, this is your wedding. We don’t need to talk about this.”

He shrugged, adjusting his tux coat and laughing as he did. “I don’t know, might give me something to keep my mind *off* the fact that this is my wedding.” Then his smile fell. “Sorry, I didn’t—”

“It’s okay. I just, it doesn’t seem appropriate to be talking about a divorce at a wedding.”

“Fair enough.” He glanced in the mirror. “Though between you and me....” He hesitated.

I raised an eyebrow. “What?”

He turned around and clapped my shoulder. “Look, I know the rest of the family gives you hell for it, but I’m proud of you for doing it.”

“For—” I cocked my head. “For what?”

He winked. “For kicking that psychotic bitch to the curb.”

My jaw dropped. Then I laughed. “God, at least someone gets it. I’m pretty sure Mom’s disinherited me for it.”

Rolling his eyes, he shook his head. “She’ll get over it.”

“Yeah,” I said bitterly. “As soon as I find someone to take Stephanie’s place.”

He turned to get his shoes off of the table. “You’ll find someone eventually, though—” He paused again, then shook his head.

“What?”

As he sat, pulling one of his shoes out of the box, he said, “Honestly, between Mom and your ex, I’m surprised you haven’t sworn off women altogether.”

My blood ran cold, and I tried to swallow. Couldn’t.

He looked up, chuckling. “I’m kidding, man, relax.”

Shifting nervously, I cleared my throat. “I know,” I laughed, hoping it didn’t sound as forced as it was. “I was just imagining how Mom would react if she found out that I was the gay son, not you.”

“Hey!”

I ducked as his tennis shoe flew at my head. “Hey! No violence. This is a wedding, not a cage match.”

He froze, cocking his head. “I wonder if we could convince the bridesmaids to have a cage match....”

“Ah, but if we do, you won’t get to be there to enjoy it.”

“Why the fuck not?”

“Because by then, you’ll be a respectable married man, whereas I—the bachelor brother—would be sure to—” The other shoe flew at my head. “Dude, do you want to have to explain to Lisa or Mom why you have a black eye in all of your pictures?”

“Of course not,” he said, wincing as he pulled his dress shoe on. “That’s why I threw the shoe at *you*.”

I picked it up and gestured menacingly with it. “Yeah, but now I can throw it *back*.”

“Don’t even think—”

The door opened, and we both turned. Paul, the bride’s father, leaned in. “The photographer needs the two of you in five minutes.”

“Almost ready,” Rick said, nervousness creeping into his voice.

“We’ll be there in a minute,” I said.

Paul smiled and disappeared.

Rick stood, straightening his tux and moving his feet gingerly. “Okay, I guess it’s time to go be respectable gentlemen.”

Still holding his thrown tennis shoe in one hand, I nodded and picked up my tux coat. “Yeah, time to look like mature adults.” I started towards the door. “Oh, by the way, Rick?”

His eyebrows lifted. “Hmm?”

“Think fast.”

The shoe narrowly missed his shoulder. He watched it land, then looked at me. “You are so fucking dead.”

“Murder?” I reached for the door. “That would be two life sentences in one day, wouldn’t it?”

He chuckled, shook his head, and we went out to meet the rest of the wedding party—aside from Lisa—for photos. After the ceremony, we’d stand for even more photos, this time with the entire wedding party together. *Christ, this day is never going to end.*

As the photographer gave orders and posed us in varying combinations, I couldn’t shake the uncomfortable knot in my gut. Over and over, my brother’s comment echoed in my brain: *Honestly, between Mom and your ex, I’m surprised you haven’t sworn women off altogether.*

That wasn’t what I was doing, was it?

Of course I’d wondered about that from the beginning, but hearing Rick say it unsettled me. I was used to domineering, controlling women, but I knew not all women were like that. Most of the women

I'd dated since Stephanie certainly weren't. Kate was nothing like that. My sister had somehow turned out to be just the opposite of our mother. If anything, my mother and ex-wife were in the minority.

Still, they had been two of the biggest female influences in my life. Was that really why I'd suddenly been drawn to a man?

"Dusty?"

I turned in the direction of the voice.

Kari, my sister, cocked her head. "You okay?"

"Yeah, yeah, I'm fine," I said. "Just thinking."

Her concerned expression changed to a sympathetic one, her brow knitting together as she pursed her lips. "Are you going to be okay today? I mean with—" She paused, glancing around at the wedding decorations and guests.

I smiled. "I'll be fine." *I'm too busy wondering if I'm gay to let the wedding rub salt in my wounds.*

"You sure?"

"Absolutely."

The ceremony was starting, so she went to sit with our mother as I went to the back of the church with the other groomsmen.

The processional started. The other bridesmaids and groomsmen left in pairs, and finally I offered my elbow to the maid of honor. She and I walked down the aisle, and I stood behind my brother.

When the music changed and everyone stood to watch Lisa and her father come down the aisle, déjà vu kicked me square in the gut. My mind went back to the moment when the doors had opened and I had seen Stephanie coming down the aisle. I swallowed hard, choking back emotion. No matter how much hell I had gone through with her in our ten years of marriage, I had loved her when I married her and realized that on some level, whether it made sense or not, I still loved her.

I caught myself thumbing my ring finger as I watched Lisa come down the aisle. She was stunning in her wedding dress, and even halfway across the church and obscured by the veil, her feelings for

Rick were written on her face. My brother sniffed, quickly wiping his eye, and I envied him.

Rick took Lisa by the hand, and they faced each other in front of the pastor, wringing each other's hands nervously, exchanging tearful smiles. I couldn't see Rick's face, but I could see the way his thumbs moved back and forth across the backs of her hands, like he just needed to remind himself, over and over, that she was really there.

If ever I had witnessed a couple so completely in love, each so certain that the other was *the one*, that everything about this moment was right, I was witnessing it now. Standing up there over a decade ago, a scared kid with no idea what I was getting myself into, I hadn't felt that certainty. I think I always knew, consciously or not, that my marriage wouldn't last. What I wouldn't have given to feel the way Lisa and Rick obviously felt.

My knees almost buckled as a memory flickered through my mind, and I realized that I *had* felt that certainty before.

For all of my doubts and second thoughts and reservations, nothing had ever felt more perfect than the first time I had woken up with Brandon in my arms.

THE ceremony finally ended. I managed to will my legs to get me back up the aisle and made it through the receiving line. Mercifully, the receiving line also ended eventually, and the photographer ushered the bride and groom out for some of their portraits, giving me time to disappear for a few minutes before I had to put on a happy face for the camera once again.

With a more or less believable excuse about leaving something in the room where Rick and I had changed earlier, I slipped away.

In the tiny, stuffy room, I took my coat off, laid it on the table, and dropped into one of the chairs, resting my elbows on my knees and rubbing my eyes. Letting out a breath, I replayed the ceremony in my mind. I don't know which revelation unsettled me more: that I wasn't nearly as over Stephanie as I thought, or that I felt so strongly about Brandon.

Even if my initial attraction to him had been a way to get over her, there had been plenty of other “not Stephanie” candidates along the way, and none of them had had this effect on me. If this were a rebound, then it made about as much sense as breaking an addiction to one drug by getting hooked on a stronger one.

“Jesus,” I muttered, rubbing my eyes again.

Someone knocked. “Dusty?” It was Kari.

“It’s open.”

She came in and shut the door behind her. “The photographer is almost done with Rick and Lisa. Mom wants us all front and center.”

I rolled my eyes and stood, reaching for my coat.

“Are you sure you’re okay, Dusty?”

Thumbing my ring finger, I couldn’t even muster the energy to put on a smile and pretend everything was fine. “I’ll live.”

“That doesn’t sound like ‘okay’ to me.”

Avoiding her eyes, I brushed phantom dust off of my shoes. “What do you want me to say?” I wasn’t angry with her. If anything, I was just exasperated. Exhausted.

“I just want to know if you’re okay. I’m worried about you.”

I gave a half-hearted shrug and pulled my coat around my shoulders. “It’s only been a few months. It’s just going to take some time.”

“I know, I can’t even imagine.” She folded her arms across her chest and cocked her head. “Why did you agree to be the best man? You had to know this would be hard on you.”

Buttoning my jacket, I said, “Rick was my best man, and I always promised him I’d be his. And it’s not like I would have missed his wedding.”

“True. But still—”

“Come on, the photographer’s probably waiting.”

“You mean *Mom’s* probably waiting,” she said as we started down the hall.

“Exactly,” I muttered, clenching my fist and willing myself to stop searching for the band I’d taken off a long time ago.

She glanced over her shoulder at me but didn’t push the issue. Instead, she said, “Fair warning: I think Mom has her eye on several of the ladies for you.”

I groaned. “Please tell me you’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Good God, she just doesn’t quit,” I said. “Do you think she’d back off if I said I was seeing someone?”

Kari stopped in her tracks and spun around so fast I almost collided with her. “You’re seeing someone?”

I turned her around by the shoulders and gave her a gentle push to keep walking. “No, but I could tell her that.”

“And then you could listen to her demand to know why you didn’t bring the mystery lady to the wedding.”

“Great. I can’t win, can I?”

“No, you definitely can’t,” she said. “I’ll try to distract her with the baby at the reception, but no promises.”

“Ah, the grandbaby diversion,” I said with a laugh. “Foolproof. Please do.”

“You’d better be grateful.” She shot me a playful glare as we walked out of the church to the courtyard where everyone posed for portraits. “I’m letting her traumatize my kid to help you.”

As the photo session wore on, my mother dictated her list of required portraits to the photographer. Bride and groom with bridesmaids. Bride and groom with groomsmen. Bride and groom with the bride’s family. I wondered if Lisa’s parents were annoyed with the way my mother domineered this part of the wedding that they had paid for, but being the gracious, civil people that they were, they said nothing.

“Now I want one of just my kids,” our mother said.

“You’re kicking Lisa out of the picture?” Rick said.

“Oh it’s just for one,” Mom said.

“Couldn’t we have done this earlier?” Rick asked through his teeth. “When Lisa wasn’t in any of the shots?”

Gesturing casually, our mother said, “The light is so much prettier now than it was earlier.”

“It’s fine.” Lisa picked up her skirt and stepped to the side. “Gives me a minute or so away from the camera.” She laughed, but it sounded like she was clenching her jaw. Only my mother would so brazenly boot the bride out of a wedding portrait.

The photographer arranged the four of us in a line, with Tristan and me flanking Rick and Kari, since they were shorter. Just before the camera snapped, Kari elbowed me in the chest. On the next shot, I shoved her into Rick. Then Tristan cuffed Rick over the back of the head. Everyone around us howled with laughter as we behaved like the siblings we were, smacking and elbowing each other, fucking up shot after shot as the photographer tried to keep a straight face.

“Would you four knock it off and stand properly?” our mother finally barked.

“She lasted a good minute and a half this time,” I said, just loud enough for my siblings to hear as we all tried to compose ourselves.

“I think that’s a new record,” Kari whispered. Tristan snorted. Rick chuckled. I bit my tongue trying to keep from laughing.

“Okay, got it,” the photographer said.

“In spite of *their* best efforts,” our mother said. “Spouses in.”

My good humor faded. I had been the first of us to get married, and now it was my turn to be the single sibling in the “siblings with spouses” portrait.

“Dustin, why don’t you step out of this one?” my mother said, killing any humor I had left. She gestured for me to move aside, and my stomach did a flip. *Well, that’s a new low.*

“Mom!” Kari said as her husband stepped into the picture.

“Oh honestly, it’s just for one picture,” Mom said.

“But—”

I gestured for Kari to let it go. Walking past Lisa, I smiled and said, “Tag, you’re in.”

She gave me a sympathetic smile. “That was cold of your mom.”

I shrugged. “Could be worse.” From behind the camera, I tried to keep a pleasant expression on my face as my siblings and their spouses were arranged for their portrait. From the looks on their faces, they were as stunned and annoyed by my mother’s request as I was.

In the past, the single siblings had still been invited into this shot. I forced myself to keep my irritation to myself; it was one of my mother’s passive-aggressive stabs to remind me of how she felt about my divorce. It was just a portrait, a petty thing, but the message was clear: I wasn’t a single sibling. I was the *divorced* sibling. It honestly surprised me that she hadn’t invited Stephanie to the wedding. I wouldn’t have put it past her to do it, just like I wouldn’t have put it past my ex-wife to show up.

The photo session finally ended, and we all headed to the reception. No one mentioned the portrait snub, probably following my lead and letting it go. They knew as well as I did that it wasn’t worth arguing about. A clash over something petty between my mother and Tristan had gotten more than a little ugly at Kari’s wedding, so it was best to just let it go.

At the reception, Kari handed off her son to our mother, hoping that would be enough to pacify her attempts to hook me up with every single woman in the room. When Mom wasn’t looking, I carefully slipped into the throng of guests and mingled with old friends.

It wasn’t long, though, before a tug at my sleeve caught my attention. I turned around to see my mother with my nephew on her hip and a pretty redhead next to her.

“Dustin, I want you to meet someone.”

Chapter 11

BRANDON leaned against the arm of his couch, watching me at the pool table. “So how was the wedding?”

I groaned, partly from the memory of the wedding, partly because I’d just missed an *easy* shot on the table. Tapping my cue against the side of my shoe, I cursed under my breath. “Your shot.”

Brandon laughed, picking up his cue. “That good, huh?”

I shrugged. “I’m a few months into a nasty divorce. Weddings are, by nature, not going to be pleasant.”

“I’ve never found them all that pleasant anyway.”

“I don’t know, I used to enjoy them.”

“They’re nice enough,” he said, knocking the fifteen into the side pocket. “Except when you see how stressed, exhausted, and bankrupt most people are by the time they get to the actual wedding. They always look like they’re just ready to get the bloody thing over with.”

“That’s about the size of it,” I said.

“I take it yours was no walk in the park?”

I winced. “I can think of very few days when my mother and my wife were *less* tolerable.”

He grimaced, looking up from staring down the cue ball. “I hope the honeymoon was marginally better?”

“Marginally.”

“Ouch.”

I shifted my weight. “So yeah, my wedding wasn’t fun. But the one yesterday....” I shook my head and rolled my eyes. “Christ, I probably could have dealt with it if everyone and their mother—and *my* mother—wasn’t trying to hook me up with everything that moved.”

“Everything *female* that moved, I assume?”

“Exactly.”

He paused, looking up at me. “Do any of them have a clue? About—” He gestured at himself, then me. “This?”

I exhaled sharply. “No.”

“How do you think they would take it?”

“Not well.” I avoided his eyes. “Not well at all. My mother would absolutely shit bricks, and my brother....”

He glanced up. “Your brother, what?”

“My brother has got to be one of the biggest homophobes I have ever had the displeasure of knowing,” I said. “I love him to death, but that’s one thing that’s always bothered me about him.”

Brandon’s cue snapped forward, and another ball dropped. Walking around the table to take his next shot, he said, “So I take it he has no inkling at all that you’re anything but perfectly heterosexual?”

“Absolutely not. No one in the family does, as far as I know.”

He paused, seeming to focus on nothing for a moment, then looked at me. “Is this the first time *you’ve* ever had any inkling that you’re not perfectly hetero?”

I swallowed. “First time in my life.”

He smiled. It was more a look of understanding than amusement, but there was a devilish twinkle in his eyes as he said, “Well, you seem to be catching on quickly.”

Laughing, I said, “Apparently I’m in good hands.”

“I do the best I can.” He winked.

“I’m not complaining.” I watched him take his shot as I put chalk on my cue. “So when did you figure out you were bi?”

“On my twenty-first birthday,” he said with all the nonchalance of someone who’d just been asked where he bought a pair of shoes, not when he made a startling discovery about his sexuality.

“You remember the exact day? Wow.”

He gave me a knowing look. “Don’t you?”

“Touché.”

He laughed. “You don’t forget stuff like that. Mine just happened to be on my birthday.” He paused to take a shot. The cue jerked forward, the cue ball cracked against the thirteen, and the thirteen obediently dropped into the corner pocket. His eyes darted around the table. Then he stood and looked at me, shaking his head slightly to get a stray strand of hair out of his face. “So you want to know how it happened?”

“Well,” I said, “you certainly know how it happened with me.”

“Indeed I do.” He winked. Folding his arms across his chest, his cue resting in the crook of his elbow, he leaned his hip against the pool table. “Some friends took me out for my twenty-first, because, of course, being the pure and innocent saint that I am, I hadn’t had a drop to drink until that point.”

I coughed to mask the word “bullshit.”

He laughed. “Christ, I drank like a fish back then.” He smiled, his eyes distant for a moment, as if pausing the reminiscence. “Anyway, we went out to a club. I don’t even remember how much I’d had to drink, but I was the only one in my group that was still standing without the support of furniture or other people.” He shrugged, and I swear his cheeks turned a little pink. “We ran into each other on the dance floor. Had a few dances. Had a few more drinks. Next thing I knew, we were in her apartment and out of our clothes.”

“Wait, did you say—”

“Her. Yes, you heard right.” He winked and turned his attention back to the pool table. “That was the first time I was ever attracted to a woman.”

“So you were—” I paused. “You were gay, then bi?”

He shrugged again. “They’re just labels, Dustin. Think of it this way.” He leaned over the table, his eyes fixed on the cue ball even as he continued speaking. “If you’re attracted to blondes, then one day a brunette catches your attention, does it mean you’re somehow different?”

I pursed my lips. “I hadn’t really thought of it that way.”

“Society likes to put us all in neat, tidy little categories, but—*son of a bitch*.” The cue ball followed the nine into the side pocket. “Your shot.”

“About damned time,” I said, fishing the ball out of the pocket.

He grabbed my ass as he walked by. “Enjoy it while it lasts.”

“Fuck you,” I laughed.

“Again?” He rolled his eyes and groaned theatrically. “Jesus, Dustin, give me a few minutes to recover.”

I put an arm around his waist, pulling him close enough to kiss. “And if I don’t want to wait a few minutes?”

He swallowed. “Well, if you put it like that....” He put his hand on my face and kissed me.

Then I slipped out of his grasp and grinned. “Pity we have a game to finish.”

He smirked. “Tease.”

“Learned from the best.” I turned back to the table. A moment later, I cursed as the two narrowly missed the corner pocket.

“Maybe you should learn from my—”

“Shut up.” I laughed and kissed him again before stepping away from the table so he could finish slaughtering me.

He chuckled. Then his expression turned serious as he looked down his cue at the ball. I loved the intensity in his eyes when he played, that slight furrow of his brow, the way his eyes narrowed with concentration. He took the shot and turned his attention to me, evidently completely confident that the eleven was going to drop into the corner pocket, which it did.

“So, anyway, what I was saying about society putting us into little categories,” he said. “Everyone wants to label everyone else. Straight. Gay. Bisexual.” He rolled his eyes. “Whatever. I fuck who I want to fuck, I love who I want to love, and the rest of society can suck my left nut if they don’t like it.”

I snorted with laughter. “You’re so eloquent about these things, Brandon.”

He grinned. “It’s true. I mean, think about it. Since we’ve been seeing each other, are you a different person? Or are you still Dustin Walker?”

“Good point.”

“You’re still the same person you were then.” He was scowling, talking through gritted teeth, but his eyes were fixed on the table. He moved back and forth, apparently trying to figure out how to take the particular shot. And still he continued. “You just happen to be fucking a man now instead of a woman.”

“There are people in my life who might see that distinction as a bit more than just semantics,” I said.

Moving his cue to his other hand and leaning in to take the shot left-handed, he said, “Like I said, if people don’t like it, they can suck my left nut.” As if to emphasize his point, the cue snapped forward, and the ball dropped.

“Damn it, you’re even beating me left-handed?”

He grinned. “I’ll beat you with whichever hand I choose, and you’ll like it.” His gaze swept over the table. “Why, look at this. It seems I’ve run out of balls.”

“That’ll be the day,” I muttered, trying unsuccessfully not to laugh.

He wiggled his eyebrow at me. “Well, I guess I’ll have to go for some of yours, then.” He put his finger to his lips, cocking his hips as he pretended to give it great thought. Then he pointed at the eight ball. “Do you mind if I go for that one? You know, to help you out?”

I rolled my eyes and rubbed my lower lip with my middle finger. "Oh, do go ahead."

"You're such a gentleman."

"Not really. I just like watching you bend over the table."

"Is that why you let me win?"

"Let you?" I ran my cue up the inside of his leg, chuckling as he glared over his shoulder at me. "You know I always give you a run for your money."

He shrugged as he lined up his shot. "You hold your own."

"Keep being cocky, and you'll be holding *your* own."

He didn't even flinch. The eight ball fell in, then Brandon turned around and said, "Empty threat."

"Is it?"

He kissed me and squeezed the front of my jeans, making me gasp. "Yes, it is."

"Be careful, or I'm going to bend you over that table, and it won't be so you can knock the eight ball in."

He gave me one last squeeze, then released me and reached for the chalk. "Rack 'em."

As I racked the next game, I said, "How about a friendly wager this time?"

"A wager?" His eyebrow lifted, and he grinned. "What did you have in mind?"

I picked up the rack and set it aside. Leaning against the table, I made a casual gesture with one hand. "Maybe something other than cash this time?"

He snorted. "Tired of losing money?"

"Cocky bastard." I rolled my eyes. "You know I can beat you."

"Sometimes," he said, nodding. "So what did you have in mind?"

"Oh, I don't know." I pretended to give it serious thought. "How about the loser sucks the winner's cock?"

He blinked, then laughed. “Now, if there’s a blowjob at stake, you’d better have your A-game on.”

“So you’re game?”

He leaned over to break, pausing to give me his cockiest smirk. “Oh, you’d better believe it.”

I returned the look, winking at him. “Can’t promise I’ll play fair with a blowjob on the line.”

He narrowed his eyes as he laughed. “Dustin, you *don’t* want to play dirty with me.” He kissed me quickly. “Rest assured, I *will* win.”

Sliding my arm around his waist, I leaned in for another kiss and, against his mouth, growled, “Bring it on.”

“Oh, it’s on.” He raised his chin as if coming in for another kiss but instead snapped his teeth an inch away from my mouth. Laughing at my startled reaction, he reached for his cue. “You can play dirty if you want, but only if you want to get stomped.”

He turned towards the table and lined up a shot to break. I held my hand over the end of his cue, almost closing my fingers around it but not actually touching it. Just as he went to take his shot, I grabbed the cue, keeping it from moving.

“What the—” He glared at me and stood. “Ooh, it’s going to be like that, is it?”

I held my hands up, feigning innocence. “I didn’t do anything!”

He chuckled and pointed sharply at the other end of the table. “Now get over there so I can see you. I’m not turning my back to you while I’m playing.”

“Scared?”

“Scared I might have to beat you with my cue,” he said, watching me walk to the other side of the table before resuming his break. “And this fucker was expensive, so if I broke it over your head, I’d have to take it out of your hide.”

I gestured below my belt. “I’ve got your pound of flesh right here. All you have to do is ask.”

He snorted with laughter just as he took his shot. The cue ball ricocheted off of the racked balls. It still broke, but it was definitely not his most impressive break.

“Your shot,” he said through his teeth, obviously trying not to laugh.

“Oh my, I guess it is,” I said, smirking.

Brandon was right: Playing dirty against him was not in my best interest if I wanted to win.

I groped his ass while he took a shot. He ran a finger under the waistband of my jeans while I leaned over the table. I slid a hand around the inside of his thigh, startling him but not even remotely screwing up a perfectly executed bank shot.

He, however, got behind me and flicked his tongue across the back of my neck just in time to fuck up what should have been a simple shot. I swore when I watched the cue ball breeze past the three and drop into the corner pocket. *Shit*. We were down to five balls on the table: three of mine, one of Brandon’s, and the eight ball. I was fucked.

And of course, Brandon wasn’t about to let me forget it. “I told you playing dirty with me would get you into trouble.”

I slid an arm around his waist. “Ah, but it’s fun, so what’s the harm?”

“No harm at all,” he said with a devilish wink as he walked past me.

I caught him with an arm around his waist. “Besides,” I said, kissing his neck. “I like playing dirty with you.”

“Likewise,” he said, reaching between us and squeezing the front of my jeans. He glanced down and grinned. “And evidently you like it just as much as I do.”

“Great minds think alike.” I pulled him into a long kiss.

He paused and licked his lips. “You know, I *never* get tired of the way your kiss tastes.” He didn’t give me a chance to respond before he kissed me again, sliding a hand around the back of my neck and exploring my mouth with his tongue.

Finally, he broke the kiss, gave me a quick, mouthwatering grin, and turned his attention back to the game. The twelve was practically falling into the side pocket. He paused. “So what was that wager again?”

I laughed and rolled my eyes. “Loser sucks the winner off.”

He nodded, grinning. “Duly noted.”

My mouth watered. I had no qualms about losing this particular bet. Any excuse to get into bed with Brandon, especially if I could—

The cue ball bounced off of the side of the table, missing the twelve completely, and knocked the eight ball into the corner pocket.

I stared at it in slack-jawed disbelief. Then I looked at Brandon, and the cocky, horny grin on his face made my knees weak.

“Oops.” His cue made a hollow click when he laid it across the table, and he started towards me. “I seem to have lost.”

Chapter 12

AFTER my workout, I showered, dressed, and headed out of the locker room to clock out for lunch.

“Hey Dustin, are you going to lunch?” Kate asked, following me into the office.

“Yeah, want me to bring something back for you?”

“No, I brought mine.” She glanced over her shoulder. “There’s a new client, though, that asked specifically for you. Said you were recommended to him by a friend.”

I looked at the clock. I was dying to eat, but I couldn’t afford to let potential clients go. My divorce lawyer had to make his car payments, after all. “Ugh, I don’t suppose I can get out of this one, can I?”

“Well, unless you want to pass up a client,” she said with a shrug as she handed me a folder. “He came in while you were doing your workout, so I did his prelim stuff.”

“Thanks.” That would save me half an hour or so; now all I had to do was go over the forms that Kate had filled out detailing the client’s goals, workout history, and health history. I glanced at the clock again. “Tell him to give me ten minutes. I’ll go over his info while I eat something.”

“Sounds good. He’s in the lobby.” She left the office, and I grabbed a protein shake out of the communal refrigerator before leaning back in the boss’s chair with the new client’s paperwork.

I was just taking a drink when I flipped the folder open, and I nearly choked.

Brandon Stewart.

I sat up straight. “Oh, you son of a bitch.” I perused the file, wondering if it was just a coincidence, but his workout and health history were consistent with his physique.

Quickly finishing my shake, I got up and headed out into the lobby. He looked up from a bodybuilding magazine and gave me that cocky grin. In that moment, I wasn’t sure if I wanted to fuck him or kill him.

“Brandon Stewart?” I said, trying to sound polite and casual.

He set the magazine down and rose, extending his hand, keeping up the charade that we’d never met. “You must be Dustin. I’ve heard quite a bit about you.”

I gave his hand an extra firm shake, but he just smiled and ran his thumb across the back of my hand.

“Why don’t we head to weight room?” I said. “Since all of the prelim crap is out of the way.”

“You lead, I’ll follow,” he said with a smirk.

“I’m sure you will,” I growled.

He laughed and followed me towards the stairs. As we walked past the reception desk, Kate gave me a puzzled look but said nothing.

On the way up the stairs, I turned to Brandon and whispered, “What are you doing here?”

“Didn’t have any classes today,” he said matter-of-factly. “So I decided to come fuck with you.”

“Fuck with me?” I laughed. “By giving me money?”

He wetted his lips. “By getting hot, sweaty, and out of breath.”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “You know I’m going to get even with you for this, don’t you?”

“We’ll see about that.”

I gave him a good-natured glare and lowered my voice even more. “Just remember, you started it.”

That cocky grin again. “I don’t suppose,” he said. “You’ll show me how to do handstand pushups?”

My blood went cold. There was no way in *hell* I would be able to keep a professional façade if he even attempted a handstand pushup. I cleared my throat. “I, well, why don’t we go through your lifting routine and cardio, then we’ll try that?”

He pursed his lips. “But if I’ve already done a lifting routine, my arms will be too tired to hold me up.”

“Pity.” I gestured towards one of the mats by the corner of the track. “Do some stretching. Trust me, you’ll need it.”

He snorted. “Is this more for my benefit or yours?”

I raised an eyebrow. “If it were for my benefit, I’d have you doing wind sprints in the parking lot with hundred-pound dumbbells in either hand.”

“Slave driver.”

“Damn right. Now stretch. I’ll be right back.” I left him to warm up while I went to see if any of the benches were open in the weight room. One was, so I threw a towel on it to let the other members know it was taken.

I always had clients start out with a few minutes of stretching, but I had to admit that this was, as Brandon had suggested, for my benefit. Not because I wanted to watch him stretch, though. I needed a moment to take a breath and will myself to get through this session without making myself look completely unprofessional. It was bad enough working with someone with Brandon’s flawless physique when I wasn’t planning on having sex with them in a few hours.

This was going to be—in every sense of the word—the hardest training session in recent memory. I paused to glance at myself in the mirror, cursing at the slight flush in my cheeks. Then I shook my head and laughed. *I am so getting you back for this, Dr. Stewart.*

Running him through various exercises in the weight room proved to be as torturous for me as it was for him. I pushed his limits—which was my job—but he pushed mine right back.

Towards the end of a particularly difficult set of hammer curls, his grimace reminded me of the way he looked when he was right on the edge. As he sat up after putting the weights down, a single drop of sweat slid out of his hair and disappeared under his shirt, and my mind's eye watched it run down the groove in the middle of his back, watched it pause on the edges of his tattoo.

I shook my head, forcing myself to do my damned job and focus on what he was doing, but that didn't help, not with the way his biceps moved with each rep. *Fucking hell, Brandon, I am going to get you back for this.*

He set the dumbbells down and ran a hand through his sweaty hair—*Which looks nothing like it does right after he gets out of the shower. Damn it, Dustin, pay attention.*

"You're quite the slave driver," he said with a wink, opening his water bottle.

"Just making sure you get your money's worth." I went about putting the weights back on the rack. Under normal circumstances, I'd make him do it, simply because I wanted to make him work, but in this case, it gave me something to do other than watch his Adam's apple bob each time he swallowed.

"So how about those handstand push-ups?" he asked, capping the bottle.

"We'll see how you feel after you do your cardio."

He blinked. "Cardio? After all of that?"

I grinned. *It seems I've regained the upper hand, haven't I?* "There are conflicting schools of thought as far as whether it's better to do cardio before or after lifting. In this case, I'm going to say it's better to do it after."

He raised an eyebrow. "Why is that?"

I gestured for him to follow me out of the weight room. “Because it’ll make you suffer.”

