

A close-up portrait of a young man with curly brown hair and light blue eyes, looking directly at the camera with a slight smile. The background is a warm, golden sunset or sunrise sky with soft clouds. The overall tone is romantic and nostalgic.

T. A. Chase

# FINDING LOVE

NOWHERE  
DINER

OPEN  
24 HOURS

COFFEE

## NOWHERE DINER: FINDING LOVE

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The expression on her face and the nod she gave me told me everything. She knew about us and understood why I was leaving. I had no idea if she was angry, grateful, or hurt and, as the bus pulled away from the bus stop, it no longer was my problem.

I rested my forehead against the cool glass and closed my eyes. A single tear trickled down my cheek to drip from my chin onto my jacket. Aaron said he loved me and needed my presence near for him to be happy, but I would never allow that. Neither his new wife nor I deserved to be treated as an after-thought.

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ALSO BY T. A. CHASE

*Allergies*

*Bitter Creek's Redemption*

*Nick Of Time*

# NOWHERE DINER: FINDING LOVE

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BY

T. A. CHASE

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NOWHERE DINER: FINDING LOVE  
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*Thank you to my wonderful editor  
and to the singers who inspired this story.*

*Also, thank you to C, you've  
supported me through this wild ride and I  
appreciate you more than ever.*

# CHAPTER 1

The cool night air bit through my jacket, drawing goose bumps to the surface of my skin and causing shivers to dance down my spine. The icy breeze fit my emotions perfectly. Glancing around, I memorized the sight of the local diner where I'd spent so many nights, hanging with friends and jonesing on the love no one knew about. I gazed at the different stores where I had worked for minimum wage and learned to be a responsible adult—my uncle's words, not mine.

"Tim."

Turning back, I met the broken gaze of my first love, Aaron. His dark eyes filled with tears, and my resolve started to crumble. I couldn't let him change my mind. There was a time when I would have given him anything he wanted, but no more.

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"I can't stay, Aaron." I stepped back, gripping the handle of my duffle bag until my knuckles turned white.

"You could, but you don't want to."

Aaron reached out and the halogen light at the bus stop glinted off the ring encircling his finger. I took another step away. No touching had been my rule since the day I found out about the piece of metal on his hand. He knew how I felt about the whole thing, but still he tried to tempt me into losing what self-respect I had.

"There was a time when I planned on living in this town for the rest of my life." I shrugged, looking down the road at the bus heading toward us. "But things change, and you know why I can't stay here anymore."

Aaron's flinch told me he understood my reason for leaving. "Things could be like they were before."

Desperation colored his words and I shook my head, putting more distance between us. I had to remain strong. It wasn't time for tears, so I blinked them back. I would wait until I was alone in a motel room far away from this town before I broke down.

"They can never be like they were, Aaron. You know that. She wasn't married to you before, and you loved me. Now she's your wife, and I refuse to be your dirty little secret. I can't do it anymore. I need to be able to tell you I love you, but that ring silences me better than any gag could."

"Tim, I had to marry her. My dad would've disowned me if I didn't marry, and she was willing." Aaron clenched his hands into fists and shoved them in his pocket.

It was a posture I'd seen him take so many times when he knew the choice he'd made was wrong. "You married someone you didn't want or love to make your father happy."



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My bitter laughter spilled from my lips into the night. If my heart had been whole, it would have broken all over again, but I didn't have to worry about that. The moment Aaron had said "I do," my life in my hometown was over. I couldn't stay and not go to him at some point.

I had loved him all my life and for several years, it had been just us. Now there was a third person in our relationship and she didn't know about me. I never wanted her to find out either. Hurting her never occurred to me. It wasn't her fault Aaron was a coward and he lied to everyone about his feelings for her. It wasn't my fault either, but guilt weighed down my shoulders.

He started to say something, and I held up my hand to stop him. I didn't want to hear anything else from him. No matter what he said, I'd made up my mind. I was leaving because there wasn't anything left for me in this town and the possibilities down the road would keep me from dwelling on the past, or so I hoped.

The bus stopped behind me, the air brakes hissing like a hundred snakes, and when the driver reached for my bag, I gave it to him. I kept my backpack with me for it held all of my personal possessions and I wasn't going to let it out of my sight.

"Good-bye."

I handed the man my ticket and climbed aboard. The bus was only half-full and there were several empty seats for me to choose from. I took a window seat on the left side and settled in, putting my bag next to me.

It started to rain and the few other passengers getting on at this stop filed down the aisle while I stared out at Aaron standing in the drizzle. He gave me a weak smile and waved. I pressed my hand against the window, knowing I'd never see him again. Movement behind him caught my attention and I saw his wife step from the

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## CHAPTER 2

I inhaled the burger and fries, hunger having gnawed a hole in my stomach about fifty miles back. I'd been thrilled when the bus stopped at the little diner. My appetite had been non-existent until this moment, stress and sorrow suppressing any desire I'd had to eat.

Shamelessly eavesdropping on the other customers' conversations, I grinned to myself at the husband complaining to his wife about her mother. Did every husband dislike his mother-in-law? Two teenage girls were chattering about their boyfriends and what they were going to wear to the homecoming dance. I'd never made it to mine. Aaron and I had snuck off to my uncle's hunting cabin after he dumped his date.

Plates crashing to the floor drew my gaze. A gorgeous blond

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scowled at the older man standing on the other side of the counter. As I watched, the blond tore off his apron and tossed it at the older man.

“I quit.”

Without stopping to pick up the plates, he stomped toward the door.

“Quinn, you can’t just quit in the middle of your shift.”

“Yes, I can. I never planned on staying here and working in this rat hole all my life, uncle. I have plans that don’t include this place. I’m going to be somebody.”

Quinn flung open the door and sauntered out. I could only imagine what kind of somebody that boy would end up being.

“Shit.”

I looked back at the man who stood staring down at the pile on the floor in front of the counter. After wiping my mouth with my napkin, I stacked my empty plates and stood, carrying them to where the busboy’s cart was. I set my stuff in the tub and knelt, picking up the pieces of glass and plate.

“You don’t have to do this,” the man said, coming around to join me.

“I know, but you need help and I have time.”

Together, we cleaned up the mess and I wiped up the food off the floor. I tossed the dirty rag into the water bucket before the owner of the diner came up to me, holding out his hand.

“Thank you, young man. I appreciate it. You wouldn’t be looking for a job, would you?”

I thought about it. I’d been traveling for three days, getting as far away from my hometown as I could before I took some time to rest. Could I find a little bit of peace in this small town?

“You’re probably heading to somewhere else just like my

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nephew was.” The guy’s grin was rueful. “Everyone who comes through here is heading somewhere else.”

“What would you pay me if I stayed?”

“My name’s Cookie. Not very original, I admit, but the sailors I cooked for in the navy weren’t interested in creativity.”

I shook Cookie’s hand and smiled. “Timothy Gapin.”

“Nice to meet you, Tim.”

A large group of customers entered, laughing and pushing each other around. Cookie grimaced and grabbed the apron off the counter, holding it out to me. “Can we talk about the money later?”

“Sure. Where can I put my bags?” I nodded toward my belongings in the booth.

“I’ll take them and put them in my office if you’ll get that group settled for me.”

“Great.”

Cookie took my bags, and I picked up some menus, heading to where the group of teenagers sat around two tables.

I worked the rest of the night, talking to the customers and delivering food as I went along. By three in the morning, I was beat. I wasn’t used to being on my feet that long or staying up that late unless I was with Aaron. *Stop it.* No more thinking about my ex-boyfriend. It was counter-productive and not worth my time.

Traffic died down and I sat at the counter, resting my feet and leaning my head on my hand. Cookie set a cup of coffee in front of me along with cream and sugar. I fixed it to the light brown color I liked and blew on it to cool the liquid. Cookie joined me and sipped his own.

“Thanks for chipping in, Tim. It’s hard to find someone who wants to stay out here and work. Austin is about twenty minutes away and all the kids head there as soon as they can. My nephew,

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Quinn, is one of those kids. Not sure what he thinks is going to happen when he gets there, but can't tell him any different."

I laughed. "I've been there. Couldn't tell me anything when I was your nephew's age. Had to learn everything the hard way."

"You needing to learn something the reason why you're traveling?" Cookie's question held a knowing tone.

I nodded and tasted my coffee. "I'm trying to forget something and someone."

"We all are in some way. If you're willing to stay for a while, I can only pay minimum wage, but there's an apartment out back above the garage you're welcome to and you get three square meals a day."

"I don't need much of anything at the moment. Free food always sounds good." I winked at him.

"You'd be working the midnight-to-six shift. I'm sure there'll be times when you can pick up more hours when some of the other wait staff calls in sick."

"Does that happen a lot?"

"Only with Chad. He's the afternoon dishwasher, plus part-time cook, and well on his way to becoming an alcoholic. Some days are good and he'll be here on time to do his job. Other days aren't and he won't show for a couple of days." Cookie frowned.