We found a treadmill that wasn’t occupied, and I glanced at the information Brandon had filled out. “So, six miles is your usual?”

“Before I’ve lifted, yes.” *Is that apprehension in his voice?*

“We’ll make it four, then,” I said. “But next time, you’d better be back up to six.” Setting the machine for the appropriate program and speed, I nodded for him to get on. I hit the start button. “Enjoy.”

“Sadist,” he said with a laugh as the treadmill started.

I paused, eyeing him and smirking. “I’m the sadist?”

He batted his eyes. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Uh huh.” I gave him a playful glare. Starting back towards the treadmill, I added, “Oh, that reminds me.”

“What?”

Craning my neck to see the controls, I changed the incline to three percent, then grinned at him. “That should be enough to remind you not to fuck with me.”

“No, it probably won’t.”

“Want me to make it six percent?”

Laughing, he batted my hand away from the control. “No, leave it alone!”

“I’ll be back in a few. Enjoy your run.” I went into the office to get something cold to drink and figure out just what I had to do to get him back.

I COULDN’T help the look of smug satisfaction when Brandon limped into my apartment that evening. Trying not to laugh, I said, “Sore, are we?”

He glared at me, but the corner of his mouth twitched into a grin. “Yeah. Funny how that happens after I spend an hour getting my ass kicked.”

I shut the door. “Well, it’s not like I dragged you into the gym.”

He snickered. “Looked more like you were going to try to drag me *out*.”

“I’m not one to turn away a paying client,” I said. “So I figured I’d just make you regret walking through the door to begin with.”

“You’ll have to try a lot harder than that, Dustin.” He winked.

Kissing him lightly, I put my arms around him. “I just wanted to make you regret coming in,” I said, pulling him a little closer. “I didn’t want to cripple you.”

He winced, shifting his weight. “I think you almost did cripple me.”

“I didn’t really hurt you, did I?”

Shaking his head, he said, “No, but I’m going to feel like hell tomorrow. Already do feel like hell, thank you very much.”

“That’ll teach you.”

“No, it probably won’t.” He winked. “When’s my next session?”

“I’ll pencil you in sometime, oh, *never*.”

He laughed and kissed me. Then he cocked his head and looked at me, obviously thinking something.

“What?”

“You knew I’d be too tired to try handstand push-ups, didn’t you?”

I tried not to smile. “I don’t know what you’re talking about.”

“Liar.”

Knowing full well my cheeks were burning, I dropped my gaze. “Yes, I knew you’d be too tired. I would never have a client try something like that at the end of a session. If I’d had any intention whatsoever of doing them with you, we would have done them at the beginning.”

His eyebrow lifted. I could tell he was both amused and curious. “So, why...?”

Chewing my lip, I said, “Because I can barely keep myself professional when I’m watching my other clients do them. If I saw you do it...” I swallowed. “Let’s just say everyone in the gym would have known exactly how I felt about you.”

“Ah, so the professional Dustin has an Achilles’ heel, after all.”

I snorted. “Trust me, I have several. But that is definitely my Kryptonite.”

“Why is that?”

“It’s—” I cut myself off, pursing my lips as I tried to find the words to describe it. “I mean... fuck it, let me show you. Come on.”

We went into the living room where there was a bit more space in case I lost my balance. I almost never did, but with Brandon there, anything could happen. Even now, he made my hands shake, which didn’t bode well for maintaining a handstand.

I started to tuck my shirt in, but instead, I took it off.

“I like the looks of this already,” Brandon said with a smirk. He folded his arms across his chest and rested his hip against the couch as he watched me.

I laughed. “Okay, watch and learn. It’s hot as hell when a woman does this, but I’ll do the best I can.”

“I think I can manage with what I’m seeing.”

We exchanged grins, then I focused on what I was doing. I dropped my hands to the floor, kicked up into a handstand, and gave myself a moment to stabilize. From where I was, I could have easily cast a glance at Brandon, but I didn’t dare. Standing on my own two feet was enough of a challenge when he gave me the look that I could already feel him giving me.

Taking a breath, I tightened my core and lowered myself, then pushed back up. My shoulders, fatigued from my own workout earlier, quivered with the exertion but stayed under me.

After three or four reps, I dropped my feet and stood. “So do you—” I stopped when I saw the knowing grin on his face. “What?”

He chuckled and came towards me, putting his arms around my neck. “Nothing.”

“You’re thinking something.”

“Am not.” He tilted his head to kiss me, but I avoided his kiss and smirked.

“Spill it,” I said.

Pulling me into a kiss, he whispered, “I’ve been doing handstand pushups for three years.”

My jaw fell open. “You—”

“I just wanted to see *you* do it.”

I laughed and kissed him. “All you had to do was ask.”

His fingers trailed up the back of my neck. “I did.”

“Is that the only reason you came to the gym today?”

“Fuck no,” he said. “If all I wanted was to get a hard-on watching you do handstand pushups, I’d have just asked you to do it in the bedroom.” He nudged his hips against mine, letting me know he wasn’t exaggerating about the hard-on.

“So why did you come in, then?”

“Because I wanted to fuck with you.”

I laughed. “Jackass.”

He grinned into my kiss. “You loved every minute of it.”

“Maybe,” I said with a shrug. “I’m still going to get you back for it.”

“Oh really? And how are you going to do that?”

“You’ll see.” I ran my fingers through his hair. “When and where you least expect it, I’m *going* to get you back.”

He narrowed his eyes. “An empty threat.”

“Is it?”

“I think it is.”

“I guess you’ll find out, won’t you?”

The smug cockiness in his expression couldn’t mask the very slight raise in his eyebrows. I could tell he was trying to decide whether

or not to call my bluff, but I just grinned. Whether he knew it or not, I most definitely wasn't bluffing. Revenge *would* be mine.

"Just wait." I pulled him closer and kissed his neck. "But now that I have you good and turned on...."

"You had me turned on the minute you took your shirt off." He ran his hands over my shoulders.

"I showed you mine," I said, nibbling his neck and sliding my hands under his shirt. "You show me yours."

"I think I can manage that." He stepped back and pulled his shirt over his head. As he tossed it onto the couch, he winced, rubbing his shoulder and neck gingerly.

"You okay?" I asked, putting my hands on his hips.

He nodded, but the painful grimace still twisted his mouth. "I'm fine."

"Are you really that sore?"

"No." He looked at me, then laughed. "Yes."

Frowning, I squeezed his shoulder gently, then his upper arm, watching him flinch in spite of his best efforts not to. "Is this just fatigue, or did you pull something?"

"I think you just kicked my ass a little harder than I expected."

"You're going to feel like shit tomorrow, then," I said, furrowing my brow and watching him rub his shoulder.

"Great."

"A massage might help."

He smiled. "A massage *always* helps."

"Come on." I nodded towards the bedroom. "I fucked you up. I might as well fix it."

As he followed me down the hall, he said, "And then fuck me, right?"

I glanced over my shoulder. "Doesn't that go without saying?"

"It'd better."

“Have I ever let you down, Brandon?” I rifled through a dresser drawer, looking for the bottle of massage oil.

His hands slid up my back, making me suck in a sharp breath. “Not once.” He kissed my shoulder.

“And I don’t plan to start now,” I said. “Ah, here it is.” I pulled the bottle out, elbowed the drawer shut, and nodded towards the bed. “Now lie on your stomach.”

BRANDON did as I asked, lying on his stomach as I sat on my knees beside him on the bed. He rested his face on his hands and watched me pour some of the massage oil into my palm. “You know, we could have a lot of fun with that stuff.”

“We could.” I rubbed my hands together to warm the cool liquid. “And as soon as you’re not quite so crippled, maybe we will.”

He snorted. “I’m not crippled.”

I put my hands on his shoulders, circling gently with my palms, gradually applying more pressure as I went. “Maimed, then?”

“Hmm, maimed could—oh my *God*....”

I froze. “What? Too much?”

“No, it’s awesome. Keep doing that,” he said, almost slurring. “Where did you learn to do that?”

Pushing a little harder, I kneaded the stiff muscles of his shoulders and upper back. “When I was getting my training certification, I took a couple of massage classes just for the hell of it.”

“You obviously paid attention,” he said. “*Jesus*.”

“I find some skills worth learning,” I said with a laugh. “I’m a bit out of practice, though. Haven’t done this in a while.”

“If this is you out of practice,” he said, “please feel free to use me to brush up on your skills.”

“Come on, now,” I said. “I couldn’t possibly use you. That just wouldn’t be right.”

“No, please do. I insist.”

“Well, if you say so.”

Pressing the heels of my hands into his lower back on either side of his spine, I slowly slid them up to his shoulders, my oiled skin gliding over his. I watched his chest rise and fall with long, deep breaths as the tension in his muscles melted away at my fingertips. When he released a low moan, it vibrated up through my skin and raised goose bumps on my arms.

I kept one hand on his back and reached for the massage oil. Then I poured some on the back of my own hand, put the bottle aside, and used my free hand to coax the oil from my skin onto his so that it was warm when I smoothed it on. As I did, I marveled at the sight of my own fingers sliding across his muscles, the ridge of his spine, and the edges of his tattoo.

It wasn't the first time I'd given a man a massage; I'd worked on men and women alike as part of my classes. Staring at Brandon's body, massage oil glistening like a sheen of sweat, I wondered how I ever could have overlooked just how sexy a man's body could be.

More than once, I forgot that I was supposed to be working the knots out of his strained, fatigued muscles. Instead, I just ran my hands over his torso, letting my fingertips memorize every last contour. I knew the human body like a mechanic knows a car, but everything about Brandon's fascinated me.

Though he was hardly a bodybuilder, he had the kind of toned, sculpted physique most of my clients have would killed for. The kind of physique *I* would have killed for. Fully dressed, he looked slim and fit, but once the clothes were gone, his body looked as powerful as it was beautiful. Even now, as he lay calm and relaxed, the strength and energy just beneath the surface was palpable.

The dragon on his back rose and fell beneath my hands, seeming to draw breath with him. Brandon's eyes were closed, his breathing so slow and even that I thought he was asleep until he whispered, “I could let you do this all night.”

“So you don't want me to hurry?”

“Please don't. Take your time.”

I kneaded his shoulders, finding the knots in his muscles and working them out, occasionally stopping to run my hands down the length of his spine and back up. Each time I returned to his shoulders, I explored every inch as if I'd never touched it before. The knots were long gone, but I wasn't about to stop. The warmth of his skin was hypnotic as my oiled hands slid over it again and again.

It was only the fatigue in my own shoulders that finally stopped me. My hands still had a few miles left in them, but my neck and shoulders were starting to ache. I sat beside him and said "Give me your arm."

Eyes fluttering open, he lifted his head and freed the arm closest to me, stretching it out, letting the side of his face rest on his other forearm. He closed his eyes again as I kneaded his arm.

"You know, if this is what happens when I show up at the gym, I may have to do it again."

"Don't you dare." I laughed and made firm circles with my thumbs, working my way down his bicep. Holding his forearm in one hand, I massaged my way down his arm with the other, tracing the contours of his muscles and watching my own thumb follow the groove on the inside of his forearm to his wrist.

His fingers closed around my wrist, his thumb gently rubbing the side of my arm. The soft brush of his skin against mine made my breath catch.

Our eyes met. Neither of us spoke, but the look in his eyes drew me towards him. Without releasing my hand, he rolled onto his back, gently pulling me with him. He rose to meet me, putting his arms around me as I leaned in to kiss him, and we both sank slowly onto the bed.

"Your hands are amazing," he murmured.

"Any excuse to touch you," I said, kissing him deeply.

"You don't need an excuse if you're going to touch me like that." Then he looked at me with a mischievous grin. "If I told you my feet were killing me, would you give me a foot massage?"

I laughed and kissed him gently. "All you have to do is ask."

“Then I’m asking.”

“For what?”

“Rub my feet, damn it.”

I bent and kissed the side of his neck. “You have to ask nicely.”

“Please rub my feet, damn it?”

“Behave yourself, or I’ll make you beg.”

“If your hands are half as good to my feet as they are to everything else, I *will* beg.”

“Mmm, maybe I want to see you beg for it.”

“Please?”

“Please what?”

“Please rub my feet, since you so cruelly crippled me.”

“I thought you said you weren’t crippled.”

“If it gets you to rub my feet, I’ll say I am.”

Kissing my way up his neck, I ran my hand down his side. “Might be more fun to make you get down on your knees and beg.”

“If I get down on my knees, *you’re* the one who will be begging.”

“Touché.” I kissed him before moving down to his feet. “In the interest of full disclosure, I haven’t done this in a while. I might be a little rusty.”

“I’m sure I’ll—*holy fuck*.” He closed his eyes as I ran my thumb up the arch of his foot. “You can do that as long as you want.”

“Careful what you wish for,” I said. “I can go all night.”

He chuckled. “I can take it.”

“You sure?”

“Bring it—oh my God....” He groaned softly as the heel of my hand followed the same path my thumb had a second before.

Watching him, hearing and feeling his responses to my touch, fascinated me as it always did. I had always enjoyed watching a partner respond, whether it were in the form of a powerful orgasm or simply a catch of breath after a gentle brush of my hand, but Brandon’s reactions did more than just intrigue me. In the beginning, it was the novelty of

being with a man, having that kind of effect on a man, but it was more than that now.

It was more than just a turn-on when he responded to my touch. It was almost a sense of relief that the cosmos had somehow seen fit to give me the chance to do this to him just one more time, like giving him this kind of pleasure—whether a gentle massage or hot, sweaty sex, or even a brief kiss—was a privilege I didn't deserve.

Deserving or not, I was going to enjoy every second of it.

Letting his foot ease back onto the bed, my hand drifted up his ankle and onto his jeans. His breath caught as I let my fingers trail up the side of his calf. Watching his eyes, I gently ran the heel of my hand over his cock, pausing to unbutton the top of his jeans. He drew in a long breath while I slowly drew the zipper down.

Tugging at his waistband, I said, "I hope you don't mind that I stopped rubbing your feet."

"Go back to rubbing my feet now, and I might have to hurt you." He lifted his hips so that I could get his jeans and boxers out of the way.

"You sure?" My fingers trailed up the shaft of his erection, barely touching the skin but enough to make him shiver and raise goose bumps on his skin. I flicked my tongue across the rise of his hipbone. "I could always finish giving you a foot massage now, and—"

"Don't you *dare*."

I didn't. I took his cock into my mouth, stroking the shaft as I licked around the head. There was just enough massage oil left on my hand to let it slide easily up and down his cock.

"Oh my God, that's...." He was up on his elbows now, abs quivering and chest rising sharply with shallow, uneven gasps for air. He let his head fall back and moaned. "Oh Jesus, don't stop, don't fucking stop."

I stroked faster, squeezing his cock as it stiffened in my hand. His back arched and he let his shoulders drop back to the bed. His hands hit the mattress beside him, grabbing at the sheets.

“Fuck,” he breathed. “That’s... fuck... *holy*—” He took in a sharp hiss of breath. Then his body shook with a violent tremor and, a second later, he came with a throaty roar that faded into a growl, then a moan, then a breathless whimper.

I licked my lips and said, “That would be the foot massage with the happy ending.”

“That damn well better not be the end,” he growled. He sat up and pulled me into a kiss. As his tongue explored my mouth, his hands went for my belt. We quickly got my remaining clothes out of the way, then he tried to lower me onto the bed. I grabbed his shoulders, though, and got the advantage just long enough to get him onto his back.

“I hope you don’t think you’re getting on top,” he said.

“Damn right I am.” I laughed and pinned his wrists beside his head.

“The hell you are.” He pulled his arms free, slipping easily out of my grasp. I tried to grab him again, but the oil on his skin and my hands made it impossible, and he got away.

“Hey! You’re covered in oil,” I said, rolling onto my back and looking up at him. “That’s cheating.”

“You’re the one that covered me in oil.” He kissed his way down my side, trailing his fingers down the center of my chest.

I grinned. “Maybe you should put some on me to level the playing field.”

He raised his head and opened his mouth, I assume, to make a witty remark, but he paused. Then his eyebrows lifted. “I think I like that idea.” He picked up the bottle of massage oil and poured some into his hand.

I sat up to kiss him, inhaling through my nose as he put his hands on my chest, sliding them up to my shoulders. His mouth moved against mine just as slowly as his hands moved on me, the gentle motions mesmerizing me and turning me on. I put my arms around him and didn’t resist as he leaned into me, letting us slowly collapse together on the bed.

Reality faded into a blur of oiled hands gliding over skin, tongues intertwining between gasps and moans, and two bodies moving together like they were each made specifically with the other in mind. He knew where to touch to make me tremble. I knew where to touch to make him bite his lip and hold me tighter. We both knew what we wanted, and when he reached for a condom, it only vaguely occurred to me that I hadn't actually said the words "I want to fuck you." I'd only thought them.

I sat up to put the condom on, desperate to be inside him.

He glanced at the massage oil bottle. "That stuff *is* condom safe, right?"

"Absolutely. Bought it for that very reason." I winked at him and tried to tear the wrapper with my teeth, but it slipped out of my oily fingers. Tried and failed again. "Damn it. I guess that assumes you can *get* to the condom."

He laughed and held out his hand. "Want me to try it, butterfingers?"

I smirked and tossed it to him. "Your hands are as slick as mine. Good luck."

We both laughed as he struggled with it too. It always amazed me how quickly and seamlessly the mood between us shifted in bed, from playful to sensual to downright horny and right back again with neither of us missing a beat. One second, we were laughing, each trying to pin the other down. The next, we were taking each other's breath away with little more than the brush of a hand.

And, of course, the next second, we were struggling to get a fucking condom wrapper open when both of our hands were covered in oil.

"Got it!" Brandon said, ripping it open and handing it back to me.

"Thank God." I quickly rolled it on and reached for the lube. He gave me an inquisitive look, as if waiting for me to tell him how I wanted him. I said nothing, just put my arms around him, kissing him deeply as I lowered him onto his back. As soon as he was in my arms, the playfulness was forgotten, replaced by that delicious sensuality.

“Fuck me,” he whispered against my lips as I teased him with my cock. “Oh my God, I want you to fuck me.” His voice was unsteady, like he was in pain or his teeth were chattering.

I pushed into him slowly, letting my head fall beside his as the sensations overwhelmed me. “Oh fuck.” I shivered as I withdrew, then pushed in again.

He tried to hold onto my shoulders, then my arms, but his oiled fingers slipped on my skin. “That feels fucking—” He gasped as I slammed into him.

Picking up speed, I groaned softly. When my nipples grazed his slick chest, I shivered and lowered myself enough to let my skin slide against his.

Faster and faster, we moved together. Oil mingled with sweat on our skin as moans and gasps mingled in the air. I held myself up on my arms, watching his face as I fucked him, watching his eyes.

“Oh God,” I whispered, struggling to keep my eyes open, not wanting to lose sight of him for even a second for fear that this wasn’t really happening. “Oh my God, I’m gonna come.”

His hands ran up my sides, and he wetted his lips. He tried to speak, gasped instead, and only a moan came out. Finally, he closed his eyes and managed, “You feel incredible, Dustin.”

The look on his face, that blissful, lost expression, was more than I could take. “Oh fuck... oh... fuck....” My arms went out from under me and I caught myself on my elbows as I collapsed over him. His fingertips trailed up my back, making me shiver and gasp as my orgasm kept going.

I let my head fall beside his. The cool softness of his hair felt good against my hot forehead.

“That was a hell of a foot massage,” he said, nuzzling my neck.

Lifting my head, I kissed him. “Told you I took a few classes.”

He blinked. “They taught you *this*?”

I shrugged. “Well, I modified it a little bit.”

“A little bit?”

“Okay, I bastardized it completely.”

“Works for me.” He kissed me lightly and we both laughed.

We took a long shower, both of us too exhausted for anything more but too caught up in each other to get through it without making out until the water turned cold. By the time we made it back into bed, neither of us could muster the energy to fuck again, so we just held each other, kissed, and talked.

Eventually, Brandon fell asleep against me. Sleep threatened to overtake me, but I wanted to stay awake just a little longer, just to enjoy his presence like this.

The longer I held him, the more I knew that whatever this was between us, it had long since gone beyond chemistry and physical attraction. Either I was throwing myself into my relationship with Brandon to spite my mother and my ex, or I was being drawn into something much, much more intense than a rebellious rebound. I’m not sure which prospect scared me more. All I knew was that I loved being with him and savored every second of this.

The part that really unsettled me, though, was the thought of how much it would hurt if there ever came a time when I couldn’t experience it again.

Chapter 13

I HAD just finished with a client and sent her to the locker room when Kate came out of her aerobics class.

“Hey slacker,” she said as I caught up with her.

“Slacker? Come on, now.”

“You are a slacker. Don’t even try to bullshit with me.”

“Whatever.” I elbowed her playfully. “Hey, do you want to grab a beer after work?”

She smirked. “You’re not asking me out, are you?”

I rolled my eyes. “Please, I have standards.”

“Low ones.”

“Indeed, but still too high to go out with you.”

“Jackass.”

“I’ve been called worse.” I laughed, then my humor faded. Lowering my voice, I said, “Seriously. I’ll buy.”

Her smile fell and her eyebrows lifted. “Need to talk?”

I nodded.

“I’m off at four. Usual place at four thirty?”

“I’ll be there.”

BY THE time Kate showed up, I had already peeled most of the label off of my beer bottle. She dropped into the chair opposite mine, eyeing the wrapper that was curled around my finger.

“Let’s see,” she said. “Peeling the bottle, barely touched the contents of said bottle, and willing to buy me a beer on a Tuesday afternoon.” She looked at me with a smirk, though there was concern in her eyes. “So what’s going on with the girl?”

I laughed. “Am I really that transparent?”

“Dustin, darling, I can read you like a book. So what’s going on? Is it the girl or your mom?”

“Both, in a way.”

She straightened. “Dustin, you’re not—”

“That’s not what I meant, you pervert.”

We both laughed. Then she said, “Okay, okay, tell me.”

I watched my own fingers pulling the label off of the bottle, giving me something to look at besides her. “So I told you that I met someone. And that I thought I fucked things up, but everything’s cool.”

“Right....”

“And remember how I said my mom wouldn’t back off until I met a girl?”

“Yes....”

My cheeks were suddenly on fire, and I furrowed my brow, staring harder at the label I was peeling.

“Dustin?”

I took a breath and lowered my voice. “Look, this has to stay between you and me, okay?”

She blinked. “You know it will.”

I chewed my lip. “I met someone, and....” My heart raced. Kate was my closest friend. Of all people, she wouldn’t judge me. Yet I was still terrified to tell her. Or maybe I was just terrified of hearing myself say the words. Of somehow making it more real than it already was.

“And...?” She cocked her head. “She’s a serial killer?”

I laughed. “No.”

“Cult leader?”

“No.”

“Terrorist?”

“No.”

“Come on Dustin, tell me.” She paused. “I mean, it’s not a man, is it?”

My breath lodged in my throat, and I stared at her.

Smiling, she said, “I *knew* it!”

I blinked. “You—what? How?”

She grinned. “The guy that came into the gym yesterday. That was him, wasn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said, taken aback. “How did you know?”

“Come on. I’ve never seen you get that nervous with a client.” She laughed. “I had a feeling you two knew each other *somehow*.”

The wrapper broke free from the bottle, and I absently rolled it between my fingers. “Yeah, you could say that.”

“So how long have you been seeing him?”

I shrugged. “A while. We met a few weeks ago, and....” Another shrug.

“Just hit it off?”

Shifting uncomfortably, I nodded. “Basically.”

“Good taste, by the way,” she said matter-of-factly, saluting me with her beer bottle before taking a drink.

“Thanks,” I said with a nervous laugh.

“So...?” she cocked her head, narrowing her eyes a little as if trying to silently pry information out of me. “I assume something is on your mind besides just needing to tell someone your dirty little secret.”

“Dirty little secret?” I feigned offense.

“Well, if it’s not dirty, I don’t want to talk about it.” She paused. “At least tell me it’s not little, or—”

I choked on my beer and we both laughed. Coughing and clearing my throat, I shook my head. “I’m not telling you anything in that department—”

“So you *have* done the dirty with him.”

I rolled my eyes. “Jesus, Kate, of course I have. What? Do you think we just sit in the living room and watch *The Sound of Music*?”

She giggled. “I’m never going to think of ‘My Favorite Things’ the same again.”

“I am so changing the CD when you lead your next aerobics class.”

“Don’t you dare.”

“I will.”

“You wouldn’t.”

“I don’t know, your class might enjoy listening to ‘Climb Every Mount—’”

It was her turn to choke on her drink. “Okay, okay, I’m not going to let you ruin my favorite musical any further. Now tell me what’s up.”

Fidgeting in my seat, I chewed my thumbnail. “Okay, so....” I took a breath, my fingers once again toying with the label from my beer bottle. “Here’s the thing. Before I met him, every woman I dated was Stephanie’s polar opposite, like—”

I stopped when her mouth made a silent “O” and she gave a single, slow nod, as if the pieces had fallen together in her mind. “So you think that this guy—he has a name, right?”

“Brandon.”

“Brandon.” She nodded. “Okay, so you think you’re attracted to Brandon because he’s so much different from Stephanie?”

“Exactly. That’s exactly it.” Lifting my beer bottle to my lips, I added, “Especially after what my brother said at his wedding.”

Her eyebrow jumped. “Which was?”

I rolled a sip of beer around on my tongue, then swallowed it and said, “He said that between Stephanie and my mother, he was surprised I hadn’t sworn women off completely.”

She tapped her beer bottle against her lips. “He’s got a point.”

“I know. That’s why it concerns me.”

She set her beer down and put her elbows on the table, leaning closer to me and keeping her voice low. "When you first met him, did your ex even cross your mind?"

Nothing crossed my mind except how badly I wanted to taste him.
"Not once."

"And do you think of her when you're with him?"

I can't think of anything when I'm with him. "Very, very rarely."

"Well, you're the only one that can decide if your attraction to Brandon is because of him or because of Stephanie." She looked at the table, pursing her lips. "But I'll be honest, Dustin..."

"Please do. Whatever it is, just tell me."

When she looked at me, there was no trace of humor in her expression, not a single hint that she was fucking with me. "To tell you the truth, I would be willing to bet money that this thing with Brandon has nothing to do with Stephanie."

I swallowed. "What makes you say that?"

"Look, I had a feeling there was something going on between you guys as soon as he came to the gym yesterday. I didn't want to pry, but I could tell."

Remembering the day before sent my temperature up several degrees, so I closed my hand around the cold beer bottle to cool myself down. "Oh?"

"Dustin, I knew you'd met someone before you told me," she said. "I have *never* seen that look in your eyes before. And yesterday? I mean, I'd never thought of you with another man, but I knew. As soon as he got there, I knew." She played with the label on her own beer bottle for a moment, then looked at me. "It was kind of funny, actually. It didn't even strike me as 'oh my God, Dustin's gay?' It was just—" She let out a breath, pursing her lips as if frustrated that the words eluded her.

I took a drink. "Like you noticed my significant other but not the fact that he's a man?"

"Exactly. Yes, exactly."

Toying with the peeled label, I said, “That’s about how I’ve felt about it from the beginning. It’s like, in my head, I think I should be questioning the fact that I’m seeing another guy, but...”

“But it feels right?”

I nodded.

She smiled, raising her eyebrows. “Then what’s the problem?”

“How do I know this isn’t just some rebound thing I’m throwing myself into to get over Stephanie?”

“Not with what I saw yesterday.” She dropped her gaze for a second. “In fact, and this is going to sound incredibly stupid, but...”

In any other conversation, I would have ribbed her, told her it was hardly the first time she’d sounded stupid, but she was uncharacteristically serious. I finally managed, “Try me.”

Taking a breath, she met my eyes. “There was one point yesterday, when you looked at him. I can’t,” she made a sharp, frustrated gesture with one hand, “I can’t describe it, but the way you looked at him,” she swallowed hard, and I swore her voice was unsteady when she said, “Dustin, I would *kill* to have a man look at me like that.”

AT DINNER that night, Brandon paused in mid-sentence, doing a double take and looking past me.

“What?” I glanced over my shoulder.

He squinted, then shook his head. “Nothing, just thought I recognized the bartender. Looked like someone I dated a while back.”

I turned around again, catching sight of the good-looking bartender with a stubbled jaw and green eyes that were arresting even from here. “I can see why.” I looked back at Brandon. “He’s not bad.”

Brandon shook his head. “Not him. The other one.”

I looked a third time. “The blonde?”

“Yep,” he said. “She looks a lot like my last girlfriend.” His eyes shifted to the bartenders, then he shrugged and looked at me. “I wouldn’t throw the guy out of bed though.”

“We could always see if he’ll go home with us.”

He laughed. “Getting daring, are we?”

“I’m kidding,” I dropped my voice. “Not quite ready for a threesome.”

“Fine,” he said. “I’ll wait in the car. You come and get me when it’s my turn.”

I snorted with laughter. “Dirty bastard.”

“That’s what my driver’s license says.”

“You know, I wouldn’t put it past you.” I picked up my drink. “So have you dated mostly men or women?”

“Mostly men,” he said. “But I’ve had a few girlfriends. Almost got married once.”

“Really?”

He nodded. “A few years ago. We talked about it, but there were some issues we couldn’t get past.”

“Such as?”

“She couldn’t handle the fact that I liked men.”

“So she dumped you...over *that*?”

“No, I dumped her.” He shrugged. “She didn’t trust me, thought I was going to sleep around on her simply because I was attracted to men. I asked if she was going to cheat on me because she was attracted to men, but she didn’t think that was the same.”

“So why was she with you at all if she didn’t think she could trust you?”

“Because she thought she could change me. Or rather, she thought I would change for her, if I really loved her. As if it’s something I can just turn on and off.”

“What? She expected you to just suddenly stop looking at men?”

“Apparently. I asked if she expected me to stop looking at other woman too, but she seemed to think that was different.”

I laughed. “Well, at least she didn’t mind you looking at other women.”

His eyebrow rose. “I take it the wife didn’t like you looking at the other items on the menu after you’d already ordered?”

“Ooh, no. Didn’t stop her from ordering off of the menu herself, but heaven help me if I so much as looked.”

“Fucking hypocrite.”

“You’re telling me.” I took a long drink as if it would rinse the bitterness out of my mouth.

Brandon looked away for a moment, as if lost in thought, then met my eyes. “Let me ask you something. About your ex.”

“Shoot.”

He leaned back in his chair, cocking his head. “Were you ever, you know, happy with her? I mean, in ten years, was it all bad?”

Looking down at my hands and sighing, I shook my head. “No, it wasn’t all bad.” I paused, drumming my fingers on the table. “There were actually some really good times. Nine times out of ten, we were at each other’s throats or I was under her thumb, but that one time out of ten...” I trailed off, my fingers slowing as I let my mind wander for a moment. “That one time out of ten was what made it hurt so much to leave.”

“Amazing what shit we’ll put up with in exchange for that occasional Kodak moment.”

“Yeah,” I whispered hoarsely. “I really did love her. On some level, I probably still do. Honestly, it would have been so much easier to walk away if she had been awful the entire time, but sometimes, she could be so....” I exhaled. “Anyway, I convinced myself that I couldn’t live without the good times, so I stayed through the bad too.”

“I don’t blame you.”

“Are you kidding? I was an idiot.”

“But it’s hard to walk away from something good, even if there’s bad shit attached.”

I considered it for a moment. “Yeah, it is.”

He set his drink down and sat up. “She must have been batshit insane to cheat on you.”

My cheeks burned, and I shrugged. “I don’t know about that.”

He leaned forward, folding his hands on the table. Lowering his voice to almost a whisper, he said, “I’m serious. I don’t just mean that from the standpoint of someone who knows how good you are in bed. The very fact that you were willing to stand by her through all of that should have clued her in to what she had.”

Avoiding his eyes, I swallowed hard, playing with my straw and an ice cube. “God only knows why she did it, but....” I shrugged again. “It’s done.”

“Her loss.” He sipped his drink and watched me. We exchanged smiles.

“You know, as ironic as it is,” I said, my smile falling, “she was cheating on me for, hell, who knows how long? But the whole time? She was paranoid as fuck that I was going to cheat on her.”

“Guilty conscience?”

“Yeah, right. Not that woman.”

“She probably just didn’t like the idea of you doing something that she couldn’t control.”

“That would be the Stephanie I knew and loved,” I muttered. “Hell, she didn’t even like me having a close female friend. Kate—that’s the chick that signed you in at the gym—has been one of my closest friends since we were kids. When we started working together, my God, you would have thought Steph had caught me in bed with her.”

“That bad, huh?”

“Yeah,” I laughed. “Took her a *long* time to get over that.”

Brandon chuckled. “So that chick at the gym,” he said. “Kate, you said?”

“Right.”

“She’s cute. Did you ever go out with her?”

I wrinkled my nose. "She's cute, but dating her would be like dating my own sister. Plus, now that we work together, it wouldn't be such a good idea anyway."

He laughed. "Amen to that. Dating a co-worker is a bad idea. Trust me."

I raised an eyebrow. "Bad experience?"

"Well, I wouldn't call the experience bad." He winked. "But the aftermath was...." Grimacing, he shook his head.

"So what happened?"

"Started dating a grad student when I was still an undergrad," he said.

"Kinda puts a new spin on 'undergrad' doesn't it?"

He laughed. "Except he liked to be under me. Anyway, we started dating right about the time I graduated. Then we were both in grad school together the next year. Working together. In the same lab. It was fine when we were still seeing each other, because we could play it cool at work. No one had a clue, so everything was fine."

"Were you keeping it quiet because you were co-workers, or men?"

He shrugged. "A little of both." He ran a hand through his hair. "Anyway, when we broke up, that's when things got ugly. It was a nasty split, but having to work together just made it that much worse. Especially...." He paused, his lips tightening into a scowl. "Especially when he started seeing another undergrad. And he made a big deal out of it, just to throw it in my face."

"That's brutal," I said.

"Fortunately, he graduated shortly after that and moved on to a research lab job. Thank *God*. Another quarter with him and one of us was going to get killed."

I chuckled. "Which one?"

He grinned. "Probably him."

We stayed until the restaurant was almost ready to close. When we left, it was pouring rain. It wasn't uncomfortably cold, but it was a

heavy, driving rain. By the time we'd gone half a block, we were both soaked to the skin.

As we walked, my fingertips brushed the side of Brandon's hand. A moment later, feeling a little bolder, I let my hand slide into his. He glanced down at our hands, then at me, and smiled as he laced his fingers through mine.

"Not worried about what other people think?" he asked.

"Nah," I said. "They can all suck my left nut."

He laughed and squeezed my hand, looking around the deserted street. "Not like anyone will see us. They're probably all inside hiding from the rain anyway."

"Wimps," I said.

"Exactly."

We rounded the corner and walked the last block to the parking lot. The road and sidewalk were completely empty and silent except for our footsteps and the rain pelting the pavement.

With the warmth of Brandon's hand in mine, the rain seemed colder now, but still not unpleasantly so. Water ran down the back of my neck, a single icy drop trickling down the center of my spine.

As we got to the car, I hesitated, chewing my lower lip for a moment.

"What's wrong?" he asked, waiting for me to unlock the car.

"Nothing," I said, shaking my head. My cheeks heated up beneath the cold water running down the sides of my face.

"I've heard that before." He put a hand on my hip. "Come on, tell me."

"There's—" I paused, watching the rain slide down the car window for a moment before I looked at him. "There's something I've always wanted to try."

His eyebrows lifted. "Oh?"

"It's stupid, really...."

"Try me."

I couldn't hold his gaze, so I watched a drop of water roll down his temple and over his prominent cheekbone. "I've—" I shifted my

weight and finally forced myself to look at him. "I've always wanted to kiss someone in a rainstorm."

A smile nudged the corner of his mouth. "You thought that was stupid?"

I laughed and shrugged. "Yeah, it's—"

"Not stupid." He put his hands on my face and drew me into a kiss.

Whatever fantasies or thoughts I'd had about kissing someone in a rainstorm paled in comparison to that moment. His breath warmed the cold water on my skin, the smell of rain mingling with his familiar masculine scent. I could no longer hear the rain smacking the roof of my car over the pounding of my own blood in my ears.

The chill of the rain made his touch even hotter, making me hyperaware of every place we made contact. My fingers tangled in his soaked hair as my other arm wrapped around his waist, pulling us closer together. I dipped my head and kissed a raindrop off of the underside of his jaw, working my way down his neck as water and fingers ran through my hair.

It was hot and cold, intimate and primal.

He met my eyes, water running down the sides of his face like tears. "So was it what you expected?"

Swallowing hard, trying to catch my breath, I shook my head. "Not even close." Before he could respond, I put my arms around him and kissed him again. "Dustin."

His voice thrummed against my lips. I pulled away, licking my lips as I tried to hold onto the taste of his kiss a second longer. He watched my mouth, then looked in my eyes and whispered, "Let's get the fuck out of here."

Chapter 14

I SHUT my front door behind us and pulled Brandon to me, leaning against the door and kissing him. Without the prying eyes of society at large, the inhibitions melted away, and we could finally make up for the last few hours of trying to behave ourselves. From the looks we'd exchanged all night long, I fully expected us to rip our clothes off and *maybe* make it to the bedroom before one of us sucked the other off.

Once the door was closed, though, we slowed down. We both knew full well that we had all night and nowhere to be in the morning. I didn't want to rush. I wanted to enjoy him, and judging by the unhurried way he kissed me up against the door, we were on the same page.

Tangled up in each other's arms, we started down the hall, still kissing, still touching. He pushed my rain-saturated jacket off of my shoulders. His jacket landed on top of one of my shoes. A belt buckle jingled and a shirt hit the floor with a muffled rustle. Denim whispered over skin and jeans thudded on the floor.

By the time we reached the bedroom, there was nothing left between us. I lowered him onto the bed, lying over him and kissing his mouth, his neck.

No matter how many times Brandon and I had made love, I never tired of the taste of his skin or the heat of his body against my tongue. Though my mouth watered at the very thought of sucking his cock, I wasn't about to pass up the chance to kiss his neck, or flick my tongue across his erect nipple, or taste the grooves of his abs. His body writhed

and trembled at my touch. He made no effort to rush me, moaning softly as I kissed his side and inched towards—then past—his hipbone.

He sucked in a breath as I ran my tongue from the base of his cock to the head. Then, following the same path my tongue had just made, I blew on his skin, working my way from base to tip.

“Oh *Jesus*.” His hips lifted off of the bed, and he looked down at me, watching as I did it again. “That is fucking—oh *God*.” He moaned and let his head fall back as I took most of his cock into my mouth.

As I ran my tongue around the head of his cock, I watched his face. His lips parted and his eyes closed, eyebrows pulling together as a soft moan escaped his throat. It reminded me of the way he looked whenever I fucked him, when I first slid my cock into him.

Before Brandon, I had never once considered letting another man fuck me. Lately, though, that idea had become more appealing, and watching his face now, feeling his body react to my touch, the thought was more than just appealing.

“What’s wrong?”

I raised my head. “What?”

“You’re thinking something.”

In spite of the burning in my face, I laughed. “I’m almost afraid to ask how you can tell.”

Running his fingers through my hair and smiling, he said, “I have my ways. What’s on your mind?”

I chewed my lip and looked away for a moment. Then, I raised myself up on my arms and came back up to kiss him. For a moment, we were quiet, just looking at each other.

He touched my face. “You okay?”

“I was just thinking,” I paused. “A while ago, you said you’d be game if I wanted to try....” The words stuck to the tip of my tongue, and I suddenly felt like a kid trying to buy condoms for the first time. I laughed nervously, avoiding his eyes, then looked at him.

His eyebrows lifted and he smiled. “Switching?”

I nodded. “Yeah.”

“You want to give it a try?”

I swallowed, then nodded again.

He slid his hand around the back of my neck. “Are you sure?”

“Absolutely.”

“Nervous?”

“No.” I laughed as he lifted his eyebrow and gave me a skeptical smirk. “Yes.”

“Everyone is the first time,” he said, drawing me down to kiss him. “We’ll take it slow, and if you want me to stop, all you have to do is tell me.”

My first instinct was to tell him that the last thing I’d want him to do was stop, but I was nervous. Really nervous. I had no idea if I’d want him to keep going or not.

“Lie on your side,” he said, reaching for the lube on the nightstand. “With your back to me.”

“On my—” I hesitated. “On my side?”

“Unless you want to hold yourself up on your arms for a while,” he said, winking.

I laughed. “I’ve held myself up for long periods of time.”

“I’m sure you have,” he said. “Except this time, the object is to relax. About the time you’re relaxed enough for me to fuck you, your arms are going to give out on you.” He kissed me gently. “Trust me on this one.”

“You’re the expert,” I said, lying on my side as he requested.

“Resident sexpert?”

“The Cock Doc?”

“Better than Dr. Cockblock, I guess.”

I laughed. He settled against me, running his hand down my side and kissing the back of my neck. Nervousness tightened my gut, but I took a long breath, just trying to relax.

His hand paused on my hip. “You don’t know how badly I’ve wanted to do this,” he murmured, his lips brushing the back of my

shoulder. "It's absolutely heaven when you fuck me." He flicked his tongue across the base of my neck. "I want you to feel it too." His hand moved down my leg, then to my inner thigh, and started back up. My entire body tensed, but as his tongue made a warm, gentle circle below my ear, I relaxed.

"Just tell me if you want me to stop or slow down," he whispered. His fingers were between my buttocks now, and it was an oddly arousing sensation, his fingertips gently brushing against skin that wasn't accustomed to this kind of contact. A shiver ran up my spine.

He leaned away for a second and the click of the cap on the lube bottle simultaneously unnerved and excited me.

I sucked in a breath when his fingers found their target, the coolness of the lube startling me more than anything, but he didn't make any effort to push them in. He circled gently with his fingertips, giving me a chance to get accustomed to their presence.

He kissed the side of my neck. "I've thought about this a lot," he whispered. "About being inside you." The unsteadiness in his voice nearly made me moan. His lips were just beneath my ear, his breath hot on my skin as he said, "I hoped you would want it, because I've wanted it since the beginning. Just thinking about it...." His voice caught and his hand trembled against me. "Just thinking about it made me forget how to fucking *breathe*."

I moaned softly, then gasped as his fingertip pressed against me, pushing in just slightly.

"Relax," he whispered. "Just relax." He kissed my shoulder and withdrew his finger, then slid it in again, not moving any deeper.

It felt strange, alien, but it wasn't unpleasant. I'd expected it to hurt, but then, it was just his finger, so maybe it wasn't enough to cause pain. *Yet*.

He moved slowly, letting me get accustomed to his finger's presence before giving me a little more. All the while, he whispered to me to relax, telling me how much he'd wanted this, how turned on he was. My nervousness dissipated as he went on, but something in my

mind kept reminding me that this was just a finger. His cock was considerably larger.

He slid his finger almost all the way out. This time, he pushed two in, slowly, introducing them a little at time, just as he had before. It took a little longer for me to relax and accommodate two, but it didn't feel so foreign and strange now. When my breath caught this time, it was because of the pleasant shudder rippling up my spine.

Then he bent his fingers slightly, and I suddenly understood the meaning of the term "male G-spot."

"Oh my *God*," I breathed, squirming against him.

"You okay?" he whispered, the grin in his voice telling me he knew full well that I was fine.

"Ooh, yeah," I said.

"Good." He kissed the base of my neck, flicking his tongue across my spine as his fingers kept moving gently, slowly. "Just tell me when you're ready for more."

I closed my eyes and wetted my lips. It didn't take a brain surgeon to figure out that he didn't just mean "more" as in "another finger." And in spite of my nerves, I didn't want to wait.

"I want you to fuck me," I whispered, my own words sounding like they were coming from somewhere else.

He groaned softly and kissed my shoulder. "Fuck, just hearing you say that is almost enough to make me come."

"Don't come yet," I said with a grin, looking over my shoulder at him as he slowly withdrew his fingers.

"Oh, I won't," he breathed, kissing my jaw, working his way up to my mouth. "Not yet." We both sat up, pausing for a long kiss before he reached for a condom. As he did, he nodded to the pillows beside me. "Put one of those under your hips. I'd usually have you on your knees the first time...." He paused, looking at me with an expression that was so intense, so full of lust, it was almost reverent. In a low voice, he said, "But I want to see you while I'm fucking you."

My hands shaking, I picked up the pillow and put it behind me, lying back as I watched him roll the condom on. Everything about this

was surreal, strange, but at the same time, it made perfect sense. Whatever preconceived notions I had about having sex with another man were long gone. I was still nervous, but not like I had been earlier. Though I was worried about how it would feel physically, at least at first, there was no doubt in my mind that I wanted him like this.

He looked at me and smiled as he put lube on his cock, and I swallowed as some of the nervousness came back to the surface. Nothing about this had been painful thus far, but I was still afraid that it would be.

He leaned over me, kissing me deeply. Still nearly touching my lips, he whispered, "Same thing goes: If you want me to stop, just say so."

"I think," I said, "that's the *last* thing I'm going to want you to do."

"God, I hope so," he said, almost growling. "Because I know once I'm inside you, I won't want to stop." He kissed me. "But if you do, I will."

"I know." I kissed him again, and he sat back.

He pressed his cock against me, and I took a breath. It wasn't the same foreign, intrusive feeling as his fingers touching me for the first time, but it made every nerve in my body tingle with both arousal and apprehension.

Just like he had done with his fingers, he didn't push in right away. He let me get accustomed to his touch, his presence. After a moment, he put just the slightest pressure against me, taking my breath away.

"Relax," he said. "Breathe."

I closed my eyes and took a breath.

"Push back a little," he said. I furrowed my brow. He smiled. "Trust me." I did, and in the next instant, the head of his cock was inside me.

"Oh fuck," I breathed, closing my eyes again as a million sensations overwhelmed me.

“You okay?”

I couldn't speak, so I just nodded, gasping as he withdrew and slid in again. He didn't move any deeper until I relaxed, and even then, he took just a little at a time. It didn't hurt, not in the least, but just the movement, the feeling of being stretched, filled up, was more intense than I'd expected.

His fingertips trailed along my cock and my back arched. I thought I cursed, said his name, something, but I was only vaguely aware of the vibration of my own voice. He stroked my cock gently, slowly, his hand moving exactly in time with the careful strokes he took inside me. Deeper inside me now, his cock rubbed against my prostate, sending me into orbit.

He paused for a moment, pulling out and putting some more lube on. Then he slid into me again, meeting considerably less resistance than before. With less friction now, and my body relaxing with each stroke, he moved just a little faster.

The room spun. I couldn't think of anything but the barrage of sensations—some new, some familiar, all happening together with an intensity I'd never before imagined—that overwhelmed my senses.

“Oh my God,” Brandon moaned. “You feel incredible.”

I didn't even try to speak. I thought I groaned, but I didn't know, didn't care. He squeezed my cock as he slid deeper into me. I was vaguely aware of his body shifting, of the heat of his skin coming closer to my chest, and when his lips met mine, I put my arms around him and hungrily returned his kiss.

We both gasped for breath in between kisses, our bodies trembling.

“Faster,” I pleaded. “Fuck me faster.”

“Are you sure?” His voice was strained, and I knew he was hoping that I was, that he was ready and waiting. All I had to do was say the word. *If* I could say it.

Finally, I whispered, “Yes.”

He kissed me one last time and sat up, grasping my hip with one hand and stroking my cock with his other, and he gave it to me faster.

Closing my eyes, I surrendered to the most incredible, powerful, intense sensations I'd ever experienced. My back arched off of the bed, my hands grasping the pillow behind my head. The orgasm swelling within me had long since surpassed the intensity of any orgasm I'd had before, and it just kept building. He thrust into me. He stroked my cock faster and faster. Just as I reached the point of no return, a second before I couldn't hold back anymore, a throaty, helpless groan reverberated through my consciousness. I thought it was my own voice until I realized he'd said my name.

I opened my eyes, had just a split second to drink in the sight of him—his eyes closed, his lips parted, the cords on his neck standing out, his arms and shoulders quivering—and I came. I could no longer tell whose gasping breaths and primal cries were whose, and I didn't care. He kept fucking me, kept stroking me, kept sending me higher until his own body shuddered against mine.

He lost his balance, falling forward and catching himself with his hands on either side of me. I put my arms around him and pulled him all the way down, kissing him passionately as he collapsed against me. I didn't know where his shudders ended and mine began.

We struggled to catch our breath and kiss at the same time, each breaking away every now and then for a gasp of air before devouring each other's mouths again.

God only knows how long we held each other like that before Brandon lifted himself off of me and smiled, touching my face gently. "I knew this would be hot."

"If I'd known it would be like this, we'd have done it a long time ago."

He shook his head. "No, it wouldn't have been like this if we did it sooner." He kissed me tenderly. "You weren't ready until now."

I ran my fingers through his sweaty hair. "You're right about that."

He kissed my neck and let his head rest on my collarbone for a moment, taking long, slow breaths. "Fuck, that was intense."

"You're telling me."

“I’m serious. It’s usually awkward for a first-timer, at least to a degree, but with you....” He released a breath against my neck. “Jesus, I knew fucking you would be amazing, but this was way, way more than I expected.”

I laughed, still playing with his hair. “Glad you weren’t disappointed.”

He raised his head, his eyes wide. “Disappointed? I just hope it was half as incredible for you as it was for me, because....” He shook his head. “Wow. Just. *Wow*.”

An odd sense of relief flooded through me, as if I’d expected him to have gotten less out of it than I did. If he was just trying to stroke my ego, he was doing a damned fine job of it, but I doubted he was insincere.

He pulled out slowly and moved away to get rid of the condom.

“I could go for a shower right about now,” I said, sitting up slowly, waiting for the room to stop spinning.

“Any excuse to be hot, wet, and naked with you, I’m game,” he said with a smirk, kissing me quickly.

I grinned. “Why do I get the feeling a shower with you is going to necessitate *another* shower with you?”

He shrugged, making a feeble attempt at looking innocent. “Maybe because it always does?”

I kissed him again. “Then what are we waiting for?”

Chapter 15

THE shrill squeal of my cell phone roused me out of a sound sleep. Barely awake, I fumbled around for it on the nightstand.

Just as I found it and flipped it open, movement beside me caught my attention, reminding me that I wasn't alone. I opened my eyes as Brandon rolled over and smiled sleepily at me. I gestured at the phone and put a finger to my lips.

"Hey Mom," I said, lifting my arm as Brandon moved next to me and rested his head on my shoulder.

"Dustin, I tried to call you three times last night," she said, her voice setting my teeth on edge.

"I know. I was out and got home too late to call you back." A sharp breath on my chest told me Brandon found that amusing, and I had to bite my tongue to keep from laughing myself.

"Out? Out where?"

I rolled my eyes. Damn near thirty and my mother still thought I needed to tell her what I was doing and who with. As if she wanted to know this time. "Out. Not home."

"Did you at least go out with a girl? Dustin, I'm so—"

"Mom, it is way too early in the morning for this," I groaned.

"And you're way too close to thirty to be single. You need to start—"

“Mom, please.” I ran my fingers through Brandon’s hair. “I’ll meet someone when I’m ready.” His cheek moved against my chest, probably trying to suppress a laugh.

“But at this rate, you’ll be forty by the time you meet someone. What about children, Dustin?”

“When I’m good and ready, I’ll meet someone. I just haven’t met the right girl.” A laugh tugged at the corner of my mouth. Brandon put his hand over his, shaking with the effort needed to contain his amusement.

On the other end, my mother huffed. “So what are you doing? Just going out drinking and wasting your time? You’re not messing around with hookers, are you?”

“Mom, I am not messing around with hookers—”

Brandon couldn’t stand it anymore. He rolled onto his back, his hand still over his mouth.

Barely keeping myself together, I said, “I’ve just been out with friends. Playing pool, having a few beers, nothing that exciting.”

Brandon gave me a look of feigned offense, and I quickly put my hand over his mouth as we both struggled to keep from laughing.

“Well,” my mother said, the scowl in her voice making me laugh instead of annoying me like it always did, “just don’t go out and do something you’ll regret.”

“What? Like go out and knock up some chick?”

Brandon buried his face in the pillow, and I chewed the second knuckle on my index finger.

“Dustin!” she said. “Honestly, I worry about you.”

I glared at him when he turned and kissed the inside of my forearm. “Mom, I’m a grown man—”

“You’ve got that right,” Brandon whispered just before flicking his tongue across my nipple as his fingertips drifted down my side.

Chewing my lip and screwing my eyes shut, I tried not to laugh. “I’m an adult. I’m not stupid. Just, really, stop worrying about me.”

“Tell her I’ll take good care of you,” Brandon said.

“Fuck you,” I mouthed.

His eyes lit up. “Okay!” He kissed my neck and made a circle beneath my ear with his tongue, making it almost impossible for me to speak, let alone keep a straight face.

My mother, completely oblivious to Brandon’s presence, went on. “You know, my neighbor Frances’s niece is going to be in town again soon. She’d really like to meet you.”

I rolled my eyes, partly at what she had said, and partly at the way Brandon whispered, “Hang up, I want to fuck,” in my other ear. I stifled a laugh and nudged him away playfully.

“Mom, really,” I said. “I don’t want to meet her.”

“But Dustin, you don’t even know her! She’s a nice girl. And pretty. Oh Lord, Dustin, she’s beautiful.”

“I’m sure she is, but—*shit!*” I jumped as Brandon flicked his tongue across my nipple.

“Dustin! What on—”

“Sorry, Mom, a—” I thought fast as I flipped Brandon off. “A bird flew into the window and startled me.” I glared at Brandon and, through my teeth, added, “I think it broke its neck.”

He grabbed my hand and ran his tongue up my middle finger, sucking the tip gently.

“Well, I should let you go,” she said, her voice tinged with disapproval. “But give it some thought, will you?”

I rolled my eyes, trying not to gasp as Brandon moved over me and kissed his way down my chest. “I’ll think about it, okay? But no promises.”

“Okay, then. I love you, sweetheart.”

“Love you too, Mom.”

“Aww,” Brandon murmured against my hipbone.

I snapped my phone shut. “You’re evil.”

He shrugged, trailing his tongue along the shaft of my cock. “I’ve never heard you complain about it before.”

Moaning softly, I closed my eyes. “You’re not going to hear me complain about it now.”

“I should hope not,” he said, and took my entire cock into his mouth.

ONCE we’d showered and dressed, I said, “Up for a run?”

Brandon raised an eyebrow. “Last time I agreed to a run, you damn near killed me on the treadmill.”

I kissed his forehead. “And you deserved it that time.” Nodding out the kitchen window, I said, “This time, just a jog around the lake.”

“How big is the lake?” he laughed.

“Mile and a half.”

He considered it, then shrugged. “Sure. I’ll get my gym bag out of the car.”

Twenty minutes later, after we’d both changed clothes and stretched, we hit the trail.

“So what is your mother’s damage?” Brandon asked out of the blue.

I laughed. “Besides the fact that she can’t stand the fact that one of her golden children fell from grace and got divorced?”

“Yeah, basically.”

“She’s always been that way,” I said. “Trust me, if she’s not on my back about being divorced, or being single, or not being President of the United States, she’s harping on my brothers and sister about whatever they are or aren’t doing.”

“That would drive me insane.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said. “She pushed all four of us into the military. None of us stayed past our first enlistment, and she was pissed each time one of us got out.”

“Doesn’t she have any hobbies?”

“Absolutely. Their names are Rick, Tristan, Kari, and Dustin.”

He rolled his eyes. "So what would happen if she found out about, you know...."

"This?"

"Yeah."

"She would shit bricks and have my father exhumed just so she could scream to him about what a disgrace I am."

He turned his head so fast he stumbled. I grabbed his arm as he recovered, and we continued on. He chuckled. "Shit, I can't believe she's that crazy."

"She's a piece of work, that's for sure. She still refuses to let up about trying to hook me up with every single woman she hears about."

"Oh God," he said, rolling his eyes. "And let me guess: If you did start seeing one of those women, she'd find a reason to disapprove of that girl?"

"Not if she hooked me up with her," I said. "Any woman I choose on my own, absolutely. Any woman she chooses for me? Woe unto me if I dare break up with her."

"You can't win for losing, can you?"

"Nope," I laughed.

"Has she always been like that?"

"She's gotten worse since my dad died," I said. "Once she didn't have him to nag and harangue, she put that much more effort into pestering all of us."

"I can only imagine what holidays are like with your family."

"You don't know the half of it. And honestly...." I trailed off.

"What?"

Wetting my lips, I said, "Honestly, my siblings and I think she might have been what drove my dad into an early grave."

"Like, literally?"

"She always stressed him out. Drove him absolutely batshit." I paused, wiping sweat off my forehead with the back of my hand. "The year he died, she was absolutely hell on wheels. I mean, you could see

it. The man looked like he had aged ten years in as many months, and then he dropped dead of a heart attack a week after Thanksgiving.”

“Jesus,” Brandon said. “Were you close to him?”

I nodded. “Very.”

He didn’t press. We jogged in silence for a while before I said, “What about you? Do you get along with your folks?”

“My dad and I aren’t as close as we were before I came out.” He shrugged. “He’s accepted it and everything, even been okay with some of my boyfriends, but it drove a bit of a wedge between us that’s never gone away.”

“What about your mother?”

He smiled. “We’ve always been close. She was the only one that wasn’t surprised when I said I was gay.”

“Mother’s intuition?”

He laughed. “Pretty much. That and she found a couple of magazines in my bedroom that gave me away.”

“And she didn’t say anything to you?”

“Not a word.” He chuckled. “In fact, she told me a few years ago that I would have been in a world of trouble had she found straight porn.”

“Why’s that?”

“She wouldn’t have been as embarrassed to confront me about it.”

“Oh God, that’s priceless,” I laughed.

“You’re telling me,” he said. “If I’d known gay porn wouldn’t have gotten me in trouble, I wouldn’t have put so much effort into keeping it hidden.”

“Knowing you, you’d have left it on the coffee table for everyone to see.”

“Well,” he said, running a hand through his sweaty hair. “It would have added some variety to the *Good Housekeeping* and *Consumer Reports* crap that my parents had on the table.”

“*Good Housekeeping*, *Consumer Reports*, and gay porn,” I said. “Now there’s a versatile household.”

“No shit,” he laughed.

“Okay, so as long as I’m grilling you about your family—”

“No, you can’t sleep with my sister.”

“Aw, damn.”

“Or my brother.”

“You’re no fun.”

He glanced at me and shook his head. “Okay, anyway,” he said, “I have two sisters and three brothers.”

“Another big family,” I said. “Guess we have more in common than I thought.”

He shrugged, chuckling. “Born into a Catholic family, what can I say?”

“Yeah, same here.”

“Good thing our families live on opposite coasts,” he said. “I’d hate to have them bump into each other at church.”

“Oh God,” I said, rolling my eyes.

“So what are you? Oldest? Youngest? Middle?”

“Number two of four,” I said. “You?”

“Youngest.”

“You’re the baby of the family? Aww, how cute.”

He elbowed me playfully and laughed. “I was the afterthought. The ‘we’re done having kids, oh wait, guess we’re not’ kid.”

I opened my mouth to say something, but movement caught my eye.

“Hey, Dustin,” Sharon said, running up beside me. She gave Brandon a puzzled look, then smiled at me.

“Hey, Sharon,” I said. “Where’s Bill?”

“Oh, he went to church this morning for a fellowship breakfast,” she said.

“That’s right, he said something about that the other day.”

She looked at Brandon. "I haven't seen you out here before. Did you just move into the complex?"

He and I exchanged a quick look, his eyes asking me what he should say. I cleared my throat. "This is Brandon. He's a friend of mine. Lives in the area. Brandon, this is Sharon."

"Nice to meet you," he said, smiling politely.

"Likewise." To me, she said, "Have you given any more thought to meeting that girl I told you about?"

"Oh, right," I said, clearing my throat again. "I, you know, I'm just not really ready for anything right now."

I hoped I was imagining the odd look she shot Brandon. Then she said, "Well, like I said, if you change your mind, I have her number. She's very interested in you."

"Appreciate it," I said, forcing a smile, not even daring to look at Brandon.

We ran with her for a quarter of a mile or so before we came to the turnoff for her condo. "Well, it was good to see you, Dustin. And nice to meet you, Brandon."

"See you later, Sharon," I said. As we continued on without her, I let out a breath.

"Is *everyone* trying to pimp you out?" he asked.

"Everyone and their mother," I said. "All thanks to my mother." I gestured over my shoulder at the condos, in the direction Sharon had gone. "Every time my mother gives her a sob story about how single and lonely I am, she goes looking for another woman for me."

Brandon turned his head, barely keeping from breaking his stride. "Wait, she knows your mom?"

I glanced at him. "Yeah. Old family friends. They've known me since I was a kid."

"Think she suspects something?"

My blood ran cold. "Do you?"

He pursed his lips. "Well, I'm guessing she hasn't seen you taking a morning run with another man before."