"If you don't mind me asking, why keep him around?"

Cookie shrugged. "He's a veteran, man. I can't kick him out. He's not hurting anyone but himself. I think at times the war still affects him."

Nodding, I pushed the cup around the Formica counter.

"The graveyard shift is usually pretty calm. There's a bat under the counter by the cash register if someone comes in to cause trouble. I'll be here most nights. Getting older means I don't sleep

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as much. The sheriff and state cops stop by a couple times throughout the night for coffee or a bite to eat. A lot of long haul truckers make this a regular stop. They eat and sleep for an hour or two in their cabs before heading on to their next stop.”

The door opened and two uniformed cops stepped in. My eyes widened as I took in their broad shoulders and lean waists. Shit, both men were well built, a gay man’s wet dream, but I made sure not to stare. I’d never really hidden who I was, but I knew better than to advertise my preferences. Standing, I grabbed two mugs and a pot of coffee before heading over to where the cops sat.

“How are you gentlemen tonight?” I smiled as I set the cups down and filled them.

“You’re new. What happened to Quinn?” The younger cop checked me out while he asked.

Something was telling me that his interest was more personal than just asking about an acquaintance. Maybe it was the way he eyed me or ran his gaze over my body. So Quinn and the cop were fucking around. I wasn’t about to let on that I knew.

“Got tired of working the graveyard shift, I guess. He quit and left around midnight.” I took out my order pad and pencil. “Can I get you something to eat?”

“He quit?”

I scanned the young cop’s nametag. “Yes, he did, Officer Edson. I don’t know why and I don’t know where he went. How about some food?”

The older officer chuckled. “Worry about that little flirt later, Edson. I don’t want to ruin my meal by hearing you whine about Quinn leaving without saying anything. I’m Ned Thames. Where did Cookie find you?”

“I was passing through, but decided sticking around worked

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better for both of us. I don't have anywhere I need to be right now. I'm Tim Gapin. Nice to meet you both."

Ned didn't even open the menu before he gave me his order.

Edson seemed distracted, but he finally mumbled out, "Cheeseburger and fries."

As I walked away, I could feel one of them staring at my ass. I bent over to pick up a fork someone had dropped and took a quick peek under my arm. Ned was eyeing me like I was a rare piece of steak.

Had I dropped into the *Twilight Zone* or something? Since when did cops openly ogle other men in a public diner of all places? Cookie would know, and I decided to ask him the first chance I got.

Ned and Edson ate quickly, then left on a call. The rest of the night went by fast and before I knew it, the sun was rising. The morning shift rolled in, and Cookie flagged me down.

"Grab your bags and I'll take you to your room."

We went through the back of the diner so I could pick up my bags before we headed out to the garage. There was a rickety wooden staircase on the outside of the building leading up to the apartment. Even though I didn't plan on making this place my permanent home, I was glad to see I would have privacy.

Cookie unlocked the door and handed me the key. "This is the only copy. That way you don't have to worry about anyone coming in without you knowing about it."

We entered, and he showed me around. Tiny almost described the apartment. There were two rooms. The bigger one was obviously the kitchen/dining room/living room/bedroom. The smaller one turned out to be the bathroom.

"The sheets and towels are in the closet there."



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I tugged out a thick blanket and a set of sheets while Cookie unfolded the futon that doubled as a bed. We got the bed taken care of before he left.

After locking the door, I went to the bathroom, brushed my teeth and changed into a pair of sweats and a T-shirt. I shut off the lights and climbed under the covers, snuggling under the blanket. I wrapped my arms around one of the pillows and buried my face in the fresh smelling fabric.

What would it feel like to hold another man in my arms all night? To share a bed with him and wake up together in the morning? It was the one thing I never did with Aaron. We would have sex wherever we were and then he'd leave, so his father would never find out what we were doing.

I snorted softly. What an idiot I'd been to let Aaron have his own way in everything because I loved him so much. *No more of that.* I learned from my first love and I'd cherish all the moments I had with Aaron, but it was time to move on.

I listened to the vehicles passing on the highway, letting the hum of rubber lull me to sleep.

## CHAPTER 3

Sunlight was streaming in the windows when I woke up. Rolling over, I pried my eyes open to check my watch I had left lying on the end table next to the futon. *Eleven o'clock*. I needed to get up, take a shower and go check out the lay of the land during the day.

Hanging up my few items of clothing took two minutes and I grabbed a towel in passing as I headed for the shower. Washing, drying and dressing didn't take long either, so I was out the door and walking over to the diner in ten minutes.

The diner was packed, and Cookie waved at me as I stepped in.

"Hey, Tim, can you grab an apron and start washing dishes?"

"Sure."

I wandered into the kitchen, found an apron and tied it on. A

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big black man stood over the grill, flipping pancakes and burgers. I smiled and nodded as I waited for the sink to fill with hot water.

“You taking Chad’s place?” His question didn’t sound particularly friendly.

“No, Quinn’s. I told Cookie that I’d pick up hours as he needed me. I take it Chad didn’t come in yet.”

I slid a pile of plates into the sink and started scrubbing. I could tell Chad was a friend of the cook’s and I wanted him to know I wasn’t interested in taking the man’s place.

The man grunted. “That boy never could do a lick of work without whining.”

“I can’t promise I won’t whine, but I do promise to work while I’m doing it.”

“That’s all I ask.” The guy grinned and held out his hand. “I’m Mel.”

I shrugged as I held up my soapy hands. “Tim.”

Mel nodded. “Where’d Cookie find you and where the hell did Quinn go?”

I stacked some plates on the drainers and grabbed some more the waitresses had piled up. “I don’t know where he went. Have no idea if Cookie’s heard from him or not. I was passing through and I took a break for something to eat around midnight last night. Quinn dropped some plates and walked out. I was around and didn’t have anywhere to be any time soon, so Cookie asked if I’d like a job.”

“He’s got a good instinct. You working the midnight shift?” Mel put some burgers together and set them on the counter for one of the waitresses to grab. “Order’s up, Ramona.”

“Thanks, hon.” The waitress with big blonde hair snapped her gum and winked at me.

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“Yes.”

After I finished the dishes, I filled the sink with clean water. “Midnight to six. Is it usually a busy shift?”

“Not really. There are a few regulars who’ll stop in every night around three, but other than that, you might get some travelers or truckers trying to make time on the highway when it’s clear of traffic.”

Mel was a talker, so while I continued to clean, he told me about his family.

“My daughter’s sixteen and she’s driving me and my wife crazy. Do you have any kids?”

He didn’t even check to see me shake my head. He kept his gaze on the grill in front of him. “Good thing because children can drive a sane man to drink.” Mel chuckled. “Ask Cookie. I mean, Quinn isn’t his kid, but he’s been taking care of him since the kid’s mother dumped him here. Kid hasn’t been happy here...not enough excitement, I guess. I hope you know that.”

“I’m not looking for excitement, which is overrated at times.”

I started putting glasses and silverware away while the dishes dried.

“A young guy like you? You should be heading into Austin every chance you get.”

“Can’t. I don’t have a car and I’m not a big club guy. Never been interested in that sort of thing anyway. My hometown was pretty small, so we didn’t have clubs or parties.”

Mel eyed me for a second before nodding. “I can’t say I’m upset to hear that. It’s hard to keep people working here unless you’re older and settled like me. You can’t ask for a better boss than Cookie, though.”

“Most people think there’s something better out there for them

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and unless you've been out there, you always wonder." I leaned against the sink and crossed my arms. "I've never worried I'd miss something if I just stayed home."

"Then why are you here instead of home?"

I stared down at my feet. "Nothing left for me there, except for my aunt and uncle. They understood why I left and it certainly wasn't to see the world."

Ramona stepped into the kitchen. "Mel, I'm going to have a smoke. Hey, honey, are you the new guy?"

"Yes, ma'am. I'm Tim."

"Nice meeting you, hon." She flashed me a smile before sliding out the back door.

"Ramona's been here for about twelve years. Her husband died about two years ago and she likes keeping busy, so she works the morning shift. She leaves at three and Cynthia comes in to work until midnight. Cookie works throughout the day and night. Whenever we get slow, he goes and grabs a nap."

Cookie brought in a tub full of dirty dishes, and I flushed, not wanting to get caught gossiping by my boss.

"Are you two slacking?"

I peeked through my bangs to find Cookie smiling at Mel and relaxed. The dishes kept coming, but I managed to get two short breaks before nine, when I ate before going to change. I sat down and checked my money situation. I needed to ask Cookie how much I owed him for rent. Also, I needed to go and get a phone, so I could call Aunt Judy and let her know where I landed.