A chill ran through me. “No, she definitely hasn’t.”

“Has she ever seen you running with anyone?”

I swallowed. “Never.” We exchanged uneasy glances. Though my mother would jump on any piece of gossip or suspicion like a cat on a mouse, I convinced myself that Sharon hadn’t seen anything incriminating, so it would be easy to deny that there was anything going on.

“Guess it’s a good thing I didn’t grab your ass or something,” Brandon said.

I laughed. “Do it, and I’ll kick yours.”

He winked at me. “Promise?”

I elbowed him playfully and we finished our jog.

Chapter 16

PUTTING my foot up on the rear bumper of my car, I adjusted the laces on my boot. I hadn't worn the damned things since I got out of the Marines, but they were still just as comfortable as I remembered. Blousing the legs of my camouflage utilities was a bit of a challenge, something I had been able to do in my sleep at one point but was a bit clumsy with now. Still, it was worth the extra effort for what I was going to do.

Smirking to myself, I threw a black backpack over my shoulder so that I would blend in with the rest of the college students—particularly those who came from the nearby Army base—and walked into the building.

I wasn't in full uniform, so I wasn't worried about getting in trouble for wearing it when I was no longer enlisted. The black T-shirt—skintight, of course—was certainly not a uniform item. A lot of the guys from the base wore camouflage pants and combat boots when they were off base, so to the untrained eye, that's what I was.

I could barely keep a straight face as I walked into the classroom. It was still early in the quarter, so as far as any of the other students knew, I had missed the first couple of class sessions and was now getting caught up.

Not that it mattered what anyone else thought. I was wearing this for one set of eyes in particular.

I took a seat in the front row, giving me room to stretch my legs out. That was always my preferred place to sit anyway, but for this particular class, it was perfect. I considered sitting off to the side, but decided to hell with it and sat front and center.

I pulled out a spiral notebook I had no intention of filling and a pen I had no intention of using and waited. The other students filed in, taking their seats, chatting amongst themselves. No one seemed to notice me.

No one, that is, until Brandon walked in.

And he just happened to be in the middle of taking a swig of water, which he promptly choked on.

I bit the end of my pen, digging my teeth in to keep from bursting out laughing.

He coughed, cleared his throat, and, as nonchalantly as possible, went to the podium at the front of the room and arranged his notes. I could tell he was trying not to look at me, or at least trying not to let me see him look at me. Still, his eyes gave him away, flicking towards me in brief, surreptitious glances, his breath catching each time he took stock of every little distraction I'd brought.

Combat boots? Check.

Camouflage pants? Check.

The tightness in his lips made me wonder how many ways he wanted to kill me right then. Or if he was regretting his little personal training session. *That's right, Brandon. Two can play at this game.*

Clearing his throat again, he faced the class. "Looks like everyone is here. I assume everyone read the assigned chapters." Nods and murmurs. He glanced at me, his eyes narrowed in a glare that no one else in the room likely noticed. I grinned.

As he opened his notes and started the lecture, I had one last little trick up my sleeve. Reaching up as if to scratch my neck, I pulled my dog tags out of my shirt, letting them fall onto my chest, grinning to myself as a visible shudder ran through him. Once he'd recovered from that, I played with them, casually turning them in my fingers, running them along their chain to make that distinctive rattle. I kept it muffled

and subtle, just loud enough to fuck with Brandon without disturbing the rest of the class.

His brow furrowed, and he spoke through his teeth, obviously making every effort not to look my direction.

Throughout the lecture, he rested one hand on the podium as he spoke. I watched with barely-contained amusement as his knuckles turned white every time I let my boots squeak against each other or made my dog tags rattle on their chain.

He managed to get through the lecture without stumbling too much, but he was flustered. His reactions were subtle, probably only noticeable to a certain antagonistic bastard in the front row: the occasional clench of his jaw when he accidentally looked my direction, the frustrated click of his tongue when he paused to switch pages on his notes, the way he carefully kept his hips turned towards the blackboard when he wasn't safely behind the podium.

When I raised my hand to ask a question—because I simply had to fuck with him as much as humanly possible—he probably looked calm, collected, and professional to anyone else. But I didn't miss the way he wrung his hands, or the way he shot me a look that screamed, “You are *so* dead.”

About three quarters of the way through the lecture, he surreptitiously wiped a bead of sweat off of his forehead, and I allowed myself a smug chuckle.

Mission accomplished.

“Any questions?” Brandon closed his notes. I wondered if anyone else noticed the relieved drop of his shoulders or the impatient shift in his stance. That had probably been the longest lecture of his life. I wondered if he had been this nervous during his dissertation defense.

A girl in the back raised her hand, and Brandon patiently walked her through an aspect of meiosis that she didn't quite understand. After answering a few more questions, he gathered the rest of his notes and dismissed the class. “Remember that Friday is the deadline to transfer in *or* out.” He looked right at me, lifting an eyebrow, and added through gritted teeth, “I'll be in my office for the next hour if anyone needs to see me.”

I KNOCKED on his office door and pursed my lips to keep from laughing. When he opened the door, he glared at me and nodded for me to come in.

He shut the door and we faced each other in silence. His arms were folded across his chest and his expression icy. I watched him, looking for some hint of humor in his arctic scowl and finding none. Maybe I'd gone too far. Sure, it was turnabout from when he'd shown up at the gym, but he didn't look happy about it. My gut tightened into a knot. *Shit. Not good.*

Then he snorted and shook his head, laughing. "You jackass."

I chuckled. "Turnabout's fair play."

He picked up my dog tags and wrapped the chain around his finger. "When you show up dressed like that—" He suddenly made a fist around the chain and pulled me to him, his lips almost touching mine as he said in a low growl, "I think a more apt description would be *foreplay*." His kiss almost knocked my knees out from under me, and when his hips brushed mine, he was as hard as I was.

I put my arms around him, steadying myself as well as just wanting to touch him. "Then it had the desired effect."

"What's that? Making me try to teach a class with a raging hard-on?"

I laughed, kissing him lightly before I said, "Is that the effect it had?"

"Christ, did it ever!"

"That explains why you stayed behind the podium for the whole lecture."

He laughed against my mouth, still holding me to him by my dog tags. "You're evil."

I trailed a finger up the center of his back. "You started it."

“Yes,” he said with a nod, dipping his head to kiss the underside of my jaw. “I did, didn’t I?”

“So can I come back to class tomorrow?”

“Absolutely *not*.” He laughed, and the sharp hiss of breath across my neck made my skin prickle with goose bumps.

“But what if I want to come back? I enjoyed your lecture. I learned a thing or two.”

“Oh bullshit,” he snorted. “You weren’t thinking of a damned thing besides how to make it harder—” He paused, his cheeks coloring. I snickered. Rolling his eyes, he said, “Besides how to make it *more difficult* for me to concentrate.”

“Okay, so I didn’t learn a damned thing, but I enjoyed your lecture.” I winked. “Why can’t I come back?”

He looked at me and grinned. “Because it was bad enough trying to get through the lecture today,” he said, leaning in to kiss me. “Tomorrow, I’ll be lucky if I can speak at all.”

“Oh? And why is that?”

Putting his hands on my hips, he hooked his thumbs in my belt loops. “Because I’ll be distracted by the memory of all of the things I’m going to do to you tonight.”

“Tonight?” I murmured against his lips. “But that’s a few hours away.”

“I know,” he said, pausing to suck my lower lip between his for a second. “But you have to wait.”

“Your office door has a lock.”

“I have another student—a *real* student—coming in here for an appointment shortly.” He laughed. “And I don’t have tenure, so I’m definitely not going to take any chances of getting caught fucking anyone in my office, student or not.”

“So much for my fantasy about fucking a teacher over his desk.”

He ran his hands up my sides. “Somehow I think that, until recently, anyway, that fantasy involved fucking a teacher over *her* desk.”

“True.” I kissed him, sliding my hand between us and squeezing him gently through his slacks, grinning as he gasped. Letting my lips brush his as I spoke, I whispered, “But that fantasy is so, *so* much hotter now.”

He closed his eyes, exhaling slowly. “Jesus, Dustin....”

“What?” I asked.

Pushing his hips against my hand, he said, “You know exactly what.”

“Why, Dr. Stewart, am I turning you on?”

He held my face in his hands and kissed me. “You are a merciless tease, you know that?”

“I learned from the best.”

He laughed into my kiss. “Well, as long as you’re my student for today....” Pulling back, he reached into his pocket.

I watched him fumble with a set of keys, pulling one off of the ring.

“I have an assignment for you.” He pressed the newly freed key into my hand and kissed me again.

I looked at the key in my hand, then at him, puzzled.

“Go back to my apartment,” he said, running a finger down the center of my chest and letting it hook on my dog tags. “And wait for me.”

Closing my hand around the key, I asked, “How long will you be?”

A devilish grin curled his lip. “Several inches, as always.”

I rolled my eyes and laughed. “You know what I mean.”

“I guess you’ll just have to wait and find out.” Amusement crinkled the corners of his eyes. “As you said, Dustin: Turnabout’s fair play.”

Slipping his key into my pocket, I put my hand on his waist and kissed him one last time. “I’ll wait as long as I have to. Something tells

me—” I brushed my hand across his hard-on, grinning as he gasped. “I won’t have to wait too long.”

“Tease,” he growled, nudging me towards the door. “Now get out of here before you get me fired.”

I laughed and turned to leave.

“One more thing,” he said. I paused, looking over my shoulder and raising an eyebrow. He gestured towards my clothes. “Leave all of that on.”

We exchanged winks, and I left.

On the way out to the parking lot, I pulled his key out of my pocket and turned it in my hand. As far as I knew, he only had one house key on his ring. Now I had it, with the implicit trust that I wouldn’t lock him out of his own apartment or rob him clean.

Most people wouldn’t hand off their key like that to a total stranger or a casual fuck that they barely knew. Of course, we had moved past being little more than strangers, but there was something almost unnerving about the implied intimacy of that gesture.

I wondered if he’d done it in the heat of the moment without thinking about it, or if he really had thought it through. As near as I could tell, Brandon didn’t do much by accident. Everything he did was planned. Analyzed. Calculated in his mind from every possible angle and executed just like one of his combo shots on the pool table.

Maybe I was reading too much into it, but Brandon didn’t strike me as the type to give his key to just anyone and send them to his apartment.

Maybe that meant I wasn’t just anyone to him anymore.

And for the life of me, I couldn’t decide how I felt about that.

I KEYED myself into Brandon’s apartment and left the front door unlocked behind me.

The familiar apartment was eerily quiet. My boot heels clicked on the linoleum of the entryway, echoing in the empty room as I went into the kitchen and set the key on the counter.

My cell phone beeped, the shrill sound startling me in the silent apartment. I pulled it out of my pocket and flipped it open.

New text message.

My heart skipped.

Leaving now. Be there in twenty.

I grinned, checking the time before I put my phone away. It was just before six. Leaning against the pool table, I drummed my fingers, wondering exactly where I should wait for him. He wanted me to stay dressed. Knowing him, he wanted the boots to stay on too, but I'd polished them that morning, so I didn't dare put them up on his bed. Ditto with his couch.

Looking around, I pursed my lips. Wherever I was when he got home, I doubted we would get much further. If his kiss was any indication, this was going to be a "lying where we fell" fuck. I shivered.

Might as well be prepared, then. In the bedroom, I grabbed a couple of condoms and the lube and went back down the hall. I set them on the coffee table and sat on the couch. And waited.

The clock above his television announced that less than ten minutes had elapsed since his text message. Seven minutes after six.

I shifted. The anticipation—and a hell of a hard-on—made sitting uncomfortable, so I got up. Paced.

Nine minutes after six.

I paused and drummed my fingers on the pool table again, wondering if this was part of a devilish plot on his part to make me squirm like I'd done to him in the classroom. For all I knew, he was in his car, in the parking lot, letting me twist in the wind for a while before he came in.

Six ten.

I thought of the way he kissed me in his office. The looks he gave me in the classroom when he didn't think anyone noticed. The way he gasped when I gave his cock a teasing squeeze.

If he was sitting out in the parking lot, drawing this out to torment me, then he had much, much more self-control than I did.

Six twelve.

Because I was losing my mind.

Gripping the sides of the pool table to stop the shaking in my hands, I closed my eyes and took a long breath, exhaling slowly through my nose. Outside, an approaching car engine accelerated my heart rate. As it passed without stopping, my heart slowed again.

Silence.

Another car approached. My pulse raced. The car passed. I exhaled again, willing myself to calm down. He'd be there soon enough

Six fourteen.

Soon enough, my eye. I scratched the back of my neck. Shifted my weight. Drummed the pool table.

Turnabout is definitely fair play, Brandon. Now hurry the hell up.

Six seventeen.

Any second. Any fucking second. Any—

An engine approached, slowing down. Changed direction. Brakes squeaked. The engine died.

When the car door slammed, my heart jumped into my throat. I held onto the edge of the pool table as my knees shook.

Footsteps outside.

No keys jingling, no testing the doorknob to see if it was locked: He turned it and pushed it open without any kind of hesitation. He knew it would be open, just as he knew I would be there waiting for him.

“About damned time,” I said, pushing myself off of the table and coming to him.

“Got here as soon as I could.” He pulled me into a kiss, his fingers grasping my hair and my shirt. I slid my hands under his shirt, desperate to touch his skin.

He stepped back and took his shirt off, then reached for mine. After my shirt was gone, he went for his belt, and I started with my own, but he stopped my hand, gently grasping my wrist.

“Leave all of that on,” he said, eyeing my remaining clothes.

My eyebrows jumped. I looked at him, uncertain.

He grinned and put his arms around me, the warmth of his hands on my back and his chest against me taking my breath away as he kissed me again. His lips moved down to my neck. “You look so fucking hot like that,” he murmured. “I don’t want you to take it off yet.”

Running my fingers through his hair, I let my head fall back as he kissed my neck and my collarbone. He wanted my clothes to stay on, but I needed to fuck him. Biting my lip, trying to contain my frustration, I watched him step back and strip.

With his clothes out of the way, he put his arms around me again. Kissing me deeply, he backed me up against the pool table, hooking his thumbs in my belt loops and pulling my hips towards him.

“I want to fuck you,” I said.

“I know.” He reached between us and unbuckled my belt. “And you will. But first....” He glanced down, unbuttoning each of the five buttons of my fly, deliberately running his fingers up and down the outline of my cock as he did. He looked up at me, grinning. “I told you I have a thing for camouflage.” His eyes darted to my chest, then back up. “And dog tags.”

I swallowed, putting a hand on his shoulder and the other behind me on the table to steady myself as he wrapped his fingers around my cock. Groaning softly, I let my head fall back and gasped when the warmth of his lips found the underside of my jaw.

“You’re going to fuck me,” he said, kissing my skin tenderly. “Just like this.”

“Still dressed?”

He laughed. “Absolutely.” He dropped to his knees and put his lips around the head of my cock.

“Oh Jesus,” I moaned, grasping his hair as he stroked and sucked me. With every flick of his tongue and squeeze of his lips, I was coming unglued. I needed to fuck him. Right then. Another minute and I was going to lose my mind completely. Through my intense arousal, I tried to remember where I’d put the condoms and lube. My eyes darted around the room, and my heart jumped when I saw the bottle and foil packets on the coffee table a few feet away.

“Get up here,” I said, not sure if I sounded like I was begging or commanding. Maybe a little of both. Didn’t matter. Needed to fuck him.

He stood and I kissed him, then said, “Don’t move.” I started towards the coffee table.

“What are you—” He paused, evidently figuring out what I was going for.

As soon as the condom was on and I’d put enough lube on it, I turned him around and pushed him up against the table with my hips. The table creaked with the sudden shift of our combined weight. He moaned, almost whimpered, and shivered.

In spite of my own desperate need to be inside him, it seemed I’d gained the upper hand, and I wanted to tease him a bit. Slowly, I ran my hands up and down his sides, kissing the back of his neck as I pushed my cock against him.

“You wanted me to fuck you in your office, didn’t you?” I whispered.

He moaned. “I wanted you to fuck me the minute I walked into the room and—” He sucked in a breath as I flicked my tongue across his spine, working my way down his back, all the while pushing gently with my cock, but not enough to actually get inside him.

I kissed his shoulder. “You wanted me to bend you over that desk and fuck you, didn’t you?”

His breath caught. “As soon as I saw you, I wanted you to fuck me.”

“Then my plan worked perfectly.” I reached around his hip and stroked his cock as I gently nudged him to lean forward. I drew the tip of my tongue up the center of his back and shivers ran up my own spine as he gasped and his muscles rippled.

Steadying him with a hand on the small of his back, I pressed my cock against him, teasing him. I wanted to be inside him, but I couldn’t pass up this chance to watch the way he writhed and trembled with anticipation. He pushed his hips back against me, a frustrated growl emerging from his throat as I pulled away. His shoulders tensed and his fingers clawed at the felt on the table.

A muffled jingle caught my attention. Brandon tensed, moaning softly as my dog tags hit his back. I laughed. “You really do like dog tags, don’t you?”

“God, yes,” he said. “And you just *had* to tease me with them in the classroom, you fucker.”

“I would never do such a thing just to tease and torment you.” I let them run up the center of his spine, grinning as he gasped and trembled. “*Never.*”

“Yes, you would,” he moaned. “And if you don’t fuck me, I swear—” He gasped as I pushed against him, giving him just the head of my cock.

I suppressed a groan, tried not to let him see how badly I was shaking. “You’ll what?”

“Fuck me, Dustin,” he pleaded.

“I can’t hear you.” Slid in a little more, pulled back. “Say it, Brandon. Tell me what—”

“*Fuck me, now.*”

I did. We both groaned as I finally gave him my entire cock, his hips moving back to meet me each time I thrust into him.

“Oh God,” he moaned.

It felt incredible, but something was missing. When he let his head fall forward and released a soft groan, I realized what it was: I couldn't see his face. I was *addicted* to the look on his face while we fucked. I needed to see what he was feeling.

"Turn around," I said through my teeth.

He didn't protest.

I pulled out, and he turned around, kissing me and taking me down with him as he lay back on the table. We both groaned as I slowly pushed back into him. It was the perfect height for me and raised his hips at just the right angle.

Resting my weight on my forearms, I moved from the hips as we kissed and fucked. He moaned into my kiss as his fingers ran through my hair, and I pounded him harder. When I raised myself up a bit, and I could see his face, I was instantly on the edge. Just watching the way his lips parted and his jaw quivered with each gasp and moan was enough to send me into orbit.

He tried to speak. Couldn't. Tried again. Finally, he managed a deep groan, then said, "*Harder.*"

"Thought you'd never ask." I gritted my teeth as I tried to hold my own orgasm back, flattening my hands on the table beside him to hold myself up as I slammed into him, fucking him hard and fast. My dog tags swung in time with my rapid strokes, clicking and jingling in harmony with the creaking of the pool table each time they hit his chest.

He looked down at them, then at me. When he wetted his lips, I shuddered, my body reacting as if he'd run his tongue across my cock.

"I'm getting close," I said. "Oh God, I'm getting close...."

"Oh, fuck, Dustin," he said, holding onto my shoulders. "Fuck, I'm—" But he didn't have a chance to finish the thought before his back arched beneath us and he came. I struggled to keep my rhythm steady, my knees weakening as he cursed and called out my name. He pulled me down to kiss him. The breathless hunger of his kiss and the wet heat of his semen between our chests was too much, and seconds after his mouth met mine, I broke the kiss with a gasp, drove myself into him, and came.

“Oh my God, oh fuck, Brandon,” I moaned, trembling and gasping for breath as my orgasm peaked and tapered. Slowly, I collapsed against him, letting my head fall beside his. He stroked my hair and the back of my neck with his fingertips, making me shiver.

I finally raised my head and kissed him, running my fingers through his hair as he did the same to me. “Do I get a passing grade for that?”

He laughed. “If this is what happens whenever you show up in my class,” he said, kissing me gently, “you’d damn well better be there tomorrow.”

Chapter 17

AFTER we caught our breath, we moved into the bedroom. Brandon rested his head on my shoulder, his fingers idly playing with my dog tags. “What’s on your mind?”

I ran my fingers through his hair and kissed his forehead. “It shouldn’t surprise me anymore that you know things like that.”

“But it still does, so at least I’m not boring you.”

I laughed. “Hardly.”

“So tell me what you’re thinking about.”

I chewed my lip, trying to decide if I really wanted to pursue it. The muffled rattle of my dog tags on their chain reminded me of chirping crickets, a quiet sound that seemed to exist only to emphasize how silent the room was.

Brandon shifted, turning over onto his stomach and resting his chin on his hands. “Talk to me.”

“I was just thinking....”

“About how guilty and ashamed you are of your little stunt in my classroom?”

Rolling my eyes, I gestured dismissively. “Oh please, you deserved that.”

“I did not.”

“Yes, you did.” I nudged him playfully and kissed his forehead. “Anyway. I was thinking about when you gave me your key.”

His brow dipped a little and his head cocked. "What about it?"

"Did you—" I paused. "Did it bother you in the slightest that you were giving me your only key and sending me to your place alone?"

"No," he said simply.

"Really?"

"Should it?"

"No, I mean, not unless you're worried about my history as a cat burglar and identity thief."

Chuckling, he elbowed me. "I know where you live, Walker."

"True, I guess you do."

He propped himself up on his elbows and trailed his hand up my arm. "Does it bother you that I trusted you with my key?"

"No, I mean, not—" I paused. "I guess it just caught me by surprise."

"Dustin, I wouldn't have done it if I didn't trust you." He smiled. "And I have no reason not to trust you."

"Even after I crashed your class to fuck with you?"

He laughed. "Even after that." He picked up my dog tags and gave me a good-natured glare. "But expecting me to get through a lecture while you were wearing these, that was just mean."

"At least I wasn't making noise with them."

"The fuck you weren't."

I batted my eyes innocently. "You mean you heard that?"

Narrowing his eyes, he let the tags scrape along their chain. "Yes, I heard it, and it was killing me."

I laughed and watched him play with the tags. "You really like those things, don't you?"

He wrapped the chain around his finger. "Absolutely love them."

"Okay, indulge me," I said, propping myself up on my elbows. "I want to see how they look on someone else." I lifted them over my head.

"After four years in the military, haven't you seen them on someone else?"

"Sure," I said. "But not someone I was interested in sleeping with." I let the chain hang off of my outstretched fingers.

"Good point." He sat up and took them, putting the chain over his head. The tags rattled as they hit his chest and jingled when he got his hair out from under the chain. "So," he said, pretending to strike a pose. "What do you think?"

"I think I get why you like them so much," I said, grinning.

He lay back down on his side, propping his head up on one hand. "There's something I want you to do," he said, toying with the tags.

"What's that?"

With a completely serious expression, he looked at me. "I want you to draw me."

I blinked. "You—what?"

"Wearing this." He held up the tags before making a theatrical display of reclining into a ridiculous pose. "Wearing only this."

I snorted with laughter and rolled my eyes. "Dork."

He chuckled and sat up. "What can I say? I've seen *Titanic* a few too many times."

Grimacing, I said, "Damn it, I knew I'd find a flaw in you somewhere."

"What? The fact that I like *Titanic*?"

"Yes." I paused. "Though I'll give you the backseat scene. That was hot."

"Exactly. And the hand on the steamed-up window?" He sucked in a breath. "Hottest moment in film history."

"Can't argue with that."

"See? And it made the whole rest of the film bearable."

"I wouldn't go *that* far," I said. "So who were you looking at during that scene? Kate or Leonardo?"

He grinned. "Ah, Dustin, don't you see? That's one of the joys of being bisexual: Scenes like that are twice as hot."

“Hmm, good point.” I looked at the dog tags. “You’re right about those. They do look hot on the right chest.”

He laughed and started to take them off, but I stopped his hand.

“No,” I said. “Keep them on.”

He grinned. “You want to fuck me with them on?”

“Well, there’s that.” I smiled. “I just want you to wear them.”

“In bed?”

“I mean wear them. Whenever. I want you to have them.”

He looked at them, then at me, and smiled. “So now I have your dog tags, and I’ve let you take off with my house key. I think in some societies, that would mean we’re engaged or something.”

I rolled my eyes, laughing. “When you figure out which society has the sacred house key-dog tag exchange ritual, do let me know.”

He laughed and kissed me. When he looked up, his expression was less playful. “In all seriousness, I think we have gone past just casual fuck buddies.”

“I know,” I said, running my fingers through his hair. “And I have to admit, this is uncharted territory for me.”

He squeezed my hand. “I know it is, I do. But, isn’t every relationship?”

I shrugged. “Well, yeah, but....”

He smiled. “I know, it’s because I’m a man. But does it really matter?”

“Before I met you, I’d have said yes.” I played with the dog tags on his chest. “But now, I don’t even know which way is up, so....”

“Look at it this way: We’re two people who happen to have a lot in common, a connection most people would kill for, we trust each other, and we have the kind of sex that people base pornos on.” He shrugged. “The fact that we’re both men really doesn’t make a difference, does it?”

“Well, when you put it like that,” I said, smiling.

“See?” He pushed himself forward and kissed me gently. When he pulled back, his expression was more serious. “Look, I understand

that this is all new to you. I've been there. But," he squeezed my hand, "don't let all of that get in the way of this. Whatever it is we're doing, wherever this goes, stay or go because of *who* I am, not *what* I am."

I let my hand drift from his hair to the back of his neck. "Can I stay because of who you are and what you do to me in bed?"

He laughed. "Please do."

"I think I will."

"You think?"

I wrapped my hand around my—*his*—dog tags and pulled him closer. "Come here, you."

MY CELL phone rang as I was getting ready to go meet Brandon. It was Dan.

"What's up?" I asked, taking a quick look in the bathroom mirror and running my hand over my jaw to make sure I hadn't missed a spot while shaving.

"Hey, man, the boys and I are going out tonight, you want to go?"

"I would, but I've got plans."

"Aw, come on, you've had plans every night this week."

I chuckled. "Yeah, well, you know how it goes."

"So who is she?"

My pulse jumped and I hesitated. "Just," I paused. "Just some chick I met a while ago."

"Damn, Dustin," he said with a laugh. "With as much time as you're spending with this—" He paused. "You're not getting all pussy-whipped are you?"

I snorted. "Please. I spent the last ten years being pussy-whipped. I am not going down that road again." *I may be whipped, but it's definitely not pussy this time.* I barely kept myself from laughing at that thought.

"Thank God," he said. "She's not dragging you off to the ballet or something, is she?"

“Nah, we’re hitting up that new steakhouse over by the gym.”

“*Julian’s*? Oh, dude, that place is awesome. Can’t imagine a chick would want to go there, though. I had to drag—” He paused for just a split second. “The last girl I went out with, had to drag her in there. She wasn’t into the whole ‘peanut shells on the floor’ thing.”

“Guess you just have to find the right girl,” I said, chuckling to myself.

“Yeah, really,” he said. “Look, I’m out. The guys are meeting up at the usual place if your girl bails on you.”

“I don’t think I’ll have to worry about that, but I’ll keep it in mind just in case.”

“Later, bro.”

“Later.” I clicked off my phone. Something about the way he paused when he mentioned taking a girl to *Julian’s* unsettled me, but I couldn’t quite put my finger on it.

Maybe he’s hiding a boyfriend too. I laughed aloud and shook my head as I grabbed my jacket and headed out. If things continued with Brandon, sooner or later, I was going to have to tell Dan and my other friends. And Tristan. And my mother. That thought made me cringe. I brushed it off, though. I’d cross that bridge when I got there.

As I got into my car, I paused. *Never thought I’d need to “come out” to anyone. Isn’t life funny?* Shaking my head again, I started the car and headed into town to meet Brandon.

ON THE way out of the restaurant, I put my arm around Brandon’s shoulders. He slid his around my waist. Though part of me still worried about what other people would think, for the most part, I just didn’t care. I liked our playful, affectionate contact.

“Oh,” he said. “Did I tell you one of my students asked about you the other day?”

“You’re kidding.”

He shook his head, chuckling. "She wanted to know if you'd dropped the class."

"She? Was she cute?"

"Oh man, she was hot. Brunette, gorgeous ass. Looked like the type that likes it rough."

I glanced at him. "Shit, did you give her my number?"

"Fuck no," he said, feigning offense. After a pause, he added, "I gave her mine, though."

"Jackass," I laughed and turned to kiss his cheek.

Just as I did, a white flash startled me. We both stopped in our tracks. Then my blood ran cold.

My ex-wife lowered her cell phone, her mouth contorted into an all-too familiar scowl.

"Stephanie," I said, barely breathing.

Brandon looked at her, then at me. "Is that—"

"I should have known you were a queer," she snarled.

I glared at her. "What difference does it make to you?"

"Oh, it doesn't." She clicked a few buttons on her phone, then sneered at me. "But your mother will probably love that photo for her Christmas cards."

My heart fell into my feet. "Stephanie, you wouldn't."

She hit one more button and turned the phone so I could see "Photo Message—*Sent*" flash across the LCD screen. "Already did."

I groaned aloud, letting my arm slide off of Brandon's shoulders as I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my other hand. "What the fuck do you want, Stephanie? Did you just hunt me down so you could—" I paused. "Wait, how the hell did you know I would be here?"

She smirked. "I have my ways."

Dan, you son of a bitch. "Why are you here? Was every dick in the city busy tonight?"

She snorted. "Obviously yours is."

My cheeks burning, I avoided her eyes. "*Why* are you *here*?"

Her eyes narrowed, then her expression softened, her lip twitching as if trying to hold back emotion. “Because I wanted to see you.”

“Oh, is that right? So you find out I’m on a date, and—”

“So you admit it’s a date. You are gay, aren’t you?”

I rolled my eyes. “I don’t need to explain myself to you. I am out from under your controlling, cheating thumb. What do you want?”

“Oh please, you—” She paused, shifting her attention to Brandon. “What? Surprised to know he used to be normal?”

Without missing a beat, Brandon said, “No, I just thought he had better taste in women.”

Had I not been so furious with Stephanie, the horrified look on her face would have made me laugh. She glared at him and started to speak, but I stepped between them and stabbed a finger in her direction. “Answer my fucking question, Stephanie. You’re the one who came all this way to find me, then took the liberty of announcing who I’m seeing. What do you want, Stephanie?”

She narrowed her eyes. “I heard through the grapevine that someone saw you with him, and they thought you had gotten yourself a boyfriend. I wanted to see for myself.”

I was shaking with anger and tension. Brandon rested a reassuring hand on my back, and I glanced over my shoulder at him, then looked at Stephanie “How did—”

“Why, Dustin?” she shrieked, her sudden anger startling me.