When I got back to the diner, Mel had left and so had Cynthia. A stocky, dark-haired man with blood shot eyes stood at the sink, washing dishes. I tied a clean apron on and went into the main room. Cookie was talking to a big, good-looking man sitting in one

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of the booths. I acknowledged Cookie's wave with a nod and went to wait on another couple that had just sat down.

The night moved by fast and I found myself running from the kitchen to the dining area, keeping everyone happy. I'd never worked at a restaurant before, so I had to learn what I was doing on the fly.

The big guy left, waving good-bye to Cookie and nodding at me when he walked past. I took a moment to check out his ass as he left the diner. Faded denim covered a well-formed butt. My cock twitched in interest, but I turned back to clean off the table and tucked the tip in my apron pocket.

I hadn't left home to go looking for a new guy to take Aaron's place. It was time to figure out what I wanted and needed. If eventually I found another guy to fill my heart, I'd be happy, but I wasn't searching at the moment. Of course, that didn't mean I was dead and couldn't appreciate a hot man.

Three o'clock rolled around and the two cops came in. Cookie's must have been a nightly stop for them. I got them coffee and let them study the menus for a few minutes while I checked on some of my other customers. As I made my way back to them, I noticed Edson was talking intently on his cell phone.

"Have you decided?" I flipped open my order pad and pulled out a pencil.

"Sure, I'll have the Rueben with fries and coffee. The youngster there will have a cheeseburger, fries and a diet cola. We'll be here every night we're on shift, Tim, so get used to that order." Ned nodded.

"Quinn, what do you want me to do? I told you I don't have any more money to give you and there's no room at my place for you to move in." Edson shifted in his seat, grimacing. Quinn's

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voice shot over the phone.

I couldn't hear what he was saying, but I knew he was probably piling a whole heap of guilt on Edson. I rolled my eyes at Ned before moving off to place their order.

Ned snorted, and I heard him say, "Get off the phone, Edson. I don't want to listen to you arguing with your boyfriend."

Cookie's head shot up. "Edson talking to Quinn?"

I shrugged. "I guess. At least that's the name he used." It wasn't any of my business, but it seemed to me that Quinn should have planned his exit to the city a little better.

"Poor kid. Edson never knew what hit him. He walked in here, took one look at Quinn and lost all of his common sense. He's crazy about my nephew."

Had I stumbled through a portal somewhere and ended up in a gay alternate universe? I never thought I'd hear or see people being so accepting of gays, especially in Texas. I knew there were places everywhere in the country where I'd be looked down on because of who I loved, but Cookie's Diner seemed an oasis of tolerance.

"You have a confused look on your face, son. Probably wondering why none of us are trying to beat the shit out of Edson...or you for that matter."

I nodded.

Cookie flipped one of the burgers and tossed a piece of cheese on the other. "I learned the hard way what intolerance can do to a family. Quinn's father was Hispanic, and my pop pitched a fit. He threw my sister out when he found out she was dating one of them. She left and I never saw her until she showed up here one day and left Quinn with me. She said it was only going to be for a couple days. She had a lead on a job and was going to send for him when she had a place for them to stay, since it was the two of them."

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I got the ketchup and fries ready. Cookie prepared the buns and slid the burgers onto them.

“She was bad off when she left. I figure she was on some kind of drug, maybe several of them, but there wasn’t any way I could deny her or desert that little boy. If my pop hadn’t been so bigoted and racist, my sister would probably still be alive. All she needed was someone to support her and put her on the right track when she fell in with the wrong crowd after Quinn’s father left.”

I picked up the plates to take them out. Cookie gripped my arm for a second. I met his sad gaze and nodded.

“I swore I’d never treat anyone like my pop treated my sister. Being gay isn’t any different than being Hispanic or a woman or being a guy. It’s just something you are.”

“Thank you.”

“Welcome.” Cookie let go of my arm and waved me out of the kitchen. “Get that food out to those cops and let Edson know I want to talk to him before they leave.”

“Yes, sir.”

I delivered their food and Cookie’s message.

By six in the morning, I was dead on my feet and ready to head to bed. It would take a little time for me to adjust, but I found that I enjoyed working at the diner. The patrons seemed nice and Cookie was a reasonable boss so far.

I fell into bed and drifted to sleep. If I dreamed about the dark-haired stranger I’d checked out at the diner, no one knew but me, and I wasn’t going to tell anyone.



## CHAPTER 4

When I was leaving my apartment, the large parking lot packed with semis, trucks, and cars caught my gaze. Cookie's Diner was a popular stop on the highway leading in and out of Austin. I strolled around the edge of the building and ran smack into a large wall covered with blue flannel.

"Fuck." I fell back, arms flailing and feet scrambling for balance.

"Whoa, dude. Sorry about that."

A well-muscled arm caught me around the waist, dragging me up against the blue expanse and I ended up with my nose buried in the vee of the shirt, breathing in warm, musky male. Before I could catch myself, I flicked out my tongue and tasted the firm flesh at the base of the man's neck, humming at the salty taste of sweat

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bursting in my mouth. My cock twitched against the thick thigh between my legs.

*Holy shit.* I scrambled away, desperately praying I wouldn't ignite into flames because of how hot my face felt. Licking strange men wasn't me, and doing it in the middle of a parking lot where anyone could see us spoke of a death wish instead of intelligence.

"Easy. Don't want you falling and injuring that pretty head of yours."

Laughter tinged the words, but I didn't think the man was making fun of me. Peering up through my bangs, I caught the grin tipping up the corners of those thin lips. I smiled and chuckled.

"Sorry, I didn't see you there and sometimes I get a little caught up in my thoughts." I held out my hand. "I'm Tim."

"Good to finally meet you, Tim. I'm Bernie. Were you heading in for something to eat?"

I seemed to have forgotten how to talk, so I simply nodded. Bernie stood at least five inches taller than me, which put him around six-four. Dark brown hair streaked with gray was cut close to his head and a square jaw completed the look of solidness. His jade green eyes twinkled with humor and the corners crinkled like Bernie laughed a lot, but I could tell by the other lines on his face that Bernie had lived life.

I'd seen Bernie a few times over the last two weeks I'd been working at the diner. I'd never waited on him or had the chance to talk to him. I couldn't bring myself to ask Cookie about him, but my body always knew when he was in the vicinity. Maybe that was why I'd licked him like a kid with a lollipop.

My hand still gripped Bernie's, so he gently tugged me behind him as he entered the diner. Cookie looked up from where he stood, chatting with a pretty, red-haired woman dressed in scrubs.

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“Hey, Bernie, I see you finally met my new waiter. I’ll be right over with your coffee. What do you want to drink, Tim?”

“I’ll have a soda.”

“Coming right up.”

I settled into a booth, trying to catch my breath and get my suddenly raging erection under control. Wow, I had never gotten this worked up over a guy. Of course, I didn’t have a lot of experience in my twenty-two years, but I’d seen a lot of good-looking men and none of them have made me want to climb their bodies like Bernie did. Not even Aaron.

“Here you two are.”

Coffee was set in front of Bernie and I got a glass of soda. I looked around the diner, seeing Ramona dashing from the kitchen to the different tables. I gestured at her when I met Cookie’s gaze. “Do you need my help?”

“Nope. She’s good, but I’ll probably need you this afternoon to wash dishes if you’re willing.”

“Sure. It’s not like I have anything else to do.” I winked at Cookie.

Both men laughed, and Cookie took our orders before leaving. Bernie leaned back and stretched his arms across the top of the booth, giving me a marvelous view of that chest.

“So how did you end up here? I thought Cookie’s nephew, Quinn, was working here.”

I ignored the expanse of male muscle in front of me by watching the other customers. “He had a mid-life crisis and decided anywhere was better than here. He quit and walked out. I got off when the bus rolled through and since I’m not in any hurry, I took Cookie up on his offer to work.”

“Can a guy have a mid-life crisis at eighteen?”

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Shrugging, I grimaced. "I didn't have mine until now, so I think you can have a life crisis whenever you want."

"That why you were on the bus? Trying to get somewhere other than where you were?" Bernie reached across the table and tapped my hand, bringing my attention back to him. When my gaze met his, he smiled. "We've all been there. Why do you think I drive a truck? Best way to get someplace else."

"Do you like driving a truck?"

Bernie eased back to let Cookie set our plates on the table. He salted his eggs before he nodded. "I do. I've tried some other jobs, but none of them fit me. I got out of the service when I was twenty-six without any idea of what I wanted to do. I'd planned to be a 'lifer.' A bullet to the knee changed all that. I didn't want to sit behind a desk all day, so I got out."

I mashed my eggs and hash browns together and dumped ketchup on them. Bernie watched me with a slight look of horror on his face. I put ketchup on about anything I could without getting in trouble. My aunt said it had something to do with the vinegar. I didn't care why I liked it. I just did.

"Now you sit behind a steering wheel all day? What's the difference?"

"The scenery changes and I get to meet new people every day if I want."

"Or get run down by strangers," I joked.

"I have to say that was an unexpected pleasure." Bernie's expression was more of a leer than anything else.

My cheeks heated and I ducked my head, wishing I knew how to flirt better. It was hard to practice on a guy who knew you were a sure thing, so I'd never gotten to sharpen those skills.

"None of that, sweetheart," Bernie whispered, slipping a finger

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under my chin and lifting my head. “I like seeing those warm chocolate brown eyes looking at me.”

I calmed my racing pulse. Compliments were few and far between where I was from. I nodded and mourned the loss of Bernie’s touch when he took his finger away to start eating.

The comfortable silence hanging over our booth eased me. Just because I was attracted to Bernie didn’t mean anything would happen that day. Maybe never. Sometimes it was nice to be with someone, not really caring whether you saw him again, though I admitted to myself that I hoped Bernie would stop back by soon.

The clatter of a fork hitting an empty plate drew me out of my thoughts and I looked to see Bernie shove his plate away before stretching. I shot a glance down at my plate and realized I’d eaten almost all of my breakfast.

“Cookie makes some of the best food on my route.” He patted his flat stomach.

“How do you manage to stay as fit as you are?” I wanted to run my hand over every inch of Bernie and I clenched my hands under the table to keep from reaching out.

“I don’t eat like this all the time. It’d be too easy to let myself go and get fat, but I guess my military training is hard to shake. Get up early every morning and run for five or six miles. When I have time between truck runs, I work out.”

“Muscles look good on you.” Blushing again, I met his grin.

“Thanks, Tim.” Bernie nudged my ankle with his foot as he checked his watch. “Darn, I have to head out. Don’t want to be late getting the load delivered.”

“Oh, okay.” Disappointment sank into my stomach. The thought of spending more time with Bernie had brightened my day. I waved Cookie down. “Bernie needs his check.”

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“Sure.” Cookie pulled out the tickets and shuffled through them until he found Bernie’s.

“I’ll take Tim’s as well,” Bernie offered.

“Tim eats for free. He’ll be the cheapest date you ever have as long as you eat here.” The older man winked at both of us before moving on.

“He’s not very subtle, is he?” I squirmed, embarrassed.

“Cookie and I have known each other for a while now and he must like you or he never would’ve offered you the job. He can see we’re attracted to each other. Cookie’s not big on playing games.”

Bernie stood, and I slid out of the booth to join him as he strolled up to the cash register. Ramona met us there and, grinning, took Bernie’s money.

“Hey, hon, how do you like working here so far? Not planning on taking off, are you?”

“No, and I’m enjoying it here.”

“Thank God.” She leaned over the counter and gestured for me to come closer. “I hope you work out better than Quinn. The boy did nothing but complain.”

“I’m afraid of hard work, but I hate not eating even more,” I joked.

She giggled and smacked my bicep. “Silly. Oh, I can tell I’m going to like you already.”

She handed Bernie his change and he left a tip for Cookie. Bernie dragged me out of the diner over to where a large black-and-chrome semi sat. He led us to the other side where we’d be out of view from prying eyes. Staring down at me, he searched my face for something. He must have found what he was looking for because he cupped my chin in his hands and lifted my mouth to his.

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As kisses go, this one was the softest I'd ever had. Aaron didn't like to kiss. He'd always been in a hurry to get to the sex without any foreplay. I banished him from my mind and gave myself over to Bernie.

He slid his hands down my neck and sides to rest them on my hips. Three points of contact and I was ready to explode. A soft whimper emerged from my throat and I tried to press closer to him. His grip tightened and a low growl told me he didn't want me to move.

I opened, and he swept his tongue in to lick along my teeth and gums, learning every inch of my mouth. He sucked on my bottom lip and bit it. The sting made me jump and gasp.

Footsteps sounded on the pavement, causing Bernie to draw slowly away, letting me go, reluctance in each inch. We stood, staring at each other, chests heaving and groins aching. He grinned at me.

"I'll be coming back through here next Wednesday. Would you be interested in getting dinner with me? Maybe somewhere other than the diner."

I touched trembling fingers to my swollen lips and nodded. "I don't have a car, though."

"Don't worry. I'll take care of the transportation. Do you have a cell?"

"No. I left mine back home."

He leveled a knowing look at me. "Didn't want anyone to call you, huh?"

I looked over his shoulder and shrugged. "No one important. I'll get a phone when I have a little more money and let my aunt know where I'm at."

Bernie ran his fingers through my hair and nodded. "I'll call the

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diner. I'm sure Cookie won't mind it once in a while."

"Okay."

Were we starting a real relationship with dating and everything that went along with it? Or was the whole date thing just Bernie's way of making each hook-up feel special?

My doubts must have shown on my face because Bernie caressed my cheek and grinned.

"I don't do casual sex anymore. Being a trucker makes it easy to find a warm body at the rest areas or truck stops—women and men. It'd become real simple to see sex as nothing but a release." Bernie held my gaze, and I could see how serious he was. "I'm too old to fool around like that. Now I like to get to know a guy before we end up in bed."

I didn't know whether to be excited or nervous. On one hand, it sounded like Bernie assumed we'd be sleeping together at some point. On the other hand, should I be worried about the possibility that once Bernie got to know me, he'd figure out I wasn't worth the time and effort?

"Don't worry. My gut's telling me you'll be worth every minute."

Bernie leaned down and brushed another kiss over my lips before stepping farther away.

"Time for me to go and you need to get back inside."

"Be safe and I'll see you next week."

I walked to the front of the diner and waved as Bernie pulled out of the parking lot. After the rig disappeared from my sight, I went back inside.

Cookie flagged me down. "I've got some papers for you to fill out, Tim. I forgot about them until now. I was about to write out your paycheck and remembered I didn't have any of your



information.”

“Sure.”

Several people watched us as I followed him back to his office. As soon as we were out of view of the customers, I asked, “Were they staring at me because I’m new or is there some other reason?”

“Both. By now, most of them have heard about Quinn walking out on me and you stepping up. That alone would make you interesting to them.”

We entered Cookie’s office and he pointed at a chair close to his desk. I sat while he pulled out a folder and tossed it down in front of me.

“What else are they interested in?”

I removed my driver’s license and social security card for him to photocopy. I grabbed a pen and started to fill out the forms.

“They’re staring at you because of Bernie.”

Straightening, I stared at Cookie in horror. “Is he married?”

He frowned. “Why would you think that? If anything, wouldn’t you worry about him not being gay?”

Considering the kiss we’d shared away from prying eyes, Bernie not being gay had never crossed my mind. He’d have punched me out after I ran into him and licked his neck if he didn’t like men, but Cookie didn’t need to know that.

“Just asking,” I mumbled, going back to the W-2s. “I need the address here.”

He gave it to me before leaning back in his chair and studying me. “Bernie’s a good guy. He’s friendly and always talks to everyone.”

I nodded and muttered, hoping that would be enough to keep him talking.

“He’s never singled anyone out like he did you.” Holding up

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his hand, he ticked off people as he mentioned them. “None of the waitresses get more than polite conversation from him. Not even Quinn got more than a smile, and trust me, that boy nearly turned himself inside out to get Bernie’s attention. What did you do to get him to eat breakfast with you and offer to buy your meal for you?”

*I licked him* danced on my tongue again, but I didn’t know if that was what drew Bernie to me or not.

“He asked me out. Dinner in Austin when he comes through on his way back east,” I blurted, scrawling my signature on the last form and pushing them back toward him.

“Dinner? I’m impressed. You’re a fast worker. Not here even three weeks and you have one of the most sought after men who stops in here asking you out.” He didn’t check any of the forms, just tucked them back in the folder and filed it away.

“I’m sorry.” Why was I apologizing?

“Don’t apologize, Tim. I’m not mad at you or anything. You asked why they were staring at you—that’s why. We’re set, so why don’t you get your apron and start washing dishes.”

I stayed busy in the kitchen until around seven when I grabbed some food and went back to my apartment. I didn’t have to be back at the diner until midnight when my shift waiting on tables started. After eating, I stripped and slipped under the blankets.

Rolling onto my back, I closed my eyes and an image of Bernie popped up. Was I crazy to go out on a date with him? There were so many horror stories based on truckers who found their victims at rest areas or diners. Yet, if eyes were the windows to our souls, Bernie’s told me that he wasn’t psychotic or dangerous. Of course, what did I know? He could have been a really good actor. I snorted softly. *Because no one ever looks like a serial killer.*

I chuckled. Now I was being silly. There was no reason to

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believe Bernie was anything other than a long haul trucker looking for something more than a quickie in the parking lot.

Pride surged through me. Bernie had kissed me, and I was the one he asked out on a date. Even though I'd only seen Cookie's nephew for a minute or two the night he left, Quinn was gorgeous and obviously knew how to make the most of what God gave him. Yet Bernie hadn't wanted Quinn; he'd wanted me. What did I have that the other man didn't?