“Not that it’s any of your—”

“Got tired of trying to figure out how to get a woman off?”

“Stephanie, you know—”

“After ten years, I really don’t blame you.”

Fury tightened my chest. “After ten—”

She refused to let me finish a sentence. “Or is that why you always wanted to try anal with me?”

“What? You’re the one who—”

“Come on, Dustin, tell me: why a man? Why now? Did—”

“It’s—”

“Say it, Dustin,” she snarled. “Why?”

“Damn it, Steph—”

“Not man enough for a woman? Why do—”

“*Because he’s everything you’re not,*” I snarled. Brandon’s hand tensed, nearly lifting off my back.

Stephanie balked but recovered, snorting bitterly. To Brandon, she said, “Good luck with him. You two make an adorable couple.” She held up her phone, grinned, turned on her heel, and walked away.

I watched in disbelief. Brandon’s hand slid up my back, squeezing my shoulder gently. “What was that all about?”

My knees suddenly went slack. I sank onto a nearby car’s bumper, cursing as I ran a hand through my hair.

“Dustin?” Brandon sat next to me and squeezed my shoulder again.

“I told you she was a fucking psycho,” I said. Nausea rose in my throat.

“What did she do? Follow you?”

I shook my head. “I told a friend earlier that I was going to *Julian’s*. That fucking son of a bitch. He must have told her he knew I had a date tonight.”

“But why would she follow you here?”

“She’s done this before. Followed me when I’ve gone out with other women. Apparently she thinks I deserve it after I busted her for cheating.”

“Oh Jesus.”

“Yeah.” I rested my elbows on my knees and leaned forward, rubbing the back of my neck with both hands. “And now everyone I know knows about us.”

“Shit. How many people did she send it to?” He gently ran his hand up and down my back.

“Just one.” I groaned. “Unless she was bluffing, and I highly doubt it, she sent it to my mom.”

“Why the hell would she do that? What does she possibly have to gain?”

“Anything to make my life hell.” I sighed. “And she knows my mother hasn’t forgiven me for divorcing her.”

“Even though the bitch cheated on you?”

I laughed bitterly. “Stephanie and my mom have always been really close. When I left that night I busted her in the hotel, I didn’t want to see or talk to anyone. Went home, drank myself stupid, and went to sleep.” I sighed again. “She, on the other hand, called my mother and damn near everyone we knew. Told them that *she* had set *me* up. That she’s the one who sent the fake e-mails, she’s the one who got the room intending to catch me in the act of cheating.”

“You’re shitting me.”

I shook my head. “Nope. So now everyone believes I cheated on her.”

“Didn’t you have the e-mails? The chat accounts?”

I looked at him. “Remember the part where I went home and drank myself stupid?”

“Yeah?”

“By ‘stupid’, I mean I went through and deleted every e-mail, every picture, every scrap of anything of her on my computer. *Everything*.”

His shoulders slumped. “Oh, shit.”

“Yeah.” I took a deep breath. “Honestly, I think she really believes she was the victim. When I busted her, she said she wouldn’t have done it if I’d fucked her enough, or loved her enough, or whatever.” I cleared my throat. “Christ, she’s the one who pushed me away half the time when I touched her.”

“Are you serious?”

“God, yes. If I dared to cuddle up next to her during the night, she’d shove me off as soon as she was awake.” Swallowing the lump that rose in my throat, I looked at him and said, “Honestly, it took me a long time to stop expecting you to do it, because it’s just what I’m used to.”

“You know I wouldn’t do that.”

“Old habits die hard.”

Brandon’s hand moved on my back, rubbing my shoulders gently. His touch was more reassuring and comforting than ever.

I blew out a breath. “And I think that while she was convincing everyone else that I had cheated on her, she actually convinced herself that she wasn’t in the wrong.” I glanced at him, smirking. “She is one hell of a manipulator.”

“So I see,” he said, looking at the empty space a few feet away where she and I had faced off. “And you lived with that for ten years?”

“Plus the year or so we dated before we got married. Like I said, she’s a manip—” My cell phone vibrated in my pocket. “Oh crap.”

“What?”

I pulled the phone out. My mother’s number was on the caller ID, and I groaned, letting my head fall forward. “Fuck.”

He squeezed my shoulder. “Don’t worry about her tonight,” he said, his voice gentle. “Why don’t we get out of here? Sleep on it. Deal with her tomorrow.”

Numbly, I nodded. We got up and headed towards the cars.

As I stopped to unlock my car, he put his hand on my hip. “Do you want to stay at my place tonight? I mean, with all of this, if you don’t, I under—”

I silenced him with a gentle kiss, holding his face in both hands. “I can’t think of anywhere I’d rather be.”

His expression was uncertain for a moment. Then he smiled. “I’ll meet you there.”

I smiled, kissed him, and we got into our respective cars.

Chapter 18

WHEN we got to Brandon's place, neither of us was in the mood for anything, so we just lay on his bed for a while, my arm around him as we talked. He rested his head on my shoulder and our fingers laced together on my chest.

As we talked, I rubbed the side of his hand with my thumb, but he didn't return the gesture like he usually did. His touch seemed different. He wasn't as receptive to me, responding half-heartedly to my affection. No, not half-heartedly. Hesitantly.

I raised his chin so I could see his face. "What's wrong?"

He swallowed. "What do you mean?"

"You're thinking something."

He laughed, but it was forced. "You're learning to read minds."

"I'm serious." I stroked his hair gently. "What's wrong?"

He avoided my eyes. "Something you said tonight, to your ex...." He trailed off.

My heart pounded. "What did I say?"

"When you told her...." He seemed to search my eyes for something. "That I was everything she wasn't...." He swallowed. "Is that why you're with me?"

My breath caught. "What do you mean?"

"I mean, are we together because you want to be with me?" He wetted his lips nervously. "Or because I'm not her?"

"No, of course not," I said, my mouth going dry. "You're everything she isn't, but—"

"That's exactly what I'm worried about." He sat up, still looking at me. "Look, I've been the rebound for a lot of people, and I know how these things end—"

I sat up and touched his arm gently. "Brandon, it's not like that."

"Are you sure?"

I swallowed. I wanted to tell him I was sure, that this relationship was about him and me, not him versus Stephanie, but hadn't I had those very same doubts in the beginning?

"Look, Dustin." He put his hand over mine. "I know it's a lot to come to terms with. You had a lot invested in your marriage, she did you *heinously* wrong, and on top of that, you're coming to terms with being attracted to a man for the first time. None of this is easy."

I exhaled, looking anywhere but at him.

He squeezed my hand. "Dustin, I'm not asking you to pretend that you're completely over her. I know that what she did hurt you. If this is a rebound thing, fine. And I'm not asking you to instantly come to terms with being involved with a man." He chewed his lower lip, then said, "But I need you to level with me. Just, give me something."

I gritted my teeth, completely lost for words.

"If this is going somewhere, I'll be patient. I'll wait. I won't push you." He squeezed my hand again. "But if you know this is just something you're getting out of your system—"

"No," I said quickly. "Jesus, no." I looked at him, and he raised his eyebrows. I swore he was looking right through me, that he saw the truth just like he had all the times I'd told him I wasn't nervous when we both knew full well that I was. But this time, I really didn't know the answer. *Was* I just getting something out of my system?

"Dustin..."

"What do you want me to say?"

“I want to know,” he said, his voice low, “if I’m letting myself get too attached to someone who isn’t ready to get that attached to me.”

I met his eyes then and couldn’t speak. I didn’t have an answer for him.

“Dustin?” He squeezed my hand.

“I...” I paused. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

He looked away, pursing his lips.

I rubbed the back of his hand. “Brandon, I’m not in this to jerk you around, I swear to God. I just don’t know....” Guilt burned in my gut. Was I just jerking him around? Before I met Brandon, I hadn’t had any illusions that I was ready for a serious relationship. What on Earth made me think I was now? The last thing I wanted to do was hurt him, but I was suddenly afraid that that was exactly what I was setting myself up to do.

“Fuck,” I whispered.

He met my eyes. “What?”

I shook my head. “I’m just... confused, I guess.”

“That makes two of us.”

“Look, I’m not going to lie,” I said. “I don’t know what I want out of this. I know I want to be with you right now. I want... fuck, I’m not sure what I think, what I feel, what I want. But....” I chewed the inside of my cheek.

“But?”

I took a deep breath and forced myself to look him in the eye. “I don’t *know* if I’m here because I this is what I want, or if I’m here because this is everything my marriage wasn’t.”

He flinched.

“Brandon, I’m sorry, I—”

Gesturing for me to stop, he touched my arm gently. “Dustin, I understand. I really do.”

“Are you sure?”

He nodded. "Look, I don't envy you. You're in a tough position, dealing with your divorce from her and your relationship with me, whether they're related or not." He squeezed my arm. "All I'm asking is for you to be honest with me." He shrugged. "And now you're being honest with me."

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. "And you're okay with this?"

"I don't see what choice I have," he said. "I can't change the way you feel, and I can't make you instantly understand how you feel." He dropped his eyes for a moment. "And I just hope that when you do figure it out, one way or the other, that you'll tell me."

"I will. I absolutely will."

"That's all I can ask for, then." He put his arms around me and pulled me into a gentle kiss. He broke the kiss and rested his head on my shoulder, and for a long time, we just held each other. There was nothing sexual about this embrace, no hints or promises or overtones, nothing but an odd sense of relief that we were still *there*, that the connection between us was still there, even if some uncomfortable questions had come up that evening.

And in the back of my mind, something very emphatically told me: *Whatever you do, Dustin, do not fuck this up.*

"SO LET'S see how bad the damage is to my cell phone." I dug it out of my jacket pocket the next morning and flipped it open, but couldn't bring myself to look at it. It had been on silent mode all night, and I was afraid to see just how many missed calls and messages I had.

Brandon looked up from pouring coffee. "How bad?"

"I don't know. I haven't looked yet."

Sliding a coffee cup towards me on the counter, he sipped his own. "Come on, just look."

"I don't want to know."

"Here, I'll look." He extended his hand, and I didn't even hesitate to give him the phone. "Christ, Dustin, it's just a phone. You're like a

woman with a pregnancy test. It can't be *that* bad, anyway, I mean—" He looked at the LCD screen and stopped, eyebrows jumping.

My chest tightened. "What?"

He blinked, then stared at the phone, his eyes wide with surprise—alarm?—and his lips parted.

"Brandon..."

He shook his head in disbelief. "Well, the test is positive...."

I rolled my eyes. "Come on, tell me. How bad?"

He tightened his lips, obviously trying not to laugh. "Are you sure—"

"Just tell me. Come on."

"Seventeen missed calls."

My jaw dropped. "You're shitting me."

"Nope. Seventeen."

"Seventeen?"

"Seventeen." He casually sipped his coffee and pushed a couple of buttons. "Let's see... Mom, Mom, Mom, Rick—" He lifted an eyebrow.

"Older brother."

"Okay, so Rick, Mom again, Mom...." He scrolled through it, murmuring "Mom" a few more times. "Dan, Tristan, Kari, and a couple of unrecognized numbers."

"Jesus," I said.

"How many people do you think she sent that picture to?"

"My mom. That's more than enough to ensure that anyone with any means of communication knows about it. The Pope probably has it by now." I ran my hand through my hair and shook my head. "Fuck."

"Oh look, messages."

I groaned. "I'm sure there are plenty of those."

"Six voice messages, and—" He snorted with laughter. "Oh my God." He put a hand over his mouth, trying to compose himself.

“What? What is it?”

“I’m sorry, I really don’t mean to laugh,” he said. “But....” He chuckled again.

“*What?*”

He cleared his throat. “Does your cell phone company charge you for individual text messages?”

“No, I have unlimited.” My blood ran cold. “Why?”

His eyes dropped to the cell phone, then met mine again.

“Brandon....”

He turned the phone towards me. I stared at the LCD screen in disbelief. Certain I was hallucinating, I blinked a few times, but the number on the screen didn’t change.

Forty-three new text messages.

I braced myself against the counter. “No fucking way.”

When I looked at him, his expression was a mix of amusement and sympathy. I wanted to be pissed at him for finding this funny, but the more I thought about it, the more I realized just how comically absurd the situation was. A smile tugged at the corner of my mouth. Brandon pursed his lips, obviously struggling to keep a straight face.

Finally, I couldn’t take it anymore and laughed. “I can only imagine the conversations last night.”

“Can you imagine how many grey hairs we’re responsible for?” He leaned against the counter as he laughed.

“Oh God, the look on my mother’s face. I almost wish I could have been there to see it.”

“Looks like you set the grapevine on fire with that scandalous photo.”

I shook my head. “I can almost hear her now....”

Brandon threw up his hands and said in a shrill voice, “Oh my God! The gay! *The gay!* It’s infested our family!”

I doubled over with laughter. “And can you imagine—”

“Oh God, no way.” He snatched the phone off of the counter.

“What?”

“It’s ringing again.”

“No way!”

“I’m dead serious.”

“Who is it?”

Still snickering, he looked at the screen. “Your mother again.”

“No way, are you serious?”

He held up the phone. Sure enough, my mother was calling again. “She doesn’t quit, does she?”

“She needs a hobby.”

“I think she just found one.”

We both collapsed in fits of laughter again. Something in my mind told me that this was most definitely not funny—and I knew, on some level, that it wasn’t going to be pretty when I finally faced the music—but I couldn’t help it. In that moment, I think I understood why people sometimes laughed at funerals: Sometimes it was the only way to stay sane.

And of course, the more I laughed, the more Brandon laughed. The more he did, the more I did, until anyone walking in the room would have thought we were on something.

Brandon laughed so hard he fell. I reached for him to help him up, but I was laughing so hard I lost my balance too. We didn’t bother getting up. Instead, we sat on his kitchen floor, holding our sides, tears streaming down our faces.

When we could both finally breathe again, I leaned against one of the cabinets and rested my forearms on my bent knees.

“They’re not going to come to your place with torches and pitchforks, are they?” he asked, sitting across from me against the other set of cabinets.

“They’re probably already there.” As I thought about it, I wondered just how true that was. If my mother couldn’t reach me, it

wasn't below her to show up at my apartment looking for me. Or, I realized with a feeling of dread in my gut, the gym.

As the magnitude of the situation sank in, my humor faded. Sighing, I rested my head against the cabinet and rubbed my eyes. "Fuck, this is going to get ugly."

Brandon's voice was low and serious now. "I know. It's never easy, and the way they found out isn't going to help."

I closed my eyes. "Shit." I sensed him moving, and a moment later, he was beside me, his hand on my arm.

"Dustin, it'll probably get ugly for a while," he said quietly. "But it will blow over. Eventually, one way or another."

"You don't know my family."

"No, I don't," he said. "But you're not the first to go through this when their family finds out." His eyes darted up to the counter above us, and he smiled a little. "Though I'm pretty sure you now have the standing record for the most concerned calls and messages in twelve hours." He tightened his lips, raising his eyebrows and looking at me as if waiting for me to confirm that it was okay to laugh.

I allowed myself a smile, and when he laughed, I couldn't help but follow suit. I put my hand over his and squeezed gently. "So you won't be offended if I don't take you home to meet my mom today?"

"Not in the least." He turned his hand over beneath mine, and his smile faded as our fingers laced together. "Look, I've watched people go through this before, and..." He trailed off for a moment. "I'm not going to lie, Dustin. This is one of those times when you're going to find out who a lot of your friends are. And aren't."

I swallowed. "Did you lose friends over it?" I wasn't sure if I were looking for commiseration or reassurance. Maybe both.

He nodded. "I didn't tell anyone until right before I graduated high school, even though I knew since I was thirteen."

Squeezing his hand, I said, "How bad was it?"

"A few people pretty much walked away from me and never looked back." He watched our hands, avoiding my eyes, and sighed.

“That was fourteen years ago, and my older brother *still* won’t even look at me.”

“Jesus....”

“Yeah. We were really close before that, but after....” He shook his head and finally looked at me.

My heart sank even lower. As much as I couldn’t imagine losing the closeness I had with Tristan, I had a feeling that was exactly what was going to happen. “How long does it take to get over something like that?”

When his eyes met mine, the pain in his expression cut deep. He swallowed hard. “It’s been fourteen years. It doesn’t keep me up at night anymore, but it still hurts.”

I released a breath, squeezing his hand gently. “I’m sorry.”

“It’s life,” he whispered. “I’m sorry you have to go through it.”

Rubbing the side of his hand with my thumb, I said, “I’ll manage.”

“I know.” He put his arm around my shoulders and kissed me gently. “You’ll make it. I wish I could tell you it’s easy, but what I *can* tell you is that I’ll be here.”

“Thanks,” I said.

He glanced up at the counter, towards my phone. “So, do you want to address the scandal, or go be a bit more scandalous first?”

Up until he said that, I wouldn’t even have thought about being in the mood. But now that he mentioned it, I could think of no place I’d rather be than in bed with him.

I grinned and started to stand. “I think I like the scandalous option.”

Chapter 19

BRANDON sat beside me on the couch as I stared my cell phone down.

“I don’t even know who to call first,” I said, shaking my head.

“Do you have anyone that’ll be supportive? Or that you think will be?”

“My sister,” I said. “If anyone, she’ll probably be okay with it.”

“Start there,” he said. “The more support you have, the easier it’ll be to handle the rest of the bullshit.”

“Like my mom or brother?” I muttered. “Sister it is.” I hit Kari’s number on speed dial and listened to it ring, a nervous knot growing in the pit of my stomach.

“Hey, Dusty.” She sounded relieved, like she had been hoping I’d call.

“Hey.” I didn’t know how to start the conversation, so I played stupid. “You called?”

“Yeah, I did,” she said. “And if everyone else in the family has lit up your phone half as much as they have mine—”

“What? They’ve all been calling you?”

“Oh God, yes,” she said. “Mom called me four times last night because she couldn’t reach you.”

Fuck. “Sorry,” was all I could say.

“Don’t be sorry.” She paused. “What’s going on, anyway?”

“She didn’t send you the picture?”

“She did,” Kari said. “As did Tristan, and Dan, and Rick, and half a dozen other people.”

I let my face fall into my hand and groaned.

“Are you really—” She stopped herself. “Are you really gay?”

I swallowed. “I’m really seeing a man, yes.”

For a long moment, she was silent. “How long?”

“A while. Since before Rick’s wedding.”

“I never thought you were into guys.” She didn’t sound disgusted or repulsed. Surprised, maybe. Curious.

I laughed. “Neither did I.”

“Good taste, by the way,” she said. “Hell, if he wasn’t gay, I wasn’t married, and you hadn’t beat me to him—”

“He’s bi, actually.” I glanced at Brandon, chuckling as his eyebrows lifted.

“Oh, fuck you,” she laughed. “There’s probably some poor single girl looking for a man, and you came along and stole her Prince Charming.”

“Sucks to be her, doesn’t it?” I said.

She laughed again. Then, her tone turned more serious. “Look, I’m sure the rest of the family is going to have something to say about all of this, but you know I’m behind you.”

“Technically, Brandon’s behind me.”

Brandon snorted with laughter.

Kari was silent for a moment, then groaned. “Oh God, Dusty, now I’m going to have to hurt you because of that mental image.”

“I thought you said he was hot.”

“I did,” she said. “But that’s when I picture him with *me*, not *you*.” We both laughed, then she said, “Seriously, though. I’ll support you, whatever you’re doing.”

“Thanks, Kari,” I said. “It means a lot, believe me.”

“You know I’m always here for you,” she said. “One thing, though.”

“What’s that?”

“When I meet him, I’m allowed to ogle him.”

I rolled my eyes. “As long as you don’t tell me what you’re picturing, you can look all you want.” In spite of our good-natured ribbing, I found more than a little comfort in what she said, as if it were a foregone conclusion that she would meet Brandon eventually. Maybe I read too far into it, but I clung to her implicit acceptance that he was part of my life.

“Sweet,” she said. “Hey, I have to go, the baby’s awake. Good luck with the rest of the family.”

“Thanks,” I muttered.

“I love you.”

“Love you too.” After I hung up, I looked at Brandon. “Well, that was painless.”

“So I noticed,” he laughed.

As I scrolled through my phone for Rick’s number, I added, “She thinks you’re cute, by the way.”

“Is she cute?”

“Brandon! She’s my sister.”

“So?”

I flipped him the bird and rolled my eyes as I called Rick. As the phone rang on the other end, my humor faded and the knot in my gut swelled. I had been fairly certain of Kari’s response, and was equally confident that Tristan was going to flip out, but Rick could go either way.

“Dustin, what the hell is going on?” His voice sent a shiver through me. I couldn’t tell if he were angry or just completely caught off guard.

“How much have you heard already?”

“A picture says a thousand words,” he said. “So I’d say I’ve heard roughly a thousand words.”

“Then there isn’t much to say, is there?”

He let out a breath. “Why didn’t you tell us?”

“Because I knew exactly how everyone would react, and thus far, I’ve been pretty much right on the money.”

“Yeah, but if you’d just said something, maybe it—”

“Rick, it hasn’t even been going on for very long,” I said. “I wasn’t ready to tell the family. I was going to tell the family eventually. The last thing I wanted was for the family to find out like this. I just didn’t expect to run into Stephanie that night. Dan was the only one who even knew where to find me.”

“You told Dan where you’d be with this guy?” He was silent for a moment. “Jesus, Dustin, what did you expect, then?”

My blood ran cold. “What do you mean?”

“You didn’t know?”

“About?” There was another pause, and the penny dropped in my mind. *You’ve got to be kidding me.* “Rick....”

“They must not have wanted you to know—”

No fucking way. “Know about what?” *No way. He wouldn’t.*

The silence probably didn’t last more than a few seconds, but it felt like years. “Dustin, Dan’s been seeing Stephanie for months. Practically since you guys filed.”

And if her track record’s anything to go by, it probably started well before that. “Thanks for telling me,” I growled.

“Look, I wasn’t trying to keep it from you,” he said. “It didn’t involve me, and really, it doesn’t involve you.”

“Just like my relationship with another man doesn’t involve any of you, but that hasn’t stopped the whole fucking world from lighting up my phone, has it?”

He was quiet for a moment. “We’re just concerned about you, man. You’ve been through hell in the last year, so—”

“So I’m doing what makes me happy for once, and suddenly everyone’s concerned.”

“That’s why I’m concerned,” he said. “Something like that has never made you happy before.”

“Something—”

“Listen, Dustin.” His voice was firm, but not angry. “I want to talk about all of this, face to face. You know I’m not like Tristan. I just want to talk about it.”

Our brother’s name made me cringe. That was one call I was still dreading. I rubbed the bridge of my nose with my thumb and forefinger. “Fine. Let’s get together and talk.”

“Can you meet me tomorrow? At the Main Street Café?”

“Time?”

“Eleven?”

“I’ll be there.”

“Okay,” he said. “Take care of yourself, man.”

“I will.”

“Have you talked to Mom?”

“I’m still alive, aren’t I?”

“I’ll take that as a no. Look, take care, I’ll see you tomorrow.”

After we hung up, I tried to make sense of what he’d told me. “I need to call Tristan,” I said through my teeth, more to myself than to Brandon. “But there’s one more call I need to make first.” I hit “Send” and listened as the phone rang on the other end.

“Dustin, hey—”

“Dan, what the fuck is wrong with you?” I snarled.

“What’s wrong with *me*? I’m not the one caught on camera with *another man*.” The disgust in his voice infuriated me.

“After you sent my ex-wife—your girlfriend, from what I hear—to fucking stalk me. When were you going to tell me you were fucking my ex-wife, Dan?”

He ignored my question. “There’s been a rumor flying around for a while,” he said casually. “Someone saw you out with some guy, and

your mom told Stephanie and me that she was afraid you'd gone queer. Funny, I thought she was worried about nothing, but lo and behold...."

"So instead of asking me, you had her come find me?" I ran a shaking hand through my hair. "What the fuck is wrong with you two?"

He snorted. "Ironic question coming from someone who takes it up the ass from—"

"Fuck you, Dan." I snapped the phone shut. "Fucking hell, that's more than enough of that."

"What? What did he say?"

I rubbed my face with both hands for a moment, exhaling slowly. "Someone saw us together. I'm guessing it was my neighbor when we went running that morning."

"So they had your ex-wife come chase you down instead of asking you directly?"

"It was probably her idea," I said. "Sadistic bitch. This is probably her way of getting back at me for saying that she cheated."

"Even though she *did* cheat?"

"Yeah, but I had the audacity to call her out on it."

"You selfish bastard."

I glanced at him, and couldn't help but smile at the mischievous grin he gave me. I kissed him lightly, then turned my attention back to the phone. "Now, for the fun part."

"Your mother?"

"Not yet. Brother."

"I thought you talked to your brother already."

"I talked to Rick. It's Tristan that I'm not looking forward to."

He cocked his head, then must have made the connection in his mind. "The homophobe."

"The very one." I rested my head on the back of the couch. "Fuck, he's going to lose his mind over it."

He cringed. "This should be pleasant. Want some coffee?" He stood.

"I might need something stronger than that in a few minutes."

"Beer?"

I wrinkled my nose. "A little early in the morning for that."

"All I have is beer or coffee, unless you think this is an occasion that warrants champagne."

"Champagne?" I pretended to gag. "Ugh, how can you drink that shit? Just coffee."

On his way into the kitchen, he said over his shoulder, "Some of us have more refined tastes than others."

"Your taste is just as salty as mine," I called after him.

He glanced back at me, and we both laughed. As he disappeared into the kitchen, I pulled up Tristan's number. The feeling in the pit of my stomach got heavier. In spite of our sometimes-heated disagreements about his homophobia, Tristan and I had always been close. A chill worked its way up my spine as I tried to grasp the reality that my relationship with my brother was forever changed.

Brandon came back into the room, handing me my coffee before taking his seat beside me again. "You okay?"

I sipped my coffee but didn't taste it. "As okay as I'm going to be." I looked at my phone. "This is going to be pleasant." Taking a deep breath, I hit "Send." I put the phone to my ear, closed my eyes, and waited.

It barely rang before he picked it up and said, "This had better be some kind of sick fucking joke."

"Hello to you too," I said.

"Dustin, it can't be true." Panic crept into his angry voice. "Tell me it's a joke. Tell me it's one disgusting fucking joke."

My stomach turned. "It's not a joke, Tristan."

"You can't be serious. You, my own fucking brother, turned *queer*?"

"Of course, this is all about you," I snapped.

“What is the matter with you? A man? Jesus, what’s gotten into you?”

“Tristan—”

“No, no,” he said. “I don’t want to hear it. I really don’t want to know. I just can’t believe this. No brother of mine is a faggot.”

“Fuck you, Tristan,” I growled, more hurt than angry. “You might as well just accept it.”

“No, I absolutely will *not* accept it.” He cursed under his breath. “Christ, no wonder Stephanie ran around on you. Ten years with a man who’d rather be a woman, I think anyone would—”

“That’s enough, Tristan.”

“Yeah, it’s more than enough, *fucking freak*.”

The line went dead.

I wondered if he would ever look me in the eye again.

I rested my elbows on my knees and my forehead on my clasped hands, holding the phone and hoping it stayed silent for a few minutes. *Just let me catch my breath.*

Never in my life had I felt so severed from my family. I’d disappointed my mother when I left Stephanie, but my siblings had supported me. This time, I disgusted them. Repulsed them. Only my sister supported me. Rick wasn’t outwardly hostile, but his voice was filled with tacit disapproval. Tristan’s response shouldn’t have surprised me, but in a way, it did. Or maybe it just surprised me that it hurt as much as it did.

My shoulders slumped under the weight of my family’s revulsion.

Brandon’s hand came to rest on the back of my neck, his gentle, reassuring touch giving me permission to exhale. There was a world of comfort in that simple gesture. *I’m here. You’re not alone.*

“You okay?”

“I’m still breathing.”

“At this point, that’s about all you can ask for.”

I released a long breath as he rubbed my neck. “That feels good.”

His fingers kneaded the tense muscles. "I wish there was more I could do to make you feel better."

I put my hand on his knee, still resting my forehead on the hand holding my phone. "Just having you here helps."

"I'm not going anywhere."

Turning to look at him, I started to speak, but our eyes met, and in that instant, I forgot what I'd been about to say. All I was aware of was how heavy and dull the atmosphere must have been before, because the second we made eye contact was like an awakening. Everything else was a dream, and Brandon was reality.

Neither of us looked away. Neither breathed. Blood pounded in my ears, drowning out the shrill ringing of the phone in my hand. In some distant, quiet part of my mind, I knew there was more pain and guilt waiting for me on the other end of that call, but the only thing that mattered was what I found in Brandon's eyes: Comfort. Respite. *Absolution.*

Slowly, probably not even realizing what he was doing, Brandon swept the tip of his tongue across his lower lip.

My phone clattered to the floor.

THE more I kissed him, the more I needed him. I grabbed the front of his shirt and pulled him down on top of me on the couch, losing myself in him. His body against mine wasn't enough; I needed the warmth of his skin, needed to be as close to him as possible.

There were times in the past when I'd needed him so bad it hurt, when I was so overcome with hunger for him that I couldn't even think. A buckle jingled. This was one of those times, but I was desperate for him like never before. A seam ripped. This time, his touch offered relief from pain that was much more than just physical.

The heavy thud of jeans muffled my ringing phone, and the warmth of Brandon's hand on the side of my face silenced the guilt and self-loathing in my mind. *I need you to tell me this is all okay.* He didn't push me away. *I need to feel something other than all of this*

pain. He wanted me. *I need you, Brandon*. His touch was as desperate as mine, and that made everyone else's disapproval and revulsion irrelevant.

My fingers tangled in his hair and I kissed his neck and the underside of his jaw before working my way back up to his mouth.

"Let's take this—" He cut himself off, kissing me again. "Let's take this in the bedroom." I nodded, and we tried to get up but fell into another long, deep kiss. Even with the promise of the release I so desperately needed, I couldn't let him go. He finally managed to stand and pulled me up with him.

It seemed like hours before we made it down the hall to the bedroom. Brandon shoved me up against the wall and kissed me, exploring my mouth as if he'd never tasted my kiss before. A few steps later, I did the same to him.

Even after we made it into the bedroom, the bed was still too far away. I leaned him against the wall and kissed him as I stroked his cock.

He let his head fall back, closing his eyes and moaning. Still stroking him, I bent and kissed his neck, my mouth watering with each vibration of his voice against my lips.

"Oh God, Dustin—oh, *fuck*..." His words were clipped, as if stuck in his throat. He sounded like he was in pain or on the verge of tears. Maybe both. He took a gulp of air, tried to speak, gasped again. Finally, he whispered, "Condom. *Now*."