No answer was going to appear as if by magic. I had to wait to ask Bernie the next time I saw him. Once that decision was made, I relaxed and let sleep pull me under.

## CHAPTER 5

The clock hit three, and I poured two cups of coffee as Ned and Edson walked through the diner's door. I had only been working at Cookie's for three nights when I'd figured out the cops' routine. They nodded as I set their mugs down.

"Your orders are already in and Cookie should have them done soon."

"Thanks, Tim." Ned gave me a smile that didn't reach his eyes.

Edson didn't even acknowledge me, and I knew something had happened. The younger police officer might not have been happy that I took Quinn's place, but he'd always been polite to me.

I went to get their dinners and Cookie glanced at the men before looking at me with a question in his eyes. I shrugged.

"I don't know what's up, but it must be something big because

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neither man is his usual cheerful self.”

“I’ll take them their food and see if I can get them to talk.”

I waited on some other customers, letting Cookie take care of his friends. I was a newcomer to the diner and it wasn’t my place to see if I could comfort the men. As I chatted with the others, I kept an eye on Cookie, Ned, and Edson. As they talked, Ned began to look less grim and Edson even smiled once. Whatever Cookie said seemed to be working.

The phone rang and Chad, who had finally made it in, answered it. I’d never received any calls, so I wasn’t paying any attention until Chad shouted my name.

“Tim!”

When I whirled around, I found Chad glaring at me. “What?”

“The phone’s for you.” Chad held out the phone to me.

“Seriously?”

Chad rolled his eyes and set it on the counter before walking back into the kitchen. Who would be calling me? Bernie said he would, but I’d never really expected him to do so.

I picked up the phone and moved to a corner where no one could overhear me. “Hello.”

“Tim?”

The unfamiliar, deep voice socked me in the stomach. I cleared my throat. “Yes.”

A warm laugh washed over the phone and settled into my groin. I faced the wall, not wanting anyone to see the bulge in my pants.

“It’s Bernie.”

“Wow,” I whispered.

“I told you I’d call.” Banging and music overwhelmed Bernie’s voice. “Just a second.”

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Nerves assaulted me and I drummed my fingers against the wall, feeling like a teenager talking to his first crush.

"There. That's better. The bar was getting noisy. I stopped in to get a drink and something to eat. Thought I'd give you a call and see how you're doing."

"Really?"

"Are you okay, Tim, or maybe you don't want to talk to me?"

The hesitation and disappointment in Bernie's voice knocked me out of my shock. "I'm sorry, Bernie. To be honest, I wasn't expecting to hear from you." Guilt had loosened my tongue.

"I told you I'd call and you didn't believe me?"

I didn't want to go into my issues on the phone where people could overhear, but the hurt in his voice forced me to tell him more than I had planned, having just met him. Glancing over my shoulder, I noticed Ned, Cookie, and Edson were watching me, but I knew they weren't close enough to hear what I said. Still, I lowered my voice, not wanting to risk it.

"I'm sorry, Bernie. It's not you, and I'm trying not to compare you to him."

"Him?"

Sighing, I rubbed the back of my neck. "Yeah. The reason I caught a bus and headed as far away from my hometown."

"Ah..."

"I don't have much experience with guys. I've had one boyfriend since I was eighteen."

"And he broke your heart. Did he find another guy?"

My laugh sounded bitter, even to my ears. "He got married."

"Shit."

"It's not that bad. I mean, everyone has issues. I'm not any different from anyone else, but I wanted to let you know it wasn't

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you I doubted. I'm not used to having someone think about me when I'm not with them."

I cringed. God, I sounded pathetic. I wasn't looking for sympathy or pity from him, just a little understanding and patience.

"I wondered if it was something like that. I've been watching you the few times I came in before you ran into me. It was the sad look on your face that made me decide to talk to you."

"Just my sad expression? No other reason why you would chose to approach me?" I joked.

Bernie's warm laughter washed over me. "Well, your sad expression and your cute little ass. I'm not immune to good-looking men, Tim. Just interested in seeing if there's something else under all those looks."

I'd never considered myself good-looking, but if Bernie thought so, I wasn't going to argue with him.

"Tim, you have customers," Cookie called.

"I better let you go. Don't want your boss getting mad."

I made a quick decision. "I'm getting a cell phone tomorrow. If I can have your number, I'll call you and that way you don't have to keep calling me at work."

"Great. Here it is."

I wrote it down as Bernie rattled it off.

"Take care and I'll talk to you tomorrow."

"Be safe," I whispered before hanging up.

Turning, I saw Cookie, Ned, and Edson grinning at me. I frowned.

"Bernie okay?"

"He's fine." I grabbed the coffee pot for two men who had walked in. "Take a seat anywhere, gentlemen."

I took the men's orders before checking on my other

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customers. After a while, I could do nothing more, so I wandered back to where my boss still sat with Ned and Edson.

“You and Bernie, huh?” Ned leered.

“He was just calling to check on me,” I muttered, not sure how to deal with their teasing.

“Checking on you, huh?” Edson glanced at Ned. “Has Bernie ever called you to check on you?”

“The most I’ve ever gotten from him was a grunt as we passed each other in the parking lot.” Ned grinned at Cookie. “How about you?”

My ears were burning and I knew they were probably beet red.

“Order up,” Chad yelled from the kitchen.

“I have to get that.”

I jumped to my feet and raced toward the back of the dining room. Chad shot a look at the three men chuckling behind me and met my embarrassed gaze.

“They don’t mean anything by it.”

Surprised, I stopped and stared at Chad. I’d worked with the man several nights since I came to the diner, but he never really spoke to me about anything.

“Ummm...I know. I’m just not used to having people joke about me and another guy.”

“You weren’t out wherever your hometown is?” Chad swirled a wet cloth around a plate.

“Not really. I never said anything, and no one ever asked me. It’s a little town and while my aunt and uncle might be willing to accept me the way I am, the rest of the town wouldn’t be.”

Chad nodded, but didn’t look up. “Most people don’t like something or someone who is different from them. Different because you like guys and they don’t understand why.”



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I picked up the hot plates, holding them gingerly. “And you? Do you hate me because I’m gay?”

Chad’s laugh was bitter and harsh. “I’ve got enough trouble of my own to keep me from worrying about who you sleep with.”

“Thank you.”

The customers came and went, keeping me busy enough not to think about Bernie or the phone call.

## CHAPTER 6

As Wednesday approached, I became more and more nervous. I thought about all the times Aaron and I would get together, but it was always somewhere no one would ever see us. His father's cabin by the lake or my uncle's hunting cabin way out in the back forty. Why had I never questioned the fact that we never went out in public together? I just accepted his lies and believed he really did want to spend all of his time with me and not have to worry about talking to other people.

I tried not to compare Bernie to Aaron. The poor man didn't deserve it, even if the only experience I had was with Aaron. For goodness' sakes, it was only a date. It wasn't a commitment ceremony or anything.

*Why does it feel like it was more than just a date then?*

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Hot water hitting my face drew me out of my thoughts and I wiped the liquid off as I glanced around to see Chad standing next to me.

“Why’d you do that?” I looked down at my soaked shirt.

“I said hi to you and you didn’t react. Besides, you’ve been standing there, staring at the water like it’ll give you the secret to life for the past ten minutes.” Chad tossed me a towel. “What’s got you thinking so hard?”

I studied the other man as I dried off. Chad and I had very few conversations. Chad rarely talked to anyone. His life was a vicious cycle of high and low waves, awash in a sea of alcohol. Yet there were times when I could tell that he was trying to connect, not specifically with me, but with anyone. Chad would work for a day or two before disappearing for several days. We weren’t friends, but I had come to worry about him as much as Cookie and Mel did.

“I’ve got a date tonight.”

“Bernie?”

I nodded, folding the towel and setting it on the counter next to the sink.

“He seems like a nice guy. Why are you worried?”

“First of all, I don’t know him very well.”

Chad snorted. “Haven’t you talked on the phone every night since last week?”

Nodding, I scrubbed a pot. “Yes, but that’s not the same thing. We don’t talk for long, and I’ve never had to get to know someone.”

Chad moved back to the stove and checked the fish he was frying. “You’ve never been on a date before?”

“No. I wasn’t formally out, remember? And my boyfriend was

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even more in the closet than I was. We never went anywhere together on a date in case someone saw us together.” I rinsed the pot and stuck it on the rack to dry.

“Boyfriend doesn’t sound like he was worth your time.” Chad took the fish out of the fryer and laid them on a wire rack to drain.

“You might be right. He was my best friend and the first person I ever loved. I let a lot of things slide because of that.” I frowned and rested my hands on my hips. “No more of that. If the guy I’m seeing is so ashamed of himself he can’t be seen with me, then he’s not the guy for me.”