Reaching for the drawer, my hands were shaking. Hell, my entire body was shaking. I wanted to fuck Brandon, and I wanted to fuck him like both of our lives depended on it—at that point, mine may very well have. I'd never felt like this before, consumed by this overwhelming, primal need not just to fuck someone, but *feel* them.

It occurred to me then, as I pulled the condom out of the drawer, that I could very well lose control like never before, and I didn't want to hurt Brandon. He liked it hard and rough, but I was on the verge of completely coming apart.

I tore the wrapper with my teeth, damn near shredding it. As I kissed Brandon, I stroked him gently again.

"Put it on," he pleaded. "Oh fuck, put—" He gasped as I rolled the condom onto his cock instead of my own.

"I want you to fuck me," I whispered, kissing his neck as I fumbled blindly for the lube.

His Adam's apple bobbed against my lips. A moment later, he put both hands on my face and raised my head to kiss him. "You want me to fuck you?" he whispered.

"Yes," I said, my voice shaking. "Please, fuck me."

"Absolutely," he said in a hoarse, unsteady whisper. I started towards the bed, but he grabbed my shoulders. Before I could react, he had me against the wall, kissing the back of my neck as he pressed his cock against my ass.

"Fuck me," I begged.

He pushed into me slowly, my knees trembling as he gave me a little at a time. "Oh God, you feel good," he growled.

Closing my eyes, I moaned, both mind and body relaxing as Brandon slid into me. He moved slowly, almost cautiously, as he always did when he fucked me. I wasn't as accustomed to it as he was, but this time, I wanted everything he could give me. I needed it.

"Harder," I said, surprised I could even manage that much.

He hesitated. "I don't want to hurt you." He held my hips tighter and slowed his strokes, as if struggling to keep himself from losing control.

"Fuck me harder," I said.

"Dustin, I—"

"*Make* it hurt."

"Are—"

"*Please.*"

He said nothing, but his breath caught. Taking a long, ragged breath, he withdrew slowly, and for a moment, I was afraid he wouldn't

do it at all. Then he whispered—through clenched teeth, from the sound of it— “You don’t know how long I’ve wanted to fuck you like this.”

Before I could comprehend what he’d said, he slammed his cock into me and gave me everything he had, fucking me so hard I saw stars. It hurt, but not the way I was afraid it would the first time; it was the kind of primal, violent sex that was hot *because* of the pain, because of the roughness.

I braced myself against the wall with my forearms, hoping that my knees wouldn’t give out, at least not before this reached its peak. “Oh God,” I said, panting and growling. “Oh my God, that’s....”

“Like that?” he asked breathlessly.

I tried to speak, finally managing a nod. Closing my eyes, I couldn’t breathe, couldn’t think, could do nothing but savor every intense sensation he gave me. It was everything I needed and then some. It was more than I could handle, but still I wanted more.

I was on the edge when my knees buckled. I cursed, but Brandon kept me upright.

“You okay?” He ran his hands up my sides, kissing between my shoulder blades.

“Yeah,” I said, my mouth dry from breathing so hard. “Just can’t hold myself up.”

He pulled out slowly. “I didn’t hurt you, did I?”

“Not yet.” I turned around to kiss him. “Now fuck me.”

He laughed, kissed me again, and said, “Lie on the bed.”

“On my back?”

Nodding, he said, “I’ve got this. You’re just going to lie back and enjoy it.” He paused for more lube, then joined me on the bed. As he slid into me, moving still deeper, he kissed my neck and whispered, “I love being inside you, Dustin.”

I could only moan, holding onto his shoulders as he withdrew and pushed back in.

He kissed beneath my ear. “Jesus, you feel good.”

“So do you,” I said. “Fuck me hard, fuck—”

“I will,” he said, his lips brushing against the underside of my jaw. “But you had me so close to coming earlier, and I don’t—” His voice caught. When he exhaled, his breath whispered across my skin. “I don’t want this to be over yet.”

I shivered, closing my eyes as his cock slid into me again.

“I’m always afraid I’m going to hurt you,” he said, breathing hard as he withdrew. “That you won’t want me to do it again.” He kissed my mouth, his tongue dipping between my lips. “But you want me to fuck you like that again, don’t you?”

“*Please.*”

“Hard and fast?”

“Yes.” I blinked, my eyes refusing to focus for a second. “*Fuck me.*”

He didn’t put it off any longer: He slammed his cock into me. Everything around me disappeared as he fucked me so hard I couldn’t tell pain from pleasure anymore. I tried to focus on him again but realized that I couldn’t see through the blur of tears that had welled up in my eyes from the sheer intensity.

No one had done this to me before. No one had given me so much pleasure that I teared up. And I’ll be damned if anyone had ever made me feel this good in the wake of that kind of pain.

“Oh my God... oh fuck, I’m—” My hands clawed the bed beside me. “Jesus, I—” I took in a gasp of breath. “Fuck, Brandon, I—” The words lodged in my throat, and I had a split second to panic at what I *very* nearly said before a powerful orgasm took over.

Over the sound of my own voice, I distantly heard him say, “Oh fuck, I’m gonna come....” He groaned and fucked me even harder before he threw his head back and roared, driving himself into me so hard it almost knocked the air out of my lungs, and came.

I was vaguely aware of him leaving the bed for a moment to see to the condom. Then he collapsed on his back next to me. For a long time, the room was silent except for the two of us panting and the thrumming of my blood in my ears.

When everything finally stopped spinning, I turned to him. We both smiled.

“Feel better?” he asked with a grin.

“Hell, yeah,” I said. “Fuck, I needed that.”

“I live to serve,” he laughed.

I chuckled and clasped his hand gently, closing my eyes as I tried to catch my breath.

Though the guilt and self-loathing from earlier were a distant, surreal memory for the time being, there was a new knot in my gut. Only the overwhelming intensity of my orgasm had kept me from saying something I wasn’t sure I wanted to say.

Was I really going to say it?

Did I mean it?

Could I mean it?

Swallowing hard, I wondered....

Did I really love Brandon Stewart?

Chapter 20

I LOOKED at Rick over my coffee cup. The tension in the air was palpable, the unspoken questions ringing in my ears.

“So how is married life?” I asked, setting my coffee down and thumbing the handle.

He shrugged. “Not much different than before we were married.”

“That bad, huh?”

He laughed, but it was forced. “Something like that.”

The silence set my teeth on edge. Part of me wanted to just cut to the chase and discuss what I knew we’d come to discuss. Part of me really didn’t want to talk about it.

“So how’s work going?” he asked.

I sighed and folded my hands on the table. At least that kept me from searching for my wedding band for the thousandth time. “Look, Rick, we both—”

“A *boyfriend*, Dustin?”

“I don’t know if I’d call him—”

He gestured sharply. “Whatever you want to call him. Just, seriously. A guy?”

I sat back in my chair. “Yes. A guy.”

“But why?”

“Do you want the details, or do you just want me to say ‘it just happened’ so you can get into lecturing me about why I shouldn’t be with him?”

He glared at me and let out a breath. “Dustin, when I said I was surprised you hadn’t sworn off women, I didn’t actually mean it as a suggestion.”

“I was already seeing Brandon when you said that.”

He paused. “Guess that explains why you looked so surprised when I said it.”

“You could say that.”

“Even still, I was kidding.”

“And, when I say I’m seeing a man—” I shrugged. “I’m not kidding.”

He leaned back, folding his arms across his chest. “Dustin, I know things got ugly with Stephanie, but—”

“This has nothing to do with her.”

A skeptical eyebrow lift. “So you’ve been gay all this time?”

I rolled my eyes. “No. Brandon’s the first guy I’ve ever been attracted to.”

“And that little epiphany just coincidentally occurred six months after your marriage to the Wicked Witch of the West went south?”

“Rick—”

“Look, Dustin, I just want to make sure you’re not getting involved in something like this—”

“You mean a relationship between two consenting adults who happen to be male?”

He glared at me. “I mean suddenly deciding you’re gay to keep from getting hurt like that again.”

“That’s not what this is.”

“Sure about that?”

I gritted my teeth. “What? Do you know something about me that I don’t?”

“I just know that every woman I’ve seen you date since Stephanie has been as different from her as you can get.”

I folded my arms across my chest. “So that couldn’t possibly have anything to do with the fact that I’m no longer interested in manipulative, controlling, cheating bitches?”

“That’s exactly my concern.”

“What? You think I *should* be with someone like her again?”

“Good God, no,” he said. “I’m concerned that you’re so hellbent on keeping yourself from getting hurt that you’re just looking for anything that isn’t Stephanie, regardless of how much *that* person could hurt you too.”

My stomach flipped. Wasn’t that what I had worried about from the very beginning? As much as I’d tried to convince myself that I wasn’t with Brandon to get as far from Stephanie as possible, how could I be sure?

“Listen, I’m sure he’s a good guy,” he said, probably hoping I didn’t catch the thinly veiled disgust and disapproval in his voice. “But have you really thought about this?”

“Honestly?”

“Yes.”

I swallowed. “I’ve thought about it a lot. I’ve asked myself the same thing.”

“And?”

“I think about it all the time,” I paused. “*Except* when I’m with him.”

He flinched, the slight wrinkling of his nose irritating me.

Rolling my eyes, I drummed my fingers on the table. “Just say it, Rick.”

“Say what?”

“Regardless of what happened with Stephanie, you can’t stand the idea of two men dating.”

His lips tightened into a grimace. "I just don't want to see my brother get hurt again."

"Funny, you didn't seem so vocal about that over the last ten years."

He dropped his eyes. "Would you have listened?"

"Do you expect me to listen to you now?"

"Dustin, I'm doing this—"

"Because you can't stand the idea of your brother being gay."

"No, it's not that."

"Then why are you disapproving of him when you haven't even met him? You met Stephanie and kept your mouth shut when I married her. When I could have seriously used a smack upside the head before I made the biggest mistake of my life."

"Dustin, that—"

"You knew what she was like but didn't lift a finger. But here you are, trying to talk me out of this for no other reason than the fact that Brandon's a man."

My brother cringed at the mention of Brandon's name, as if knowing it forced him to accept his existence as a real person instead of "that guy." Letting out a breath, he said, "You're right. I should have done it then, and I'm doing it now."

"Would you have said something if Stephanie had been a man?"

He opened his mouth to speak but paused, looking away.

"That's what I thought." I pushed my coffee cup away and started to stand.

"Dustin, wait."

I paused. "What?"

He gestured for me to sit. I hesitated, then did as he asked. He ran a hand through his hair and looked anywhere but at me. "Look, maybe I do have some preconceived notions about this, but you have to admit, it came out of left field."

Resting my elbows on the table, I steepled my fingers, nodding. “Fair enough.”

“I mean, have you ever had any inkling of something like this before?”

“About being with a man?”

He nodded.

I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. “Never.”

“Never even been curious?”

“Nope.”

“Not even during those communal showers in boot camp?”

I laughed. “No.”

“So it doesn’t strike you as even remotely odd—”

I put my hand up. “I get it.” I exhaled, rubbing the back of my neck and staring into my empty coffee cup. “And I’ve wondered about it myself, but....”

“But what?”

The knot sank even lower into the pit of my stomach. Wondering who I was trying to convince, I said, “But I don’t think this has anything to do with Stephanie.”

“Or Mom?”

“What?”

“Come on, between Mom and Stephanie, women have made your life hell, especially for the last ten years. I’m not saying every guy who figures out he’s gay later in life is doing it because he’s surrounded by harpies, but....” He shrugged. “The fact is, you *were* surrounded by harpies, and now you’re suddenly attracted to men?”

I chewed my thumbnail, avoiding his eyes. I understood where he was coming from, but he didn’t know Brandon. He didn’t get it. This was different.

Wasn’t it?

“Dustin, talk to me. I just want to make sure you’re not setting yourself up to get hurt again.”

I exhaled. “Fuck.”

“Just give it some thought.”

“I have. Believe me.”

Neither of us spoke for a few minutes. Then he said, “So how much has Mom been on your back about it?”

I laughed bitterly. “Remember how she flipped out when she thought you knocked that girl up in high school?”

He grimaced, then laughed. “Wasn’t that the time Dad almost brought in an exorcist to calm her down?”

“Yep. That was *nothing* compared to this.”

“Ouch.”

“Tell me about it.”

For the rest of lunch, we tried to talk about anything but my relationship with Brandon, though the tension still lingered. It was like trying to ignore someone who was sitting right there with us: not speaking about them, but eyes and conversation occasionally darting in their direction before quickly returning to the safety of mundane topics.

Eventually, Rick had to leave to meet Lisa elsewhere in town, so that was as good an excuse as any to leave. We paid, walked out to the parking lot, and exchange goodbyes, pretending everything was fine.

I watched him pull out of the parking lot as I got into my own car. Once he was gone, I closed my eyes and let my head fall against the headrest. Tapping my thumbs on the steering wheel, I relived our conversation over and over again.

For as much as I’d tried to convince him that my relationship with Brandon had nothing to do with Stephanie, I couldn’t deny that the conversation had chipped away at my own confidence about that very thing. I thought I had pushed the doubts out of my mind, but now, I wasn’t so sure.

Whatever I felt for Brandon—sexually or otherwise—was intense. It was incredible. Still, I couldn’t escape that nagging worry that what attracted me was not who he was, but who he wasn’t.

THE knot in my gut refused to loosen even hours after my conversation with Rick. All the doubts I'd had in the beginning resurfaced. *Was* I just trying to avoid dating someone like Stephanie? *Was* this just a phase, a fluke?

Brandon was on his way over when my phone rang for the seventy millionth time in the last forty-eight hours. I groaned and looked at the caller ID. I didn't recognize the number, but the area code was familiar.

"Hello?" I said, reclining on the couch with a hand over my eyes.

"Dustin, it's your Uncle Bill."

I blew out a breath, not sure if I was happy to hear from him or not. We'd always had a good relationship, but it dawned on me that I never knew how he felt about homosexuality. "Hey Bill. How's it going?"

"Not bad here." He paused. "But I understand things with you have been...." He paused. "Interesting."

"You could say that."

"Look, kid, I'm gonna cut to the chase," he said. "Are you gay?"

I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger. "I'm seeing another man, if that's what you want to know."

"Well, that half answers my question," he said. "I asked if you're gay."

"I—" A knock at the door interrupted my thought. "Hold on, Bill." I covered the phone with my hand as I sat up. "It's open." Brandon came in, and I gestured with one finger to give me a minute. He nodded, smiled at me, and joined me on the couch.

"You still there, kid?" Bill asked.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm here, sorry, someone came to the door," I said, quickly covering the phone again as Brandon kissed me. To Bill, I said, "Yeah, I guess I am. Or bisexual. Or something. But yes, I am seeing a man."

"I see."

I still couldn't tell if there was disapproval in his voice, or if he were simply trying to process what he'd learned.

He cleared his throat. "Oh. Well, listen, is this whole thing with your, um, your guy, is he going to be around for a while?"

I let out a breath. "It's not that big of a deal, Bill. It's nothing. It's just a..." Brandon shifted beside me. I pursed my lips, then said, "It's just, you know, nothing serious."

"You might've wanted to keep that cat in the bag, then," he said. "Your mother is about to have heart failure. She called me at damn near three in the morning to tell me about it."

"I know, she's flipping out about it," I said. "She thinks the whole thing is the end of the world."

"Everything is the end of the world to her."

"No shit."

"So it's not serious? You're not going to be dragging us all to Canada for a wedding?"

I laughed, but there wasn't a lot of humor behind it. "It's not serious, Bill. It's nothing." Brandon fidgeted next to me. I put my hand on his knee and gave him a quick smile. He returned it but didn't seem to feel it.

"Well," Bill said, "don't expect your mother to calm down about it anytime soon, but you're no idiot, so I have faith that you know what you're doing."

Wish I felt the same. "Thanks." We wrapped up the call with small talk, and I hung up. "Sorry about that," I said to Brandon. "Still getting calls from everyone in my mother's grapevine."

He nodded, but his mood seemed darker than when he arrived. "It'll probably go on like that for a while." The change in his demeanor unnerved me, but maybe I just hadn't paid close enough attention when he came through the door.

"I could go for a beer," I said. "Want one?"

"Sure."

We went into the kitchen and I pulled two bottles out of the refrigerator. For a long moment, we drank in silence. Brandon's eyes focused anywhere but on me, his expression neutral except for the subtle furrow between his eyebrows.

I couldn't stand the silence anymore. "What's wrong?"

He shook his head, sipping his beer. "Nothing."

"I could be wrong..." I tapped my own beer against the counter. "But that sounded an awful lot like the 'nothing' that women use to mean 'something's wrong'."

He laughed, but there wasn't a lot of humor in it. "You're getting good at this."

I couldn't even fake amusement. "What's wrong, Brandon?"

Sighing, he looked at the floor between us. "Look, I'm not going to beat around the bush," he said. With what seemed like a great deal of effort, he met my eyes. "Is this relationship, you know, is this something you want?"

My tongue stuck to the roof of my mouth. I quickly took a sip of beer. "Of course. Why wouldn't it be?"

He shrugged, running his thumb up and down the neck of his beer bottle and avoiding my eyes again. This kind of nervousness was alarmingly out of character for him. "I just, if you want some space—"

"Brandon, what are you talking about?" I set my beer down and crossed the kitchen to him, putting my hand on his hip. "That's the last thing I want."

He looked at me, searching my eyes.

"What brought this on?" I asked. "I think I'm missing something."

Taking a breath, he said, "When I came in tonight, you were on the phone, and you told the person that this was nothing."

My lips parted. "Brandon, that didn't mean anything."

An eyebrow lifted. "Which is more or less what you told *them* about *us*."

I touched his arm. "I didn't mean that, I swear."

He looked at me quietly for a moment, then said, "Okay." He didn't seem convinced.

"Are you sure?"

"Yeah," he said with a smile that was even less convincing than his resigned tone. He sipped his beer. "How did things go with your brother?"

I hesitated. He obviously wasn't satisfied that things were resolved, and I didn't want to let the subject drop, but I followed his lead. "Okay, I guess."

"That doesn't sound good."

I shrugged. "He's just concerned that this is all because of my ex, that I'm attracted to you because you're not her."

"Are you?"

"Brandon, we've talked about this."

"I know. And I want you to say it again."

My mouth went dry. I swallowed hard. A few hours ago, I could have told him without a second's hesitation that this had nothing to do with Stephanie. But that was before I talked to Rick.

"Dustin?" He was barely whispering.

"This has nothing to do with my ex."

"Look me in the eye and say it."

I met his eyes, and the words stuck in my throat. The longer I struggled to say it, the more pained his expression became. "Brandon," I said finally, silently cursing the unsteadiness in my voice, "this has nothing to do with my ex-wife."

His jaw tightened and he watched my eyes for a moment. Then he looked away and picked up his beer, taking a long drink and rolling it around in his mouth for a moment. When he swallowed, it looked like that simple task took every bit of effort he had, as if he were trying to physically swallow what I'd said.

Folding his arms across his chest, he leaned against the counter. "So your brother thinks this is all a phase?"

“He doesn’t know what it is,” I said. “He just thought it was odd to figure out I was gay this late in life.”

“You wouldn’t be the first.” He shrugged. “I don’t suppose anything came into the conversation besides the fact that I’m a man, did it?” The sudden hostility in his voice startled me.

“What do you mean?”

He rolled his eyes. “If he’s so concerned that this is just a way to get over your ex, did it even come up that you and I have more in common than your ex and I *don’t*?”

“He didn’t ask about any of it, no.”

His eyes narrowed. “Did you volunteer it?”

“No,” I said. “Look, I was just trying to get him to wrap his head around—”

“Then maybe start with getting him to wrap his head around who I am,” he snapped. “Instead of what I am.”

I let out a long breath. “Brandon—”

“Do you compare me to your ex in your head?” He pushed himself away from the counter with his hip, but his arms were still folded across his chest. “When you realized we were good together in bed, was it because I was different in bed than Stephanie?”

“No, of course not.”

“Did you compare my sense of humor to your own?” he asked through his teeth. “Or did you compare it to hers?”

“I get it,” I said.

“Then why does this all keep coming back to the fact that we’re both men?” His tone shifted from taut with anger to unsteady with emotion. “Dustin, I know you have a lot to come to terms with, and I know it’s nothing simple to deal with, but...” He trailed off. I thought he was trying to decide what to say, but by the tightness in his lips, he was trying to compose himself. After a moment, he took a breath. “You’ve got to look at the small picture as well as the big one.”

“You’re right,” I said, running a hand through my hair. “I’m sorry, I am. I just—my head’s been going ninety miles an hour since this whole thing blew up.”

He nodded. "I understand." He paused. "Listen, it's late. Why don't we sleep on it and talk more about it in the morning?"

"Okay," I said, looking at the floor.

He touched my hip gently. "I know this isn't easy." His voice was soft. "And it won't be for a while. But things will settle down."

"I hope so." I met his eyes, trying to find some reassurance in his expression and finding none.

It seemed to take a monstrous effort for him just to add, "You'll make it. It's hell, but it won't last forever." He kissed me lightly. Half-heartedly. "Come on, let's get some sleep."

Very little was said as we got ready and into bed. Although we held each other as we always did, neither of us tried to initiate anything.

Lying in the darkness, we were both awake, but silent. I stared at the ceiling. His head rested on my shoulder, his eyelashes brushing my skin each time he blinked. Our fingers were loosely laced together on my chest, more out of habit—obligation, even—than affection.

I wondered what he was thinking about, but was afraid to ask. Had he suggested giving me some space because he was the one that wanted some distance? Was he having second thoughts?

My mind went back to my conversation with Rick and all the doubts that had surfaced.

Am I gay? Is this just a fluke? Is this all because of Stephanie? Am I just setting myself—and Brandon—up for more hurt down the line?

Even after what Brandon had said, that I needed to think of him as Brandon, not as "a man I happen to be seeing," I couldn't shake the worries and doubts. Hours must have gone by as I agonized over it all, but eventually, exhaustion took over, and I drifted off to sleep.

EARLY the next morning, I was somewhere between asleep and awake when I realized Brandon wasn't lying against me. We often separated during the night, only to find each other and come back together before

we woke up. Still mostly asleep, I moved towards the middle of the bed to find him.

The sudden chill that ran up my spine wasn't from the coolness of his empty side of the bed but from the crinkle of paper and familiar rattle of my dog tags in my hand.

I was instantly awake. Sitting up, blinking rapidly as my eyes tried to focus, I grabbed the piece of paper. The muffled sound of my dog tags echoed in the silence as they slipped out of my hand and onto the bed.

I'd often heard people describe the feeling of having their world suddenly come crashing down around them, that simultaneous heart-racing panic and gut-twisting resignation of realizing the worst case scenario is not only happening, it's already happened, and there isn't a damned thing they can do about it. As the paper crumpled in my hand, the crunching sound echoing in the hollow silence of my bedroom, I suddenly knew exactly what they meant.

Even though they were tucked inside the ball of paper in my tightening fist, the words—scrawled in Brandon's familiar handwriting—were seared into my mind:

It was more than "nothing" to me.

Chapter 21

I STARED at my cell phone for an eternity, hemming and hawing about calling him. The finality of his departure became more certain with each passing minute, but I couldn't accept that he was really gone. Brandon wouldn't leave like that. Would he?

Finally, I called him, swallowing hard as it rang on the other end.

His voice very nearly destroyed my composure. "Hey." He didn't seem surprised to hear from me. He didn't seem happy about it either.

"Hey." My heart pounded in my ears. "Can we talk?"

"About?"

"The weather." Pause. "Sorry, I'm—" I cursed under my breath. "Look, I just want to talk. Face to face."

He was quiet for a moment. "Okay. We can talk. When and where?"

"Anytime, any place."

He exhaled. "I'll be at the club tonight."

Out in public, then. Not in the privacy—or intimacy—of home. No home turf advantage. Wondering if that was a good or bad sign, I said, "I'll meet you there."

After we hung up, I stared at my phone again. We'd reconnected, at least re-established some communication. All wasn't lost.

So why was I even more nervous than before?

WHEN I pulled into the club, he was waiting by his car. He watched me park but didn't look at me as I moved across the lot to him.

We stood in silence for a moment. Finally, I swallowed hard and said, "What happened?"

"I thought you could use some space."

"So you just disappeared?"

The pain in his eyes belied the coldness in his voice when he said, "I tried to talk to you. You wanted me to stay."

"So you didn't talk to me because you thought I'd talk you out of leaving?"

"I *did* talk to you, and you *did* try to keep me," he said. "But I'm not convinced that I should stay, only that you think I should."

I shifted my weight from one foot to the other, willing myself not to look away from him. "Brandon, why are you being so damned cryptic? Christ, just fucking *talk* to me."

Through his teeth, his tone taut with hostility, he said, "Why? Do you really want to hear what I have to say? Wouldn't you rather I keep it to myself so you can stay in denial?"

"I want to know why you left."

"I think it was pretty clear."

"Yes, you're right, it was, but I want to hear you say it to my face."

"What? You think I owe you some sort of explanation?"

"You don't owe me a damned thing, but I'm asking you to tell me."

"Fine. Fine. You want to know why I left?"

"Yes. Please."

The hostility suddenly dropped out of his tone, replaced by the pain reflecting in his eyes. "Okay. I left because I can't be with someone who can so easily pretend that whatever we have is nothing."

My heart dropped into my feet. “You know damn well that I don’t—”

“I know that you say you don’t think that. But every fucking time anyone asks, you blow it off without even blinking. Dustin, they all know about us now.” His voice shook with renewed anger.

“And you think this—”

“I think it’s fucking telling when you don’t hesitate to tell them it’s nothing.” Again, the anger diminished, his voice cracking slightly as he said, “But when I ask you if it’s something, you clam up.” His tone and demeanor alternated between furious and deeply hurt, and I could blame him for neither.

I avoided his eyes, chewing my lower lip.

His shoe ground against the pavement as he leaned against his car. “Your family, your friends, they all know. What’s the point of hiding it anymore?”

I blinked. “I, fuck, I don’t know, I’m just—” I ran a hand through my hair. “What do you want me to say, Brandon?”

“I want you to tell me why you’re still hiding me even after the cat’s out of the bag. They know. Just admit it to them all and let *them* get over it.”

“It’s not that simple.”

He folded his arms across his chest, the familiar creak of his leather jacket making me shiver as it brought to mind better times in this very place. “Evidently it is that simple, if you can tell them it’s nothing.”

“That’s not what I meant.”

“Then what did you mean?”

“I—” I looked at the floor, chewing my lip. “Brandon, this is a lot for me to figure out, I—”

“What more is there to figure out? Would you be this hesitant about telling them you were seeing a woman they didn’t approve of?”

I blew out a breath. “I don’t know. Honestly, I don’t know.”

“Are you ashamed of me?”

My head snapped up and I met his eyes. “Jesus, no.”

“Then why won’t you confirm what they already know?” He shifted his weight, his lips pulled into a scowl. “I could understand if it was still a secret, but it’s not. If you’re not ashamed of me, if this *is* something, then why keep denying it?”

It didn’t even matter that my mouth refused to form a single word, because I didn’t have an answer for him.

“Dustin, if this is just a fling for you—”

“We’ve been through this,” I said. “It’s not. You know it’s not.”

“No, I know you’ve said it’s not,” he said. “You’ve told me it’s more than just a fling, and you’ve told them that it’s nothing. I’m trying to figure out if you’re lying to them or stringing me along.”

“I’m not stringing you along, Brandon.”

“Yet you’re still keeping me like some sort of dirty secret.”

“That isn’t true.”

“Isn’t it? Actions speak louder than words, Dustin. You can tell me all day long that this means something to you, then turn around and let everyone else think it’s nothing.”

“Look, maybe I just haven’t gotten to the point where I can tell the world to take me as I am or suck my left nut,” I snapped. “I’m not the unshakeable Brandon Stewart, okay?”

“No, but if this relationship is something to you, then I’d at least expect you to have enough of a spine to admit that it exists.”

“They all know it exists, but I’m—” I paused. “It’s—”

“It’s what?”

I took a breath. “I’m not sure what any of this is. All I know is that everyone in my life has been all over me for days over this, and—”

“*Everyone* in your life?” The bitterness in his tone turned my blood to ice.

“That’s not what I meant.”

“I’m seeing a trend here.” Before I could reply, he gestured sharply at my phone on my belt. “Just once, Dustin, I want to hear you admit to it. To someone. Anyone. Someone other than me so I have a reason to believe that I’m not the one being strung along.”

“What do you want me to do? Just pull out the phone, call someone, and tell them, ‘By the way, this really is a serious relationship’?”

“Doesn’t seem like too much to ask at this point.”

“You make it sound so fucking easy to just—”

“And you make it sound so fucking easy to just pretend that I don’t exist, even though they already know I fucking do. I’m not saying it’s easy to come out to your family, but it hurts hearing how easy it is for you to blow this off—blow *me* off—without even flinching.”

“It’s not easy to pretend it’s nothing.”

“Then why do it?”

I chewed the inside of my cheek. “Because the other option isn’t any easier.”

“No one said any of this would be easy, Dustin,” he said, his voice softening. “But you have to decide whether this—” he gestured at himself, then me—“is worth facing *them*.” He nodded towards my phone. “Pretending nothing is going on isn’t facing them. Look, I’ve been someone’s dirty little secret before. I can’t—*won’t*—do that with you.”

Wetting my lips, I said, “That’s not what I want.”

“The choice is yours.”

I paused, avoiding his eyes for a moment. “So that’s why you left? Instead of just bringing this up, talking to me about it, you just walked out?”

He shrugged. “I tried to talk to you about it. I was hoping this would get your attention.”

“Now you have my attention.”

He swallowed hard, avoiding my eyes. “And now I’m not so sure I want it.”

I couldn’t tell if he sounded more hurt or angry, but it hit hard. “What do you mean?”

“Dustin, whatever it is we’re doing, I’ve put a lot into it. I’ve held your hand—literally and figuratively—while you figured out what you

felt, what you wanted. It took walking out to wake you up to the fact that I'm a part of this too, and now that I've got your attention, I'm wondering if I'm the one who needs some space."

My breath lodged in my throat. "Brandon, I don't want you to leave—"

"Then give me a reason to stay."

I'm not sure if it was because of the ultimatum in his tone or the way his voice cracked, but my blood turned cold, and I forgot how to speak at all.

"That's what I thought." He reached for the car door handle.

"Brandon, wait," I said.

He stopped, looking at me but not releasing the handle.

I swallowed hard. "I don't want you to go. I just—" My heart pounded as I tried to find the words. "I just need some time to figure all of this out."