“Start as you mean to finish, my mother always said. I don’t think you have to worry about Bernie, though. I’ve seen him at some of the clubs in Austin and that man doesn’t hide who he is.”

*Clubs in Austin?* Bernie told me he didn’t do casual sex anymore, yet he was hanging out in clubs.

*Maybe he just liked to dance.*

I grimaced inside. *Yeah, right.* Every gay man who went to the clubs only went there to dance. I halted my spiraling suspicions. I needed to trust that Bernie meant what he said until he proved I couldn’t. Otherwise, whatever we were starting with our first date would be over before it even began.

Chad shot a grin at me. “Bernie’ll take care of you. Relax and have fun. There’s no need to worry this thing into the ground. Maybe you can tell me about it on Thursday.”

“I don’t kiss and tell,” I joked, winking at him.

“Good for you. I’m sure you can share a few details. I’d like to know what kind of date Bernie is.”

“You planning on making a play for him?” I couldn’t help but ask.

An emotion looking strongly like sorrow crossed Chad’s face.

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“A relationship with anyone is out of the question for me. No one wants a drunk soldier with PTSD and flashbacks.”

What made me do it, I’ll never know, but I reached out and squeezed his arm. When he met my gaze, I smiled.

“I think someone would be very lucky to get you, Chad.”

“Thanks, Tim.” Chad turned away, and I knew our bonding time was over.

I finished washing the dishes and set them up to dry. Grabbing a pile of silverware, I trotted out into the dining area and sat at a booth to roll some stuff for dinner. Cynthia slid onto the bench across from me. I smiled at her, but she just nodded.

Cynthia wore her straight black hair pulled back in a long ponytail. Her skin was pale and only made paler by the bright red lipstick she wore. She rarely smiled, and I often wondered if it was her natural personality or if there was something else going on with her that none of us knew about. She picked up some napkins and started rolling silverware as well.

“Thanks.”

“No problem. You’ve picked up shifts for all of us. The least I can do is help you out now and then.”

We rolled a few more and set them on a tray. I glanced around, checking the customers and making sure they were okay.

“Why are you here?” I about swallowed my tongue when those words fell out of my mouth. I hadn’t meant to ask that.

“Why am I working at this diner?” Cynthia didn’t seem to mind the question.

“Yeah. I mean you seem a little more city than one would normally see at a diner like this.”

Cynthia laughed, and I stared at her, then found myself joining in. There was such joy in the sound that the others in the diner

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smiled as well.

“And the others who work here aren’t?”

I shrugged. “Not quite what I meant. See, if any of us went to the big city, I think we might just stick out a bit, but I could see you working in some gallery in the art district, hanging out in coffee shops and going to poetry nights.”

“I did that for a couple of years and ended up not liking the big city all that much.” She tossed a set of silverware on the tray. “Sure, being able to go to plays and art galleries was great, but I didn’t like the impersonal way people treated each other.”

“You have a boyfriend?”

She gave him a wink. “No boy, but I’ve got a girl.”

“Oh, really?”

“Yep.”

I shook my head and chuckled. “It’s like falling into a gay fantasy land. Everyone’s either queer or they don’t mind people being gay. I didn’t think Texas would be so open to differences.”

“Don’t expect things to be the same when you go elsewhere. Cookie’s Diner is one of the few places where you’ll be accepted for who you are. Cookie doesn’t allow anyone to talk bad about anyone else, and I, for one, appreciate it.” Cynthia jumped to her feet. “Got a new customer. Hey, have fun on your date tomorrow night.”

It was a gay utopia populated by a bunch of gossips.

## CHAPTER 7

As I tugged on my shirt, I stared at myself in the mirror. Were nice jeans and a button-down shirt all right? Bernie never said where we were going, just that he'd be here to pick me up around seven. Cynthia was working for me tonight and I'd taken her earlier shift.

"In case Bernie ends up spending the night," she whispered after offering to switch with me.

I flushed, thinking about that possibility. I checked the drawer under the bathroom sink. Yesterday before my shift, Cookie had let me borrow his truck again, so I could run to the closest drugstore to pick up condoms and lube. No matter what happened, I wanted to be prepared.

A knock sounded on my door, and my heart jumped. I tucked

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my keys, phone and wallet in my pockets before opening the door, smiling at Bernie who stood outside.

“Oh, wow,” I said.

Bernie wore a pair of black dress pants and a white silk dress shirt over a black T-shirt. Those clothes showed off every muscle and well-formed part of the man’s body. I licked my lips, and he laughed.

“Like what you see?” He held out his hand.

“Oh, yes,” I murmured, putting my hand in his and letting him lead me out of my apartment. “Am I dressed all right?”

“Don’t worry. I’m dressing to impress. You look great.”

I shut my door and locked it behind me. We made our way to the parking lot and I glanced around.

“Are we taking your truck tonight?”

Bernie chuckled. “Yes, we are, but not my semi.”

He nodded toward a newer dark green F-150 and my jaw dropped. Bernie opened the passenger door and handed me up into it. I hooked my seat belt and waited until he got behind the wheel.

“Nice ride.”

“Have to have something to get in and out of the city. The semi’s a little hard to park.”

I settled into my seat and watched the confident way Bernie drove out onto the highway, heading toward Austin. It was obvious he spent a lot of time behind the wheel and didn’t worry about his ability. I felt safe in a way I never had before, and it was weird just watching him handle the truck made me feel that way.

“True.” Hesitating slightly, I said, “Do you have a place around here?”

Bernie shot me a look and nodded. “Sure. It’s on the outskirts of Austin. I’m not on the road every day all year around. I do take



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time off and I need a place to crash. Maybe you can come over for dinner some night when I'm home."

"I'd like that."

Reaching over, he took my hand and squeezed. I grinned and relaxed.

"Do you have any family? Where are you from?" Bernie asked.

Here came the hard part—the getting-to-know you stage was something I'd skipped with Aaron. Having grown up together, we already knew everything about each other by the time we fell in love. "I'm from a small town in Minnesota. My aunt and uncle still live there."

"Oh, right, you told me you called her to let her know you made it to Texas. How did they feel about you leaving?"

I glanced out of the window and shrugged. "They weren't happy about it, and I never told them why I was leaving. All they know is that I needed to get away."

"Sometimes you just have to leave."

Understanding colored Bernie's words.

"But, you see, I didn't want to leave. I was happy there and thought I'd live and die in my hometown." Biting my lip, I blinked back tears. No way was I going to cry about the past on my first date with Bernie.

He brought my hand to his lips and brushed a kiss over my knuckles. "I have to admit I'm not sorry you felt you had to leave. If you'd stayed there, we'd never have met."

The jury was still out, but I was leaning toward meeting Bernie being worth the pain I'd gone through with Aaron. No more talking about my past. There would be enough time for that later.

"Where are you taking me?"

"There's a little restaurant in the art district I thought you might

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like to check out.”

“Great.”

Silence covered us like a comfortable blanket and I let Bernie deal with the nighttime city traffic without distracting him. I savored the warmth of his hand holding mine. I had always envied couples who held hands in public because I figured I’d never get the chance to do it. There was something romantic about the couple being so connected, as if they couldn’t stand being apart and holding hands was the least likely contact to get them arrested...unless the couple was two guys.

Bernie swung the truck into a parking lot and found a spot almost immediately. He turned it off and turned to look at me. Before I could say anything, he slid his hand behind my head and pulled me forward. My gasp bathed his lips as he pressed them to mine.

He took his time, like he was re-learning my mouth and what made me shiver. I rested one hand on his rock-hard thigh and gripped the steering wheel with the other, needing to ground myself before I was swamped by lust.

Nibbling on my bottom lip, Bernie teased and tasted me. He left my lips and trailed kisses over my chin. I tilted my head, giving him more access to my neck. He scraped his teeth over my jugular, and I jerked, wanting him to suck there, but figuring he wouldn’t leave a mark somewhere someone could see it. Pulling away a few inches, he blew a puff of air over my wet skin, and I whimpered.

My cock pushed against my jeans, wanting more, and I was afraid the zipper would leave permanent marks on my flesh. I shifted, silently begging him to touch me below the neck.

Bernie chuckled and sat back in his seat. He held me in place

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when I would have followed him. Frowning, I leaned against the passenger door and pouted.

“We have dinner reservations, and I want to take you dancing after. We have time, Tim. No need to rush things.”

He climbed out and walked around to open my door. Feeling a little insecure, I wanted to ask if he just didn’t find me attractive enough to take to bed, but I caught a glimpse of the bulge in the front of his pants as he approached the truck. I knew attraction wasn’t the issue. Maybe Bernie really did want to take the time to know me before he fucked me.

My ass muscles tightened at the thought of Bernie filling me and I swallowed a groan. Patience wasn’t a virtue I’d cultivated. My aunt and uncle could testify to that. On Christmas morning, I was always up before dawn, sitting in front of the tree and staring at the presents with eager anticipation.

Bernie helped me out of the truck. He caressed my cheek with his thumb and smiled. “The waiting will be good for you. Foreplay can be as much fun as sex.”

“I’ll take your word for it.”

We meandered down the street, gazing in the gallery windows. My desire eased a little, simmering in the back of my mind and sparkling along my skin with each brush of his body against mine.

Glancing into a window, I froze, struck by a painting at the center of the space. I tugged Bernie over to get a better look at it. The artistic composition was so simple. All the artist gave us was the back of a man, shirtless and wearing jeans. He stood at the edge of a cliff that fell sharply away to reveal a raging river below. Fear, loss and anticipation held sway in every line and brush stroke. Why was the man standing there? Was he thinking about jumping? What was it that made me think of sorrow? Maybe the

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angle of his head or the slump of his shoulders sparked something inside me.

I noticed a small heart tattoo at the small of the man's back and I leaned closer to look at it. I couldn't make out the letters, but it looked like there were initials around the heart.

"What do you think the story is behind this painting?" I asked Bernie after a few minutes.

Shrugging, he urged me on. "There are a thousand stories that can be told by one painting. There's the original one that only the artist knows and all the private ones the people who view the painting know."

I let him lead me away. As much as the painting touched me, I couldn't afford it. Not if it was hanging in an art gallery. They didn't sell anything cheap there.

"Here we are."

We entered, and I drowned in the aromatic scents of marinara sauce. I sniffed, drawing in the mouth-watering smells, and Bernie laughed.

"Cookie's food is good, but sometimes you need something special for an extraordinary date."

He made sure I sat first before taking the chair to my right. Our table was in a low-lit corner and the privacy of its placement made my insecurity flare up. Did he not want to be seen with me? My enjoyment at the place waned until he noticed how quiet I had gotten.

"What's wrong? Don't you like Italian?"

"I love Italian. Just got thinking is all."

Bernie set his finger under my chin and lifted my head until I met his gaze. "Thinking about what?"

"Bad memories," I murmured, guilt dropping my gaze to his

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chest.

He glanced around and seemed to understand what I meant. “You think because I asked for this private table, I didn’t want anyone to see us together.”

I inclined my head slightly and bit my bottom lip.

“Sweetheart, I chose this table because I wanted to be alone with you, not have to deal with loud conversations and people stopping by to say hi to me.”

Confused, I quirked an eyebrow. “Do you know a lot of people in this part of town?”

“A lot of people know me.”

Bernie’s cryptic answer didn’t clear up my confusion, but the waiter arrived to take our order. “Mr. Capley, it’s nice to see you again.”

“Jamie.” Bernie grinned at the slender young man. “I’d like you to meet Tim. He’s going to become a very good friend of mine.”

Jamie giggled and winked to Tim. “Nice meeting you, Tim, and I have to say I envy you. There a lot of people around who’d like to become good *friends* with Mr. Capley.”

I blushed, hoping no one could see the color in my cheeks in the low lighting.

“What can I get you gentlemen to drink?”

I ordered a soda, and Bernie got a beer. After Jamie left, I sat back in my chair and studied Bernie.

“Who are you, Mr. Capley? Something tells me you’re more than just a truck driver.”

It was his turn to blush and he shifted in his chair, uncomfortable with my scrutiny. “I’m no one important. Just a guy who likes to enjoy life.”

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There was something he wasn't telling me, but I decided to let it go for the moment. No point in upsetting the man and it did look like he was willing to introduce me to his friends. As long as he wasn't married or in a committed relationship, I'd let him keep his secret for a while longer. I waited until Jamie delivered our drinks and left before I spoke again.

"I have just one question and then I'll leave you alone about it."

"Go ahead." Bernie sipped his beer.

"You're not married or in a relationship already, are you?"

He looked hurt and affronted. "Do you really think I'd have asked you out or kissed you if I was?"

Reaching out, I wrapped my hand around his and gripped it tight before letting go quickly. "I would hope not, but I don't know you that well yet, and I swore I'd never get involved with a man who'd do something like that."

He stared at the plate in front of him for a minute. Taking a deep breath, he looked up at me. "I *was* married."

My first instinct was to jerk away from him, but then my mind focused on the word "was." "You're not married anymore?"

Bernie closed his eyes and an expression of sadness crossed his face. "No. We divorced when I got out of the army. I married her shortly after I enlisted at twenty. It was what kids in my town did. Marry your high school sweetheart. Being young and innocent, I didn't know the truth about myself at the time. I finally got things figured out after I retired, and we decided to part ways. It wasn't very fair to her."

"I'm sorry." I hated dragging up bad memories for him.

"It's all right. I'm not proud of what I did, but it's done and over with. She's moved on and is married to a nice guy. I still get a

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Christmas card from her every year.”

“Nice to see there aren’t any hard feelings between you.”

From the corner of my eye, I caught Jamie heading toward us. “We should probably figure out what we want to eat. Jamie’s going to want to take our order.”

We opened our menus and gave our orders to the young man. Listening to the soft clink of silverware against plates and the murmur of conversations, I relaxed.

## CHAPTER 8

We left the restaurant arm in arm, laughing as we stepped out into the cool night air. I tripped over a crack in the sidewalk, and Bernie caught me up against him. Without a thought to people watching me, I kissed him.

Instead of jerking away, Bernie took control and slid us into the darker alley. He smoothed his hands down my back to cradle my ass, pulling our groins tight together, while I wrapped my arms around his shoulders to keep my balance. I fought the urge to rub against him, the hum of traffic barely keeping my lust under control.

“Get a room, guys.”

The comment splashed over me like ice water. I jerked away from Bernie and I would have fallen if he hadn’t caught me again.



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He winked and leered. "They're right. If we keep this up, I'll need to get us a room."

I gave my cock a thump, hoping the slight violence would make it deflate a little. Walking around Austin with an erection would be uncomfortable and I wanted to enjoy the rest of my date.

"Let's go dancing," Bernie suggested.

I eyed him with skepticism. "I don't think that's going to help with the whole attraction problem."

"Probably not, but it'll make the night memorable."

I pushed up on my toes and whispered in his ear, "Are you going to take care of the problem when we get back to my place?"

He shrugged with a wicked grin. "We'll have to see. I guess it depends on how the dancing goes."

I loved dancing. There wasn't any place to do it back home, but I would often turn up the radio and dance around the living room with my aunt. My family didn't have much, but we always found ways to have fun and enjoy life.

"Are your parents still alive?" Bernie asked.

Where had that question come from? We had avoided any more truly personal discussions over dinner.

"No. They died when I was four. My mom's sister, Aunt Judy, took me in. My mom had me when she was thirty, and my aunt was ten years older than her. They adopted a toddler when they should have been planning their empty nest. They never had any children of their own, just me, but my aunt and uncle have been great parents. They did all they could to give me what I needed to grow up a well-rounded adult."

"Sounds nice."

I smiled to myself and nodded. "It was. Uncle Bill worked his farm, and I helped out the best I could. We never had a lot, but

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they did manage to instill in me the idea that you don't have to have things to live a good life."

Bernie smoothed his hand down my back. "I'd like to meet them someday."

Glancing at him, I saw truth shining in his eyes. "Maybe someday you will."

Wandering down the street, we found a club where we could hear the driving beat of the music out on the street. Bernie paid the cover charge and we slipped inside.

"Do you want something to drink?" Bernie pressed his lips to my ear and asked under the pounding of the bass.

Shaking my head, I grabbed his hand and dragged him out onto the dance floor. I let the music take control of my body and brushed against Bernie's hard body as often as I could. Encircling my waist with one arm, he drew me closer until our bodies found a rhythm of their own. I slung one arm over Bernie's shoulder and trailed the other hand down his chest to hook a finger in his waistband, encouraging him with each thrust of my hips to move with me.

We were at the edges of the dance floor where there were more shadows than light. I wasn't aware of Bernie's intent until my back hit the wall and he swooped in, claiming my mouth with the ferociousness of a lion on a zebra. He pinned my hands above my head and took me, fucking my mouth with his tongue and drawing moans of pleasure from me.

I arched my back off the wall, but only succeeded in grinding our cocks together. In what seemed like seconds, he unbuttoned and stripped my shirt off, tucking it in his back pocket. He skimmed down my throat to where my nipples stood, pointed and tight, shamelessly begging for his mouth.

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He flicked one nipple with his tongue, teasing it before sucking it into his mouth. I fought his hand, wanting to touch him and feel his heat under my fingers. He bit the little bit of flesh between his teeth, and I cried out. He pinched and tugged, building an ache connected straight to my cock. It swelled and leaked. I could feel the wetness from my pre-cum sliding on my underwear.

When his rough fingers grazed my stomach, fumbling with my belt, I thought I'd die. My head fell back and thumped against the wall behind me. He eased away and checked me out.

"Don't stop," I pleaded.