"Take all the time you want," he snarled as he opened the car door.

Anger surged through me. "Brandon, Jesus, you've been through this yourself—"

"You're right, I have," he said, putting one foot in the car and resting his elbow on top of the door as he spoke. "I've been through it, and it was hell. It's *still* hell. But when I came out to my family, do you know what's the one thing I didn't do?"

I swallowed. "What?"

"I never *once* pretended that my boyfriend didn't exist. He was part of my life, and if they couldn't get over it, then fuck 'em."

"And you also made the choice of when and how your family found out. If you hadn't noticed, I didn't have that luxury. So you couldn't wait—"

"I think I waited long enough," he growled. "I gave you plenty of time to figure out how you felt. I was even willing to hold onto that one little glimmer of hope that you gave me that this was something more."

"Brandon, it's—"

“Obviously I was in as much denial as you were.” His voice shaking with rage. “I convinced myself that you really were attracted to me, even after you said yourself that it could very well have been just because I wasn’t like your ex-wife. And you’re right, Dustin. I’m not like your ex-wife. I would never have cheated on you, or controlled you, or hurt you the way she did.” His lips tight, he turned away, closing his eyes and taking a deep breath. When he looked at me again, his voice threatened to crack as he spoke through gritted teeth, “But I’m also not your fucking doormat.”

The pain in his eyes sucked the breath right out of me.

He moved a bit further into the car but stopped and turned to me again. His mouth was twisted with fury, but it was the tears in his eyes that dropped my heart into my feet. “I have enough members of my own family that pretend I don’t exist. If I want to be reminded of how inconsequential I am, I’ll call them. I don’t need you for that.”

Before I could will myself to speak, the car door slammed. The engine kicked on, and a moment later, he backed out of the space and drove away without giving me a second look.

I slumped against the other car, running my hand through my hair. For all of my worrying about whether I was gay, whether I did or could love Brandon, it was suddenly crystal clear that I was all too capable of one thing: hurting him.

I TRIED to forget Brandon, but someone like that doesn’t simply disappear into the past as easily as he disappears from sight. Though I hadn’t seen him since he pulled out of the parking lot and left me standing there like a jackass, he was on my mind more than ever.

When I jogged around the lake, I kept expecting him to appear beside me. Walking out to my car in the pouring rain one night, I was certain I could taste that kiss we had shared in the rainstorm. The gym, my bedroom, my goddamned shower. Everywhere I went, he was there. Or at least, he should have been.

After more than a week, I couldn’t take it anymore. I couldn’t get him off my mind.

I was scared shitless when I pulled into the familiar parking lot of the club. His car was there, its benign presence rattling me straight to the core. Between my car and the front door, I almost left at least a dozen times. Each time, I talked myself into staying. This might hurt, but I had to try.

When I walked in, it took mere seconds to find him. His back was to me, and he was leaning over the table to take a shot. I swore his body tensed when I came through the door, as if he sensed my presence. The hairs on the back of my neck stood on end when he looked over his shoulder and met my eyes. The temperature in the usually stuffy room dropped.

There was no expression on his face. No surprise at my presence, no reaction at all. Without so much as a flicker of emotion, he turned his attention back to the table and continued his game.

I went to the bar and ordered a beer. Part of it was a need to calm my nerves. Part of it was my fear of confronting him here, in front of so many people. I wanted to talk to him in private, but I wasn't sure how to get his attention. And I had to admit it: I was terrified of him turning me away. We'd both already said more than enough. If he didn't want anything to do with me, I couldn't blame him.

A few opportunities presented themselves: When he stepped away from the tables to get a drink. In between games. When he sat out for an entire game to watch someone else play. He never once looked my direction, never acknowledged my presence besides his icy look when I had come through the door.

Come on, Dustin, talk to him.

Brandon finished a game, shook his opponent's hand, and twisted his cue apart so he could put it into its case. Panic straightened my spine; he was leaving. Now or never. He slung the case over his shoulder and started towards the door.

I couldn't move.

Couldn't fucking move.

As he put his hand up to push it open, he paused, looking right at me. Our eyes locked. His expression didn't change.

Then he was gone.

I couldn't hear the door close over the loud music, but I felt it severing Brandon's presence from the club.

My heart sank. *Good one. Just let him walk out. Don't bother trying to talk to him.* Christ, what did I expect? That he would come up to me? I was the one that had fucked everything up. If anyone needed to make the first move, it was me.

Then my heart skipped.

How many times had I watched him walk out that door, certain he had left, only to find him waiting by my car? Granted, he hadn't been angry with me then, but maybe....

I quickly paid the bartender and headed out, trying not to get my hopes up but failing miserably. It took everything I had not to break into a run as I started across the parking lot.

Please be there. Come on, Brandon, please be there.

My bumper came into view in the distance, and my heart jumped into my throat. Another vehicle blocked the view of the rest my car, so I couldn't see if he were there. Panic tightened in my chest at the thought of him not being there, but I tried to shove those fears aside. He had to be there.

He had to be.

He would be.

Please God, he has to be.

He wasn't.

With a shaking hand, I braced myself against the back of my car, staring at the void beside the driver's side door where I had hoped he would be, focusing on the empty space as if I could somehow conjure him out of nothing. The pain of catching my ex-wife cheating was nothing compared to the heart-stopping futility of trying in vain to will Brandon to appear.

He was gone.

Chapter 22

IT MIGHT as well have been a hundred miles from my car to the front door of the club, but I made it eventually.

The stuffiness inside the building didn't make it any easier to breathe, and everything in this room reminded me of Brandon, but I didn't want to go home yet.

There was no point in drinking. There wasn't enough alcohol in the club to ease this pain, so I figured I wouldn't spread the suffering to my wallet or, tomorrow morning, my head. That, and I still had to get myself home. I winced at the thought of going out to the car again, of reliving every step of my last walk across the parking lot.

Maybe I *did* need a beer.

I paused near the door and looked at the pool tables, a heavy knot tugging at my gut as my mind superimposed a ghostly image of Brandon beside the vacant fourth table. In my mind's eye, I watched him taking one of his signature trick shots, laughing at the shit-talking, responding with a smirk and raised eyebrows when a challenger told him he was going down. I watched him miss the twelve and pocket the eight ball, throwing the game so he would "lose" our friendly wager, and—

"Want to play?"

A female voice cut through the noise and brought me back to reality. I turned to see a tall brunette in a low-cut red blouse. She gave me the kind of infectious smile that was impossible not to return.

I wasn't in the mood to play, but it occurred to me in that moment that a game of eight ball with a pretty brunette beat the hell out of sitting at the bar wallowing in self-pity. Something to do.

"Sure," I said with a shrug.

"Eight ball?"

"Sounds good."

She extended her hand. "My name's Renee."

"Dustin," I said, clasping her hand gently. As I reached for a cue, I nodded towards the table and added, "Your rack." Instantly, I cringed, my cheeks burning. "I mean. You—"

"I know what you meant," she laughed, putting the rack on the table and setting up the game.

Chuckling, I shook my head and took a cue off the wall. I picked up the cue ball and set it on the table, pausing to let my hand brush over the green felt, shivering at the memory of bracing myself on a similar surface in another time and place.

"Your break," she said, lifting the rack away. She leaned on the end of the table, her shoulders pushed forward just enough to let her blouse sag in the front.

Trying to ignore her exposed cleavage, I took my shot.

"Looks like you're solids," she said, glancing at one of the corner pockets.

"So does that mean I should try to get the black one in?" I gestured with my cue to the eight ball, which was close to the corner pocket.

She laughed and winked. "Absolutely, but only if we're putting money on this game."

"You want to put money on it?"

"I don't think so," she said. "You'll probably beat me anyway."

"You don't know that," I said, shrugging. "You've barely seen me play."

“No, I haven’t seen you play,” she said. “But something tells me you know what you’re doing.”

I started to ask why, then realized she was looking past me at the wall. Following her gaze, I turned around, and my heart fell into my feet. There was a framed snapshot of Brandon and me, arms around each other’s shoulders, celebrating our first and second place wins at the last tournament.

“That *is* you, isn’t it?”

“Yeah,” I said, my mouth suddenly dry. I turned back to the table and leaned down to take my shot. “Didn’t win that one.”

“I hear he’s a tough one to beat.”

“You don’t know the half of it,” I said in a hoarse whisper.

As the game went on, I tried to focus on her instead of that picture on the wall. Then she leaned over the table and glanced over her shoulder at me as she wiggled her hips suggestively. The familiar ache below my belt took me by surprise. I swallowed.

“Shit,” she said, glaring at the table. “How the hell am I supposed to get anything in?”

“Go for the twelve,” I said, pointing at the corner pocket with my cue.

Her eyes darted around the table. “I can’t hit that, there’s too much in the way.”

“Bounce it off the side.”

“And hope for the best?”

I smiled. “It’s an easy shot if you know how to do it.”

“Maybe you should show me how to do it, then,” she said.

“Well, if you insist.” I put my cue against the wall. After explaining how to angle the shot and bounce the cue ball off of the side to knock the ball in, I put my hand over hers on the table, my other hand resting on her hip. I caught the light scent of her perfume and drew in a long breath through my nose. As she leaned forward, her shirt pulled up, and my palm was suddenly against her skin.

“Like this?” she asked, nudging her hip against me.

I turned so that I was whispering right into her ear, my lips almost touching her skin. “Just like that.” Looking back at the table, I said, “Line it up, and just take the shot.”

She didn’t move.

I realized then that she wasn’t looking at the table. When I turned my head, our faces were close enough to touch.

“I guess I’m not much of a pool player,” she said in a whisper that I wouldn’t have heard had I not been so close to her.

Blood pounded in my ears, almost drowning out our voices. “Maybe you just need more practice.”

“I could think of other things I’d like to practice.” As she spoke, she lifted her chin, bringing it a fraction of an inch closer to mine.

“Oh?”

She nudged her hip against me, just enough to press against my erection, and a satisfied grin spread across her face. “Honestly, I don’t even like pool.” Her breath warmed my face and sent a shiver down my spine.

I moved my hand from the cue to the small of her back. “So why did you want to play?”

“I didn’t,” she said, letting her lip brush mine. “I just wanted to get your attention.”

Pushing Brandon’s memory away, pretending I didn’t hear his voice in my head saying that very thing in a decidedly different context, I said, “It worked. You have my attention.” I stood up slowly, and she came with me. As she turned around, I put my hands on her hips, and she did the same, pulling me close to her against the pool table.

As if it had a mind of its own, my hand moved to the small of her back. We both paused, her lips almost touching mine, letting the tension linger just a moment longer before I finally kissed her.

Her fingers drifted up the back of my neck and into my hair as her tongue sought mine. My knees threatened to buckle, so I rested my hip against the table, hoping it was enough to keep me from collapsing as Renee explored my mouth.

“Hey, you two gonna to play or not?”

I looked over Renee’s shoulder at a couple of guys with amused expressions on their faces. I cleared my throat, then laughed. “No, it’s all yours.” To Renee, I said, “You don’t mind, do you?”

She grinned. “Not at all.”

We left the pool area and started towards the bar, but she took my arm and tugged me towards the door. “It’s way too loud in here.”

Well, beats the hell out of staying here having a beer and a pity party. I followed her out to the parking lot, sliding my arm around her waist.

Once we were outside, we didn’t bother with conversation. I leaned against the wall, pulling her into a long kiss. There was no doubt in my mind where this was going.

A shiver ran up my spine, and I hoped to God she mistook my nervousness for arousal. *Come on, Dustin, get it together.* I’d gone months on end without sex when I was married, and each time we finally broke a dry spell, it was like we’d never stopped. But here I was, after maybe two months without sleeping with a woman, and suddenly I was as nervous as a fifteen-year-old virgin.

The more she kissed me, though, the more I relaxed, the more I allowed myself to leave the past behind, even if it were just for tonight. Whatever it was I had come here to forget, I forgot a little more every time her tongue met mine.

Running her hands up my back under my jacket, she said, “Do you want to go someplace else?”

“I assume you already have a place in mind.”

“My apartment is walking distance from here.”

“Show me the way.”

“THAT was incredible,” Renee slurred.

I collapsed beside her on the bed, struggling to catch my breath. “Yeah, it was.” I closed my eyes, hoping she didn’t notice the shudder

that rippled through me. Something cold tightened in my gut. *What the hell just happened?* I wasn't lying to her—it *was* hot—but all the while, my mind had been in another time and place. With another person. Everything Renee did was right, but everything I felt was wrong.

She moved onto her side and laid against me. “You’re welcome to stay the night.” She let her nails drift along the grooves between my muscles, sending a shiver up my spine.

Fuck. No. No way. I can't do this again. I swallowed hard. “I shouldn’t.”

“Why not?” She still sounded flirty and good-natured, not hurt or offended.

Because I never should have been here to begin with. I turned and kissed her. “Four o’clock comes early.”

She wrinkled her nose, her fingers still trailing up and down my chest. “You have to be up at four?”

Nodding, I gently closed my hand over hers. It wasn’t meant to be an affectionate gesture. The way she touched me reminded me of the way Brandon often had, and I couldn’t handle any more of it.

“No rest for the wicked,” I said with a half-hearted laugh.

“I should let you go, then,” she said.

“I hate to run out on you,” I said with a smile that I hoped looked sincere. “That’s what I get for going out on a work night.”

She smiled and kissed me. “I still had a great time.”

“As did I.”

We dressed and headed for the door. I keyed her number into my cell phone, made an empty promise to call her, and kissed her good night. Walking back to the club, alone with my thoughts, I couldn’t shake an uneasy feeling.

Renee was hot. Her body was incredible, and just the memory of her kiss made me shiver. Yet it had been the thought of Brandon—not Renee’s touch, not the way her body responded to mine, not even the sight of her on the verge of an orgasm—that ultimately made me come.

Even with everything she'd done to me, it had been that single second, that fleeting image of Brandon's lips parted in a breathless cry and his eyes screwed shut as his head fell back against the pool table, that put me over the edge.

Who the hell was I with tonight? Renee, or the ghost of Brandon?

I sighed, looking down at the pavement as I walked. Never in my life had I been more confused about myself. Obviously I was still attracted to women, but being with a woman now was... different.

In the Marines, I spent a few months overseas and had to learn to drive on the left side of the road. It took a little adjustment, but I adapted quickly. Coming back to the States and changing back to driving on the right, though, proved to be a hell of a lot harder. It was something I'd been so accustomed to before going overseas, yet it was suddenly alien to me. I expected driving on the left to be a switch, but I thought driving on the right would be as easy as it ever was. It was unfamiliar for it to *be* unfamiliar.

That was exactly how it felt to be in bed with a woman after being with a man: familiar, but foreign. The same, but different.

And now I couldn't, for the life of me, decide if I was meant to drive on the left or the right.

THE next morning, I caught up with Kate as she came out of one of her group classes. Before I could even speak, she said, "Oh my God, if that's not the look of someone who needs to talk."

Nodding, I said, "Got any plans for lunch?"

"I do now." She eyed me for a second. "Are you okay, Dustin? You look like hell."

No, I'm not. "Just haven't had a lot of sleep."

"Which I would usually chalk up to your significant other, but—" Her eyebrows jumped. "Oh."

I sighed, avoiding her eyes.

“Forget lunch. I have twenty minutes before my next class. Let’s go chat.”

“I can’t, I’ve got a client coming in.”

She chewed her lip. “You sure you can work today?”

I shrugged. “I’m awake and breathing, so there’s hope. Meet me at the diner across the street at eleven.”

“I’ll be there.”

BY THE time I got to the diner, Kate already had a cup of coffee waiting for me.

“Alright, spill it,” she said. “What’s going on?”

I rubbed my eyes, then picked up the coffee. “Brandon and I split up. About a week ago.”

“I figured as much. Why didn’t you tell me?”

Running my fingers up and down the handle on my coffee cup, I shrugged and said, “Because telling you meant accepting it.”

“Understandable.” She paused. “So what happened?”

Shaking my head and drumming my fingers on the side of the coffee cup, I said, “Fuck, I’m not even sure. I...” Exhaling heavily, I stared at the retina-searing red Formica table. “Everything went to shit right after my family found out.”

“I can imagine, but I didn’t think you guys would split over it.”

“I know,” I said. “The thing is, I had a long talk with my brother. The more I talked to him, the more I started thinking back to what we talked about in the beginning. You know, that this was just a way of getting as far from my ex as possible.”

Her shoulder slumped a little. “Dustin, you know it wasn’t...”

I nodded. “I know. But I started having some doubts, I started worrying about it, Brandon got upset about it, and then...” I chewed my thumbnail, avoiding her eyes.

“And then what?”

“And then someone called, they were giving me shit about the whole thing, and I told them the relationship was nothing. No big deal.” I rubbed my eyes again. “And Brandon heard me.”

“Didn’t he understand that you were just having a hard time breaking it to your family?”

“Yeah, he understood. But he didn’t understand why I was still pretending he didn’t exist when my family already knew about him. The cat was out of the bag. Why deny it?”

She shrugged. “He’s got a point.”

“I know.”

“So, have you tried talking to him?”

“Yeah. Didn’t go over well.” I gestured dismissively. “Look, he’s gone, it’s over. That’s not what I came to talk about.”

She looked at me over her coffee cup. “Okay. So....”

Resting my elbows on the table, I lowered my voice. “I went out with a woman last night.” Steepling my fingers, I added, “Well, went *home* with a woman last night.”

She put her hands in her lap and leaned forward. “And? How did that go?”

“Well, she didn’t complain,” I said with a humorless laugh. “But I just didn’t....” Chewing my lip, I trailed off. After a moment, I managed, “It didn’t feel right. At all.”

“Let me guess,” she said. “You’re worried that this time, you really *are* batting for a different team to get as far away from someone else as possible?”

“Basically.”

She sipped her coffee, then nodded. “Have you considered that you might actually be gay?”

“Sure. And I don’t have a fucking clue. All I know is that after last night, I feel even worse about....” I shrugged. “Everything.”

“Maybe,” she said, “it’s too soon. I mean, you just split up with Brandon. And correct me if I’m wrong, but you were feeling pretty strongly for him.”

I nodded, rubbing my eyes with my thumb and forefinger again as I let out a sigh. “You could say that.”

“Maybe you just need some time alone.”

“You might be right,” I said. “I just, hell, after I went home with her last night, all I could think about was Brandon. And now I’m even more confused than before about what I am.”

“I know,” she said. “But it took you this long to even give a guy a second look. Don’t expect everything to fall into place overnight. And don’t go looking to a one-night stand to make you feel better. They’ll just make you feel worse.”

“I don’t. But it would be nice to at least have some clue. And really, last night, it wasn’t the fact that it was a one-night stand that bothered me. I’ve had a few before, some fairly soon after Stephanie and I split.” I looked into my coffee cup, pursing my lips for a moment before I finally met Kate’s eyes again. “It was like....”

She sipped her coffee. “Like what?”

Taking a breath, I said, “It was as unfamiliar and weird as I always thought being with a man would be.”

“Was being with Brandon ever that weird and unfamiliar?”

I shook my head. “Not once. A few times I thought it should have been, but it never was. It just always felt... *right*.”

“Then I think you just answered your own question.”

“So I’m gay?”

She nodded. “I think it’s a pretty safe bet. But whatever you are, I would seriously take it easy for a while. You’re still not totally over your ex, and now you have this bullshit with Brandon on top of it.”

“You’re probably right.”

“Of course I’m right.” She glanced at her watch. “And my lunch break is almost over, so I should go.”

“Yeah, me too. Thanks, Kate.”

“No problem. Now give me a hug.”

We both stood, but I hesitated. “I don’t know, you might catch the gay from me.”

She shrugged and held her arms out. “Oh good, maybe I’ll have better luck with women than men.”

I laughed and hugged her. We both held on a moment longer than we usually did. “Thanks, Kate,” I whispered. “Don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Teach aerobics and make an ass out of yourself,” she said as she released me. She giggled. “Really, it’s no problem. You know I’m always here.”

She hugged me again, and we left.

Chapter 23

ON FRIDAY night, I completely ignored Kate's sage advice. Though I probably would have been wise to spend some time on my own, there were a few things I needed to know about myself.

The club was on the other side of town, but it wasn't much different than the one where I had met Brandon: mostly lit by neon. A lot of beer and not a lot of top-shelf. Pool tables, dartboards, and pull-tab machines.

I sat between two empty barstools near the back, giving me a panoramic view of most of the club. Hunched over my beer bottle, I cast surreptitious glances around the room, trying to see if anyone caught my eye. *Once and for all, am I straight or not?*

I checked everyone and everything out: Shoulders. Arms. The broad chest that stretched a Steelers T-shirt to the limits. Tattoos. Faces. The narrow waist and perfect ass in a pair of well-worn jeans. Packages. Smiles. The sculpted biceps that attracted my attention from a professional standpoint rather than a sexual one.

Nothing.

Not even a flutter of curiosity, least of all a twitch or an ache below my belt.

Of course, it didn't help that I had no way of knowing if any of these guys were gay or straight. I didn't know if I had the guts to

approach a man I knew was gay, but I was fairly sure I didn't have the balls to take a chance on one who *might* be straight.

A Mets fan in the corner met my eyes and didn't look away. I knew that look. He was sizing me up in a way that only one other man had done, and I doubted he had a game of eight ball in mind. He sipped his beer, looking away for a second, then surreptitiously glancing back.

I looked into my beer, drumming my fingers on the bottle. The Mets fan wasn't bad-looking, but he didn't do anything for me. I sighed. Took a drink, tapped my fingers on the bottle again.

Maybe I was straight after all. Maybe Brandon had been a one-time thing. A fluke. Like a man who usually liked blondes and suddenly went for a brunette just to switch things up, but then went right back to blondes as if the brunette never happened. But that still didn't explain how alien it had felt to have sex with a woman.

I rubbed my eyes, blowing out a frustrated breath. Straight, gay, or whatever, I was not finding what I needed here.

"Rough week?"

I turned my head in the direction of the question. The instant I looked at him, I discovered two things.

One, the bar stool next to me was no longer vacant.

Two, I was, without a doubt, sexually attracted to men.

His broad shoulders were set back, relaxed against the back of his barstool, his long fingers wrapped around a pint glass. A meticulously trimmed goatee framed a devilish grin, and a stunning pair of blue eyes—not as incredible as Brandon's, but *shut up shut up forget about Brandon*—looked back at me. His eyebrows lifted as he waited for a response to his question.

Clearing my throat, I shifted slightly on my barstool, trying to hide my sudden reaction to him. "I, um, yeah. Long week." I sipped my beer.

He laughed. "Some things definitely shouldn't be so long."

I coughed, having just barely managed to swallow my beer before he said it.

“Just kidding around with ya, man.” He clapped my shoulder, and I thought his hand lingered just a split second longer than social protocols dictated between heterosexual men. I wondered if he was heterosexual. The longer I looked at him, the more certain I was that I was definitely *not*.

“Sean Callahan.” He extended his hand.

“Dustin Walker.” I shook his hand and immediately knew the answer. His fingertips just barely grazed the inside of my wrist, and when I tensed in response, the corner of his mouth lifted with a satisfied, almost smug grin.

He took his hand away and picked up his beer. Glancing over his shoulder, he said, “You play pool?”

“Sometimes.”

“Care for a game?”

I looked at the pool tables, and that sinking feeling tugged at my gut. I’d managed to get through the game with Renee, but everything about pool reminded me of Brandon. “No thanks,” I said finally.

“No problem. I’m not much of a pool player anyway.”

“Then why did you—” *Déjà vu*. Hadn’t I had this same conversation with Renee?

He turned his barstool and let his knee brush mine, immediately drawing the breath out of my lungs and pulling my gaze down to our knees. Up his leg. To the obvious rise beneath his jeans.

When I looked at him again, my mouth went dry. Before I realized what I was doing, I ran the tip of my tongue across my upper lip. His lips parted.

I followed the ripple down the front of his throat as he swallowed, and when I met his eyes again, he leaned towards me.

His gaze shifted towards the pool tables, then back to me. “Why don’t we just cut to the chase?”

My mouth was dry. “Okay....”

“I get the impression,” he said, letting his knee brush mine again, “that you aren’t here for the ladies.”

I swallowed. "What gave you that idea?"

With a casual shrug, he said, "I haven't seen you look at a woman all night."

"So you've been watching me."

"I have." He didn't seem in the least bit embarrassed or apologetic about it. In fact, with the way his eyes twinkled and his lip tightened into a smirk, I think he was pretty damned proud of himself.

"So," I said. "If you've been watching me all this time, it's probably a safe bet that you're not here for the ladies either?"

"No. I'm not. And quite frankly, I'd rather not be *here* at all."

My first instinct was to take offense, as if he didn't want to be here talking to me. Then I made the connection. Somehow willing my mouth to work, I said, "Where would you rather be?"

"Somewhere a little more—" He put his hand on his own knee and turned back towards the bar, letting a single finger extend just enough to graze my thigh as they passed. "Intimate."

I gulped. I'd expected him to say "someplace more private." Comfortable, maybe. But no. *Intimate*.

"That is, if you're interested." His eyebrows arched again as he sipped his beer.

Now or never. Gay or straight, Sean is going to show you once and for all. Hell, just do it. I took a long swallow of beer, then set the empty bottle on the bar. "Let's go."

The parking lot was eerily quiet as we walked out together. Though it was a relief to be away from the prying eyes of society, I felt strangely vulnerable without the comfort of their scrutiny.

Stopping by his car, he was unnervingly close to me. Close enough to touch. We avoided each other's eyes for a moment. Then he put his hand on my hip, gently drawing me to him.

His shoulders were somewhat broader than mine, and he was a few inches taller than me. His stature magnified the powerful intensity in his eyes. He didn't intimidate me or make me feel threatened, but I got the distinct feeling that this was a man who knew what he wanted and was going to get it.

A shiver ran up my spine, and with as close as we stood, I know he felt how hard I was. An almost imperceptible motion of his hips against mine—moving to one side, then the other—told me all I needed to know about his own state of arousal.

Our eyes met, and I thought he was going to speak, but instead, he kissed me. The gentleness of his kiss surprised me. I'd expected him to be more aggressive, more demanding, but he kissed me like he wanted to taste my mouth, not devour it. The tip of his tongue slid under mine and drew it between his lips.

I caught myself wondering why Stephanie always made me shave my goatee and *no wonder Brandon wanted me to—stop, it Dustin.*

There was something exquisitely sensual about the soft brush of Sean's goatee against my jaw. Then again, there was something exquisitely sensual about everything Sean's body did to mine.

His movements—parting my lips with his tongue, exploring my mouth, wrapping his arms around me—were slow, almost cautious, but the unsteady way he breathed belied the gentleness of his approach. He was holding back; I could feel it. In spite of the calm sensuality of his kiss, there was something primal just beneath the surface. I wanted to get him behind closed doors and find out what he was really like when there were no prying, disapproving eyes around.

I needed to know what Sean was hiding beneath this gentlemanly exterior.

"You want to get out of here?" he whispered.

"Absolutely."

"My place is on the other side of town."

"Mine's closer."

"Let's go."

SEAN followed me back to my apartment. On the way in from the parking lot, we didn't touch. We didn't talk. We didn't even look at each other. I keyed us into my apartment, pausing to lock the door after

we were safely inside. The click of the deadbolt echoed in the silence, an oddly unsettling sound, as if I'd just locked myself inside a lion's cage instead of the safety of my own home. Sean didn't intimidate me or make me feel threatened, but I had a feeling that I was about to unleash an insatiable sexual beast. It was more like the feeling of standing on a bridge getting ready to bungee jump: I wanted it, but to say I was nervous was an understatement.

When I turned to face him, we were an arm's length apart, looking at each other. Waiting. My eyes followed the ripple down the front of his throat, and I tried to decide if he was nervous or impatient.

He moved towards me, reaching for my hip, his eyes never leaving mine. I licked my lips slowly, my body tensing as if I were bracing myself for the impending contact of his hand. When his hand found my hip, I took in a long breath through my nose.

Something changed in his eyes, in his expression, even as I watched. He tilted his head and moved in to kiss me, moving as slowly as humanly possible, as if he wanted me to feel every inch of ground he gained. I tried to lean towards him, but the hand on my hip stopped me with just enough pressure to let me know to stay put. I could retreat if I wanted to—he wasn't doing this against my will—but *he* was the one making the advance. He was in control.

As his lips met mine and he wrapped his arms around me, he took the lead, asserting his dominance with every motion of his tongue or jaw. At first it was gentle, no tongue, then passionate and deep, then the feather light touch of his lips against mine, all at his whim.

He dipped his head and kissed my neck, pausing at the base of my throat, just above my collarbone, his tongue making a few warm, moist circles that raised goose bumps under my clothes.

"Like that?" he murmured.

"God, yes." I ran my fingers through his thick hair, closing my eyes and letting myself get lost in the gentle touch of his lips against my skin.

His hands went up my chest and shoved my jacket off of my shoulders, the sudden movement knocking me off balance. Taking advantage of my stumble, he used his body to push me up against the

wall, panting as he kissed my neck and jaw. He shrugged his own jacket off, then slid his hands under my shirt and lifted it off. Still pinning me against the wall, he went for my belt.

He wasn't forceful or unkind; he obviously liked to be in control, and he knew what he wanted, but he was in this for my pleasure too. With a shiver of anticipation, I knew who would be giving and who would be receiving.

Before I knew it, his hand was around my cock, and I was suddenly thankful he had me against the wall. The wall and his body were the only things that kept me standing as he kissed my neck and stroked me slowly, the unsteadiness in his hand and his breathing making every sensation more intense. His hand trembled too much to settle on any consistent rhythm, so every time I started to get accustomed to it, it would change, and every fucking time, it took my breath away as if he'd just touched me for the first time.

He nipped my earlobe, and my knees almost went out from under me. "You like that, don't you?" he growled, stroking faster, then slower, then faster again.

"Keep doing it and I'm gonna come." I chewed my lip, trying to hold back as he circled his tongue just below my ear. When he released a ragged breath against my neck, my knees buckled, but still his body kept me against the wall.

"Maybe," he whispered, "we should find a place that's a bit more suitable for this."

I didn't bother trying to speak, just nodded. He eased off of me, making sure I could stand before he released me completely. Just as we had on the way into the apartment, neither of us spoke or touched on the way down the hall.

In the bedroom, though, it was a different story. Kissing passionately, we clawed at clothes and each other, desperate to get as little between us as possible. We managed to get his shirt off before we landed on the bed, his body over mine.

I tried to get him on his back, but he pinned me first, holding my wrists beside my head as he pressed his hips against mine and kissed

me. Trying to gain control, I struggled, but he kept me there. I had had playful power struggles with women in the past, but never with someone this close to my own strength, and it was *hot*.

“You’re not going to get the best of me, Dustin.” He laughed as he kissed my jaw.

“And if I stopped fighting, you wouldn’t enjoy it as much, would you?”

He growled against my neck. “Damn right.”

I continued putting up just enough of a struggle to make him think I was actually trying to get my hands free. He bought my bluff. Almost imperceptibly, his hands loosened around my wrists.

I wrenched my hands free and, before he could react, had him on his back, pinned just as I had been a second before. “Then I wouldn’t want to disappoint, would I?”

For a moment, he simply stared at me, jaw slack and eyes wide in a look of utter shock. Then he licked his lips and grinned. “I may have to fuck you for that.”

I laughed, leaning down to kiss him but keeping my mouth just out of his reach. “You must be forgetting who’s on top, then.”

“Not at all,” he said, craning his neck so that his lips brushed mine. “I haven’t forgotten who’s on top.”

“Good,” I said, kissing him quickly but pulling back before he was ready to let me go.

His lips tightened in a frustrated grimace. “Get down here.”

“Why?” I asked, flicking my tongue across his lower lip and laughing at the growl that emerged from his throat. His arms struggled in my grasp. I looked at my own hand gripping his wrist and was just about to make a smartass comment when his leg hooked around mine, and in the next instant, I was on my back, staring up at him in disbelief.

“I told you I hadn’t forgotten who was on top.” He grinned at me and lowered his head to kiss me.

As the kiss deepened, he relaxed his grip on my wrists. I pulled one free, but instead of trying to reverse roles again, I put my arm

around his neck. Then the other. Our rough game of playful dominance forgotten, we worked our way out of our remaining clothes.

“There is so much I want to do to you,” he said, pressing his hard-on against mine. “But I have *got* to fuck you. *Now*.”

“Nightstand,” I said, panting in between long, desperate kisses.

“Sweet.” He sat up to get them, not bothering to ask who was giving and who was receiving. I think he knew as well as I did who was fucking who, and we’d both known it since he kissed me in the parking lot. Rolling the condom onto his own cock instead of mine simply confirmed the obvious.

I got on my hands and knees, and he put his hands on my hips. Momentary panic swept through me. I’d only done this with Brandon, and he was much gentler than Sean. It had never hurt with him, but I couldn’t be so sure that it would be that way with Sean.

The cold lube against my skin made me suck in a startled breath. Willing myself to relax, I closed my eyes, trying to breathe slowly, evenly, expecting the worst.

“Hey.” His hand ran up my side. “You okay?”

“Yeah, I’m,” I exhaled. “Just, go slow.”

“Absolutely.” His voice was surprisingly gentle. “I’m not in this to hurt you.” That reassurance was enough to calm my nerves, and I relaxed. He pushed in slowly, just a little at a time, easing in before pulling back, then easing in a bit more.

“Fuck,” I whispered, closing my eyes and letting my head fall forward as my arms trembled beneath me.

He stopped. “Am I hurting you?”

I shook my head. “No, not at all.”

“Good.” His hands ran up my back, palms digging deliciously into the muscles that tensed and trembled as he slowly fucked me. He had been so rough and dominating, but his touch was tender now. Gentle. Patient. I could tell by the sharp catches of his breath and the occasional muffled groan that he was holding back, just as he had in the parking lot. At the club, he’d reined it back because of prying eyes and

social protocols. Now he was giving my body a chance to get used to him before he gave me everything he had.

He paused to put some more lube on, and I couldn't help but moan as he pushed in again. Now that I knew I could handle him, that he wasn't going to hurt me, I wanted more.

I couldn't quite convince my mouth to ask him to fuck me faster, so I dug my hands into the mattress and pushed back against him, gasping as I suddenly took all of his cock in one quick stroke.

He gasped too, but he recovered. Steadying my hips, he said, "You like it hard, don't you?"

"Yes," I said through gritted teeth. I tried to move against him, but he held my hips still, letting me know that *he* would decide how fast and hard I had him.

"You want it harder?"

"Please."

"I can't hear you, Dustin."

"Fuck me." I very nearly stuttered, my teeth on the verge of chattering.

"Fuck you how?"

You teasing son of a bitch. "Harder."

He slowed down. Way down. "I can't hear you."

"You heard me. Fuck me. Hard."

"Say it like you mean it, Dustin."

My frustration beat the grip he had on my hips: I slammed back into him and snarled, "Fuck me hard. *Now.*"

He didn't tease or play around; he fucked me hard, fast, and deep, panting and growling as he pounded my ass. It was almost painful, almost too much, but not quite. The room spun around me, and an orgasm built in spite of neither of us touching my cock.

"Oh God," I groaned. "Oh my God...." I was about to come, wanted to come, needed to come, couldn't think of anything but coming, had to fucking come *now*—

"I want you to feel what it's like when you fuck me."

Brandon's voice echoed through my mind, and in that instant, I came, cursing and crying out, hoping I didn't say his name even though it was dangerously close to the tip of my tongue.

As my orgasm peaked and fell, Sean kept fucking me, his voice crescendoing as he got closer. I rocked back against him, but my heart wasn't in it anymore. It wasn't that I had gotten mine and thus didn't care if he got his. Brandon's intrusion into my thoughts—particularly knowing that it was he, not Sean, that had pushed me over the edge—killed my mood.

Sean's grip on my hips tightened to the point of being painful, jarring me back into reality just as he drove himself into me and came. We both sank to the bed, sweaty, breathless, and spent.

"Good God, that was intense," he said, groaning as he sat up to do away with the condom.

"No kidding." I ran a hand through my sweat-glazed hair and rolled onto my back. I wasn't lying. The sex had been incredible. It was just that last-second appearance of Brandon in my mind that made a knot sink in the pit of my stomach.

"You put up a pretty impressive fight," he said with a devilish grin as he lay down beside me.

I laughed. "Made you work up a bit of a sweat at least."

He looked down at his chest and shrugged. His skin, just like mine, shone with a sheen of perspiration. "I could go for a shower. How about you?"

I shrugged. "Sounds good to me." Regardless of the knot in my gut, a shower sounded too good to pass up. And if we got in the shower now, maybe we'd both still be too spent to get started again.

Sean, apparently, had other ideas. "I have a feeling I'll be needing these." He winked as he grabbed the lube and a condom.

"I'll take that as a compliment," I said, trying not to let it show that I suddenly wanted to be anywhere but there.

He put his hand on the small of my back and kissed me. "Trust me, it is."

As soon as we were in the shower, Sean pulled me into his arms. His kiss persuaded my body to betray my mind, and before I could stop myself, I was returning his advances with equal enthusiasm.

Hot water and warm hands ran all over my skin. His touch became more insistent, as did his kiss. He took my hand and guided it to his cock, which was already hard again. Then he closed his fingers around my own erection, stroking slowly, gently, as we kissed under the water.

When he looked at me, that blissful, satisfied expression from earlier was gone. His eyes narrowed with the same intense hunger that parted his lips, and water ran down the sides of his face and neck like sweat. He reached for the condom and lube, but I beat him to it. He watched me tear the wrapper open with my teeth.

“Turn around,” I growled.

His eyebrows jumped in surprise. Then a grin curled his lips. “Taking charge?”

“Taking *you*.”

He sucked in a breath and pulled me in for a kiss as I rolled the condom on. I reached for the lube, but he had it first. He poured some into his hand, set the bottle aside, and kissed me as he stroked my cock.

“Turn around,” I whispered again.

With one last, brief kiss, he did, bracing himself against the wall with both hands as I grasped his hips. As my cock pressed against him, his spine straightened with a shudder. I teased him, just barely pushing the head of my cock into him, then backing off.

“Like that?” I said, nipping his shoulder as I slid a little farther into him.

“I’ll like it even more once you give me the whole fucking thing,” he growled.

As soon as I was all the way inside him, I exhaled, a shiver running up my spine. I hoped he took it for a sign of arousal, and judging by the way he moved his hips to pull me further into him, he did. He had no way to know—and no need to know—about the heavy

feeling in the pit of my stomach. The same feeling I had had as soon as I was inside Renee: Unfamiliar. Foreign. *Wrong*.

I took a deep breath and held his hips, fucking him harder and faster as I tried to concentrate on him, on the here and now.

“Oh fuck, that’s good.” His voice was barely audible over the running water.

I leaned forward, kissing the side of his neck. “You like that?” I growled.

“Fuck, yes.” He moaned as I slammed into him. “Harder,” he pleaded.

“I can’t hear you.”

“Harder.”

I slowed down, my legs shaking as I took long, gentle strokes. “Come on, Sean, tell me what you want.”

“You know what I want.”

“Say it like you mean it.”

Bracing himself against the wall, he pushed back against me. “Fuck me *harder*, you son of a bitch,” he snarled.

“That’s more like it,” I growled against his neck, gripping his hips tighter before slamming into him.

“Oh fuck, yeah,” he groaned. “Jesus, just like that.”

Closing my eyes, I slid my hands up his back. My fingertips explored his muscles, the ridges of his spine, every tremor and shudder making my mouth water as my mind’s eye saw my fingers tracing the familiar edges of his tattoo, the outline that I had come to know by heart and—

My eyes flew open and I gasped, breaking my rhythm for a few strokes. The bare, unmarked skin of Sean’s back brought me back to the present, reminding me that this was not Brandon. He wasn’t Brandon. Brandon wasn’t here.

“You alright?”

I took a gasp of breath. “Yeah, yeah, I’m fine.” I held his hips and recovered, thrusting harder.

“Faster.” The white noise of the shower nearly drowned out his breathy, strained voice. One hand left the wall, and his shoulder and biceps shook as he stroked himself. “Jesus, fuck me faster.”

I dug my fingers into his hips and slammed into him, fucking him as fast and hard as I could. I closed my eyes again, letting my building orgasm overwhelm me.

Sean groaned softly, moving his hips against mine, stroking his own cock in time with my thrusts. “Oh God....”

Against my will, memories tried to creep into my consciousness, but I pushed them away, concentrating on Sean. I released a low, throaty growl, my balls tightening with each stroke as I got closer to coming.

...Brandon’s fingers white-knuckling the podium....

I gritted my teeth, trying to focus on Sean. On the *here and now*. On the orgasm I knew was building in him. On—

...His head falling back against the car while I stroked him in the parking lot....

Faster, harder, digging my fingers into his hips, trying to stay in the present. Sean moaned, then roared, using the wall to hold himself up as he came. Even over the sound of his voice, a gentle whisper from the past crept into my consciousness.

...“You don’t know how badly I’ve wanted to do this,” he murmured, his lips brushing the back of my shoulder. “It’s absolutely heaven when you fuck me.”....

I was on the edge. Right on the edge. So close, driving myself as deep into Sean as I could, trying not to let my mind wander—

...Throwing the pool game so he could suck my cock....

—Back to Brandon, but I couldn’t stop it, and every time I fought it, I pulled back from the edge again, only to build up again until Brandon’s memory distracted me. When the ache finally became too much, I surrendered.

A million memories of Brandon—his kiss, his touch, his taste, his orgasms—flooded through my mind at once, and in seconds, I came, slamming into Sean and nearly knocking both of us off balance.

“Oh fuck, oh fuck,” I heard myself moan. “Oh God—” Panic tightened my throat as I nearly said Brandon’s name. I swallowed and let my head rest between Sean’s shoulder blades as my orgasm subsided. “Oh my God,” I whispered.

After I got rid of the condom, Sean pulled me into his arms under the hot water and kissed me.

“You’re fucking incredible,” I said, still breathless.

“You’re not so bad yourself,” he said, resting a hand on my hip.

“Maybe my inexperience wasn’t showing as bad as I thought,” I said with a self-conscious laugh.

His eyebrows jumped, and the hand on my hip tensed. “Inexperience?”

I nodded. “Yeah, I’m...” I swallowed. “New at this.”

“Are you serious?” His expression didn’t change. After a moment, “*How* new?”

“Very.”

His lips were parted in surprise, but they slowly pulled into a smile. “Well,” he put his hand on the back of my neck and leaned in to kiss me, “you had me fooled.”

Chapter 24

WITH Sean asleep next to me, I stared at the ceiling in the darkness.

Physically, I was certainly satisfied. After everything Sean and I had done, the only thing my body longed for was sleep. Sleep wasn't going to happen anytime soon, though. Not when my mind refused to give me a moment's peace. I was satisfied, yes, but I felt even lower—and more confused—than I had when I walked into the club that night.

So I was attracted to men. And women. Maybe men a little more than women. Both could satisfy me physically, yet both left me with the same puzzled, sinking feeling, raising more questions than they answered.

I closed my eyes and sighed. Sean stirred next to me. For a moment, I was afraid he was awake, and I held my breath until he was still long enough to assure me that he was, in fact, asleep.

Guilt gnawed at my gut. I'd never been the type to give a one-night stand the cold shoulder, especially not while we were still in bed. Even if we both knew that we'd go our separate ways in the morning, as far as I was concerned, she—or he—was my lover for the night, and I treated her accordingly. In fact, the night with Renee was the first time I had ever left before the sun came up.

It wasn't my intention to be frosty towards Renee or Sean. I just couldn't bring myself to have sex with them again.

I rubbed my eyes. The satisfaction from both Sean and Renee reminded me of the feeling of an itch that had just been scratched. I

wasn't horny anymore, but I wasn't reeling from a thrill either. Sex with Brandon left me simultaneously satisfied and desperate for more. Sex with them left me aching for Brandon.

I closed my eyes, trying to let sleep take over.

This feeling was entirely too familiar. It was almost exactly the way I'd felt when I came home after catching Stephanie in the hotel. That sinking, devastated realization that, no matter how many ways I'd tried to deny it, something was gone.

I knew long before I knocked on that hotel room door that my marriage was over, but that moment of truth still took me by surprise. It still hit me in the gut and hurt in ways I'd never thought possible. That moment had been the point of no return, when I'd had no choice but to accept it and try to move on. I could no longer deny that she was cheating, that my marriage was over.

In a way, I had had that same denial about Brandon. Though I knew he was gone, I realized that I'd held onto some futile shred of hope that he would come back. If nothing else, I'd held onto the futile shred of hope that, if he were really gone, I could move on.

Losing Stephanie after more than ten years was nothing compared to this. *And to think, I actually thought I was with Brandon just to get over her.* How could I have been so stupid? All this time, I'd worried that Brandon was just a rebellious indulgence to get me as far away from Stephanie's memory as possible.

All I could think about before was whether I was over my ex-wife, what my family would think if I admitted I had a boyfriend, and what I "was." I had been so wrapped up in figuring out which gender I preferred that I'd let the one individual I truly wanted get away. Sure, now I knew for certain that I was bisexual, but at what cost? I was so caught up in the big picture that I'd lost sight of what really mattered.

I had, in a way, missed the trees for the forest.

How could I have been so fucking stupid?

I rubbed my forehead, sighing heavily as I closed my eyes. Lying beside Sean, I realized that what I was didn't matter, because Brandon was gone.

SHORTLY after Sean left, my cell phone rang. The familiar ringtone sent ice through my veins.

Christ, I do not need this right now.

Just as I had dozens of times before, I considered ignoring the call, but I could only put it off for so long. Closing my eyes and tightening my jaw, I flipped the phone open.

Through clenched teeth, I muttered, “Hi Mom.”

“Dustin, I’ve been trying to call you for three days. Where have you been?”

“Sorry.” I didn’t give a shit if I sounded insincere.

“You haven’t been out with that man again, have you?” She spat the words out as if they were sour on her tongue.

No, Mom, I’ve been out fucking another woman and another man to try to figure out just what in the world I want. Want details? I ground my teeth so hard it hurt. “I’ve just been busy.”

“Doing?”

Sean and Renee, if you must know. In spite of the anger tightening my chest, I tried to keep the conversation light. “I’m here now. What’s up?”

“Dustin, I’m worried about you.”

I sighed. “You’re always worried about me.”

“Yes, but after all of....” I could almost see her grimacing. “Good heavens, after all of *this*....”

Fuck, I do not need this. Not now. “Mom, just—”

“I’m serious, Dustin, it’s disgraceful. You....”

I rubbed my eyes with my thumb and forefinger, hearing my mother’s grating voice but not understanding—or caring about—what she was saying. The disapproval in her tone was more than enough without actually knowing what she was saying. I didn’t need this. The pain of losing Brandon was unbearable enough without a huge serving of Mom’s home-cooked guilt.

“None of this is any reason to pretend you’re gay and run off with a *man*, Dustin.”

I couldn’t take it anymore. “Mom—”

“You just need to find the right girl. I’m sure you feel guilty about—”

“Mom—”

“—leaving Stephanie, but you’ll find another girl like her and—”

“Mom, *just fucking stop*.”

Silence. My pulse jumped. *Did I really just say that?*

“Dustin, what did you say?”

Yep, guess I did. “You heard me.”

More silence. For a moment, I thought she’d hung up on me. It wouldn’t have been the first time. A faint breath on the other end told me she was still there, mercifully speechless for once.

“Mom, you need to listen to me.” I waited to see if she’d cut me off, but she didn’t. “It’s over with Stephanie. It’s over with Brandon, for that matter.”

“Well, good, then—”

“*Stop*.” I took a deep breath, trying to keep from losing my temper. “Listen to me. It’s over, but I’m not about to pretend that I didn’t—and still don’t—love Brandon—”

She cut me off, screaming something at me, but all I heard was my own voice echoing in my mind. Did I just say that I loved him?

I’m not about to pretend that I didn’t—and still don’t—love Brandon. My heart thudded. Of course I did. It only made sense. I loved him. I loved him, and he was gone because I was too fucking stupid to figure it out. Because I’d hurt him.

I’m not about to pretend that I didn’t—and still don’t—love Brandon.

My eyes stung, and my throat tightened. *What the fuck have I done?*

“Dustin, are you listening to me?”

I swallowed. “No. No, I’m not.”

Silence. “*What?*”

“No, Mom, I’m not listening to you,” I said, fighting back emotion. “When I listened to you, I ended up married to that manipulative, controlling, cheating bitch. When I listened to you again, I stayed with her, even though she made my life hell. And when I listened to you yet *again*, I let you and everyone else fuck with my head enough that I let the best thing that’s ever happened to me get away.”

“Dustin, that’s ridiculous.”

“No, letting you dictate my life is ridiculous,” I said. Adrenaline surged through my veins. I had never stood up to her. Never. This was almost three decades in the making, and I couldn’t have stopped it if I tried. “I let you badger me into marrying a woman who was just like you, and you couldn’t see past your own delusions to see that your own son was miserable. I got out from under her thumb, and now I’m getting out from under *yours*.”

“*Dustin! You—*”

“Mom, stop.” I took a breath. “Just, stop. I don’t want to hear any more. I don’t want to listen to what you think I should do with my life. If you can’t deal with who I love—” I paused, swallowing the lump in my throat. “If you can’t deal with who I love because you can’t see past what he is, that’s your problem. Not mine.”

“Dustin, he’s a man. You can’t—”

“I am, Mom.”

“This is nonsense.”

“This is none of your business.”

“None of my business?” she screeched. “My son is—”

“Your son is listening to his heart for once instead of his mother, who seems to think the only way he can be happy is by making *her* happy.”

And before I could stop myself, I snapped the phone shut.

For a long, long time, I just sat on the edge of the bed, my phone clasped in both hands beneath my chin as I rested my elbows on my

knees. I gripped the phone so tight I thought I was going to break it, but it was the only way to still the shaking. And to keep myself from answering when it rang once, twice, and three times.

I wasn't backing down. I'd let my mother's domineering behavior control my life for far too long and at far too great a cost to myself. If I had done this a long time ago, maybe Brandon would still be here.

The phone rang again. I tossed it on the bed and walked out of the room. Sooner or later, I would have to deal with the fallout from that conversation, but it could wait.

I sank onto the couch, closing my eyes and sighing. Even as the adrenaline from confronting my mother wore off, the knot in my gut only grew. Of all the chances I'd had to tell Brandon how I felt, it took an angry conversation with my mother to finally get the words out of my mouth.

I loved him. I still love him.

Now that it was out, I didn't even bother trying to rationalize, trying to tell myself that it had just slipped out and I didn't really mean it. It hadn't, and I did.

The simple words on his note flashed through my mind:

It was more than "nothing" to me.

"It was more than nothing to me, too, Brandon," I whispered into the silence. "It was *everything*."

Chapter 25

I WENT to the club four nights in a row before I finally saw Brandon. He wasn't there when I arrived, but shortly after I settled in at the bar with a beer and a healthy dose of self-pity, he showed up.

When he came into the club, my back was turned, but I knew. The dull roar of the crowd beside the pool tables suddenly crescendoed to shouting and shit-talking as their favorite competitor appeared, but that only confirmed what I already knew. As soon as the door opened, the air changed. The hair on the back of my neck stood up as the place went from a room full of people to a room with Brandon in it.

Our eyes met briefly as he took on his first challenger, but he didn't react. Not that I could see, anyway. If he was hurt, angry, or upset, he didn't let it show.

He wasn't the same charismatic Brandon that played the crowd as much as he played the table. Tonight, he didn't talk shit. His expression was neutral even as he collected his winnings on the first and second games. He barely acknowledged his opponents except to size them up, find their weaknesses, and beat them without any flourish, without any fancy shots. Just cold and calculated. He won, as always, but his heart definitely wasn't in it.

I wondered if he were there for the same reason I'd found myself in this place several times, if he just needed to get the fuck out of the house before the silence drove him mad. If that were the case, my presence probably wasn't helping.

After watching him play for a while and realizing that I was never going to get up the nerve to approach him in here—and he sure as hell wasn't going to approach me—I paid for my drink and left.

But I wasn't going home yet.

Brandon's car was parked towards the back of the lot, beside an SUV. I leaned against his car as he had done to mine a few times, watching the club's door through the SUV's windows.

Blood pounded in my ears. Over and over, I ran through the possible scenarios in my head. I didn't know if I could listen to him tell me off again, but the faint glimmer of hope that he wouldn't kept me there by the car. Waiting. Wishing I'd had just one more round of liquid courage. Waiting. Losing my ever-loving mind.

It was almost an hour before Brandon left the club. I held my breath, waiting to see if the baseball-capped guy walking out with him was actually with him or if their simultaneous exit were a coincidence.

The guy in the cap went the opposite direction, and neither of them acknowledged the other. Brandon continued across the lot alone. His hands were in his pockets, his shoulders bunched and his elbows close to his sides as if trying to ward off a cold wind. His eyes were down, and what I could see of his face was just as neutral as it had been inside the club.

What I wouldn't give to be able to read minds like you do, Brandon.

Every step he took made my pulse jump. Part of me wanted to take off, to get the hell out of there before he saw me, but I planted my feet. I had to do this.

From a few feet away, he clicked the remote, unlocking the doors and popping the trunk. The vibration rattled through my bones. I swallowed. Now or never.

He was reaching for the raised trunk lid when he saw me, and he froze. His eyes widened, and his lips parted, a surprised, startled expression that I rarely saw on the unshakeable Brandon Stewart. He recovered quickly, though, narrowing his eyes and tightening his jaw.

After he set his cue in the trunk and slammed the lid, he folded his arms across his chest, rested his hip against the car, and eyed me. "Let me guess," he said, almost snarling. "We need to talk?"

I fidgeted against the car. "I need to talk. I'm hoping you'll listen."

A brief, almost imperceptible upward flick of his eyebrow told me I'd caught him off guard. He tightened his arms against his chest. "Okay. Talk."

"I came to apologize. For everything."

He watched me quietly.

Still my shot, is it? "Just, to get right to the point, I was a jerk. I wasn't ashamed of you, I wasn't trying to hide you, I just...." I shook my head. "I was stupid. And I'm sorry."

The silence hung in the air for a moment before his eyes narrowed. "So is this the part where I'm supposed to tell you that it's okay, that I've just been waiting for you to see the light, and everything's back to the way it was before?"

"Fuck, Brandon," I said through my teeth. "Look, I'm not going to pretend to be any good at this. I took you for granted. I made a huge mistake. What else do you want me to say?"

He pursed his lips. "I don't think there's anything left to say." He started towards me. My heart was racing, wondering what he had in mind. Then he stopped. Reached towards me—

And grabbed the handle on the car door.

His eyebrows lifted and he gave me a look that said, "*Move.*" I stepped away so he could open the door. Panic surged through me. I couldn't let him leave. There was no way I could watch him go. Not again.

"Brandon, wait."

He stopped. Looked at me. Waited.

"Please, don't go yet."

Standing beside the open car door, he drummed his fingers on top of it for a moment. "Fine. I won't go." He shut the door and leaned on the car. "*Yet.*"

Using the SUV to hold myself up, I wrung my hands as I frantically searched for the words, knowing the clock was ticking. His patience had already run out, and he was just humoring me. For how long, I had no idea.

I took a breath and let the words come, hoping for the best. “Look, since you left, I was trying to move on. Figure some shit out. I went out, a couple of times.” I paused. “Met some other people—”

“Oh, nice,” he snapped, rolling his eyes and jamming his hands into his pockets. “So did you come here to rub that in my face? To let me know that you don’t have trouble getting into anyone else’s bed? Am I supposed to come crawling back now that I see that you’re in such high fucking demand?”

“No.” I tried to stay calm. “I came here because they made me realize something.”

His expression was icy, but he said nothing. Just watched me. Waited.

“I was trying to figure out if I was gay, straight, bisexual, something.” I couldn’t stand the intensity of his eyes anymore, so I looked at the pavement. “I thought my attraction to you might have been exactly what you said, because you were everything my ex wasn’t—”

“I’m flattered,” he growled.

“I said I *thought*,” I snapped. I took a breath, running a shaking hand through my hair and looking at him. “Until I went out with this girl. Then a guy.”

He dropped his gaze, his jaw tightening. The pain in his expression nearly killed me. *Come on, Dustin, just say it. Say it. Find the words and fucking say it.*

“It—they—opened my eyes. About a lot of things.” I paused, scratching the back of my neck and thinking fast. “You said I needed to get over *what* you were and either stay or go because of *who* you were.”

“I do remember saying something like that, yes.” The bitterness in his tone knocked the breath out of me.

“And I guess I didn’t really understand what that meant until it was too late.” I paused to blow out a breath, trying to keep my composure as I chanced a look at him. “But ironically, the reason I couldn’t go back to either of them....” *Come on. Come on. Just get it out.*

He shifted his weight, holding my gaze with what looked like a great deal of effort.

I started to speak again, trying to tell him what I needed him to hear, but the English language was suddenly lost on me. My teeth snapped shut, and frustration tightened my gut. The silence hung between us, and for the life of me, I couldn’t fill it.

Taptaptap. He drummed his fingernails on the side of the car. *Taptaptap.* The sound reverberated up my spine. *Taptaptap.* “I’m waiting.”

I ran a hand through my hair, looking down at the pavement again. “Brandon, I’m sorry. I guess I was, I don’t know. I was confused. I—”

“Dustin.” His tone was calm. Neutral. “Look at me.”

I didn’t.

“Look at me.”

I couldn’t.

“*Just fucking look at me.*” His tone startled me. I couldn’t tell if it was unsteady with anger or the barely contained threat of some other emotion.

Swallowing hard, I raised my eyes, trying to see him through the tears I couldn’t quite blink back.

He watched me silently for a moment, searching my eyes like he’d done so many times before. My knees shook, and my lungs were completely useless. And still the silence lingered. *Say something, Brandon. Please, for the love of God, just say something.* Everything I cared about hinged on what he found in my expression and what the taut line between his lips meant.

Finally, he spoke, barely whispering. “What was it that you were going to say about them?” The last word sounded as if it was sour on his tongue. “About why you couldn’t stay with them?”

I forced myself to hold his gaze. “I couldn’t stay with either of them because....” My heart thudded. I licked my lips, but my tongue was just as dry as they were. “Because of what they *weren’t*.”

His eyebrows lifted slightly. “And that is?”

My heart thundering in my ears, I looked him in the eye and whispered, “You.”

He sucked a breath in through parted lips.

“Jesus, Brandon,” I said. “I was stupid, I didn’t mean to hurt you. I just didn’t realize that—”

Before I even realized he was moving, he silenced me with a kiss. Just his lips against mine, barely moving. For a moment, I couldn’t believe what was happening, but as his tongue brushed my lip, my body surrendered to him. I wrapped my arms around him and returned his kiss, holding him close.

He broke the kiss and let his forehead rest against mine. My entire body was trembling as I closed my eyes and just let myself be near him, listening to him breathe, feeling his body and his breath against me.

“I’m sorry too,” he said. “I shouldn’t have pushed you so hard.” He lifted his head and looked at me. “I’ve been there. I know how hard it is.”

“I think you had every right to know if I was just stringing you along though.”

He shrugged. “Maybe. But I don’t think you’re the type to do that anyway. I guess....” He paused. “I guess I was letting myself get so attached so quickly, I was afraid I was setting myself up for something painful.”

I ran my fingers through his hair. “Maybe we both went too fast. In too many directions.”

“Maybe we did.” He leaned in to kiss me. “But here we are. Hopefully on the same page.”

“So where do we go from here?” I asked.

He shook his head. “I don’t know. I really don’t.”

Releasing a ragged breath, I looked him in the eye, trying to say what I needed to say more than anything. *I love you, Brandon. I’ve loved you from the beginning. Whether I can live without you or not, I don’t want to. I love you.* But the words refused to come.

As he looked into my eyes, though, he smiled, that warm, understanding smile. Touching my face, his expression was as gentle as his fingertips as he said, “Whatever this is, does it feel right to avoid it?” He paused. “To avoid me?”

I held him closer. “Nothing feels right except being with you.”

“Then that’s all that matters.” He drew me into a long, tender kiss. “We’ll start here, and we’ll figure out the rest as we go.”

“I can live with that.”

“So can I.” Then he paused, cocking his head, and a familiar grin curled the corner of his lip. “Maybe we should start with the rest of tonight.”

I smiled. “I assume you have something in mind.”

He reached into his pocket and pulled out his keys. As he freed one from the ring, he said, “I have to stop for gas, but...” He took my hand and pressed the key into my palm, closing my fingers around it as he winked at me.

Tucking his key in my pocket, I grinned. Just before I kissed him, I said, “I’ll be waiting.”

L. A. WITT is a full-time writer in the romance and erotica genres, currently living in Okinawa, Japan, with her husband and two cats. She has been writing since grade school, but it wasn't until she started dabbling in romance—both gay and straight—that she found her niche. When she's not writing, she enjoys photography and generally getting into mischief.

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