"I wasn't planning on it."

He unhooked my belt and got my pants opened. Pushing the sides apart, he slipped his hand inside and fisted my cock. I cried out, not caring if anyone saw us.

"That's it, sweetheart. I want to see you come," Bernie growled in my ear before paying attention to my nipple, the one he hadn't tortured.

I became lost in the driving beat of the music and the hard, fast strokes of his hand over the sensitive flesh of my shaft. The pressure and pain building at the base of my spine consumed me. The ache in my balls told me it wouldn't be long now.

"Bernie," I warned, my voice harsh and low.

He heard me under the music and his grin was more of a leer. "Do it, baby. I want to feel your cum all over my hand."

Those crude words were all I needed to push me over the edge.

"Fuck."

I slammed my head against the wall hard enough to see stars and spilled my seed all over Bernie's hand. He milked out every drop I had by continuing to squeeze and jerk me off until I slumped, chest heaving, into his embrace.

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Closing my eyes, I tried to calm my pulse, while he murmured things I didn't understand in my ear. Finally, when my heartbeat was no longer thundering in my ears, I heard what he was saying.

"So fucking beautiful. What a portrait you'd make."

I leaned back and stared at him. My mouth wasn't working yet, but he smiled gently at me. Taking my shirt out of his back pocket, he wiped his hand off and cleaned me up as best he could. I didn't have the energy to protest. He balled it up and threw it in the nearest trashcan. He stripped off his silk shirt and dressed me. Shit, I swam in the thing. It was like wearing one of my uncle's shirts when I was seven, though I never remembered my uncle's clothes smelling as good as Bernie's.

"What about you?" I found my voice after another minute.

"You can take care of me when we get back to your place."

Turning, he led the way out of the club. I ran into people, throwing apologies over my shoulder as we rushed out of the building.

"I thought you didn't do casual sex."

Jerking me to a stop, he glared down at me. "There isn't anything causal going on between us, Tim. If I wasn't sure about what's happening, I'd never have given you a hand job in that club."

"Fuck, I'm sorry. I know that. You turned my brain to mush."

"Let's go."

I thought if Bernie knew he could get away with it, he'd have thrown me over his shoulder and sprinted to his truck. Luckily, he was smarter than that and practically ran people over in his hurry to get me back to my apartment.

We made it back to Cookie's Diner in record time. He parked and was out of the truck before I even had my seatbelt off. The

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truck door was jerked open and then he did throw me over his shoulder. The blood rushing to my face wasn't just from hanging upside down. I was glad we were parked behind the diner and no one could see how caveman Bernie had gone on me.

When we got to the bottom of the steps, Bernie froze and swore.

"What?"

He lowered me slowly to my feet, and I turned around. Sitting at the top by my apartment door was Chad, his head propped up on the frame and snoring slightly.

"Does he do this often?"

I shook my head. "No, this is the first time he's ever shown up here."

Bernie grunted before heading up the stairs. He crouched down and shook Chad. "Chad, buddy, it's time to wake up."

Mumbling, Chad swatted at Bernie's hand. I stayed farther down the stairs. Why would Chad choose to pass out on my doorstep? It wasn't as if we were friends or anything, just co-workers.

"Come on, Chad. Open your eyes."

Chad blinked, his blurry eyes focusing on Bernie. "Bernie, what're you doing here? Where am I?"

"You're sitting outside Tim's apartment." Bernie moved a little so Chad could see me standing below them.

"Why?"

Bernie shrugged. "I don't know. Do you remember how you got here?"

Chad's forehead furrowed in concentration, and I could almost see the wheels slowly getting up to speed in his mind. "I was drinking in my car. Thought I'd come see if Tim was busy. Forgot

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you were taking him out, Bernie. I'll leave you two alone."

I gasped as Chad pushed to his feet and swayed. Bernie stabilized him before throwing a glance at me over his shoulder. I grimaced, but nodded. Making my way past the two of them, I got my door unlocked and open, while Bernie got Chad turned around.

They staggered into the apartment, ending up on the futon. I watched as Bernie untangled himself from Chad and stood up. Chad curled up on his side and a low snore filled the air soon after.

"I should go."

Disappointment shot through me. I'd been looking forward to Bernie taking me to bed and fucking me into the mattress. I hated the thought he was going away without relief.

"This isn't how I thought the night would end," I admitted.

I snuggled into Bernie's embrace, resting my head on his chest, and listened to his heartbeat. He smoothed his hands up and down my back.

"I'll admit I wish we ended up in your bed together, but you can't kick him out, baby."

I sighed and looked over at Chad. "I know, but why would he show up here? I always got the feeling he had too much going on in his mind and he didn't have the energy to waste on making friends."

"He doesn't, but I think he's decided you might be someone he can talk with."

Nodding, I stepped away from him and went outside. I eased the door partway shut, leaving it open an inch or so, in case Chad needed anything.

"Do you have a place to sleep?"

"I've got blankets. I can sleep on the floor and it'll only be for tonight. He'll probably be gone before I wake up tomorrow."

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Bernie gave me a quick kiss and started down the stairs. “I have the next couple of days off. Would you like to have lunch at my place tomorrow?”

“I’d love to. Thank you for the great dinner and dancing, Bernie.”

He turned back when he got to the bottom step and blew me a kiss. I waved as Bernie pulled out of the parking lot.

There went the rest of my date. I shut and locked the door before heading to the bathroom and getting ready for bed. I grabbed a couple of blankets and a pillow. Curling up on the floor, I wrapped my arms around the pillow and sighed.

Even though the night didn’t end quite the way I’d hoped, it was still the best date I’d ever had. For the first time I’d been treated like I was special and not like I was something Bernie was ashamed of. We’d be spending time together tomorrow and it might end the way I’d hoped tonight would.

## CHAPTER 9

A car door slamming woke me up and I stretched, staring up at the ceiling while I tried to figure out why I was lying on the floor.

“Fuck, if I had a gun, I’d just shoot myself right now.”

Rolling on my side, I spotted Chad sitting on the futon, head cradled in his hands. He looked a little green around the edges.

“If you feel like shit every morning, why do you do it?”

Chad peered at me through his fingers. “After the first drink, it always sounds like a good idea.”

I stood and folded the blankets, sticking them back in the closet. After pulling on sweats, I got my coffee grinder out and ground some beans. I’d started the coffee and was digging through the refrigerator when Chad surged off the futon to stand swaying.

“I should get going.”



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“No.” I shook my head at him. “If you go anywhere, it’ll be to the bathroom for a shower, then you’ll eat the breakfast I’m going to make.”

“Why make it when we can just go over to the diner and get something?”

I began to pull out eggs and fruit, setting them on the counter next to the stove. “I like to cook and it’s healthier for me if I don’t eat the stuff at the diner all the time.”

My phone rang. I pointed Chad toward the bathroom while I answered. “Hello.” I watched Chad shuffle to the other room, grabbing a clean towel out of the closet as he went by.

“Hey, Tim. I didn’t wake you up, did I?”

Bernie’s greeting warmed me, and I leaned against the window frame, looking out over the parking lot. “No. One of the diner’s patrons did by slamming their car door too hard.”

“Poor baby. Did you get a good night’s sleep?”

I chuckled. “For the most part, though it would’ve been better if you were here with me.”

“I feel the same way.”

The shower kicked on, and I went back to the kitchen.

“How’s Chad this morning?”

Tucking the phone between my ear and shoulder, I started cutting up the bacon and cheese.

“He’s taking a shower and regretting how much he drank last night.” I turned the stove on. “I’m making breakfast for us and then I’ll send him on his way.”

“Did he say why he came to visit you?”

“I didn’t ask. Figured he’d want to wake up first before I start in on the personal stuff.”

He snorted. “Good idea, baby. I have some stuff to take care of

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this morning. How about I come pick you up around one and we can spend the rest of the day together until I have to get you back at midnight.”

“Sounds great to me.”

“Then I’ll see you at one. Make sure Chad still isn’t drunk when he leaves.”

“I will. See you later.”

I hung up as Chad came out with a towel wrapped around his waist. “I didn’t want to put on dirty clothes.”

“There’s a clean T-shirt and sweat pants on the chair over there. You can take them and get them back to me whenever.”

“Thanks.”

I’d just set our plates down on the small kitchen table when Chad joined me.

“I’m sorry I screwed up your night with Bernie,” Chad muttered before stuffing a forkful of omelet in his mouth.

“I’m not going to lie. I wasn’t happy to see you sitting on my stairs.” I poured out two cups of coffee for us. “But Bernie told me that we still have lots of time. It’s not like either one of us is going somewhere.”

“Maybe, but still it had to be like a bucket of ice water to find some drunk passed out on your doorstep.”

Not looking at him, I shrugged. “That’s what friends are for. We take the good with the bad.”

“I’m not sure what good I’m giving you.”

“Finish your breakfast. We’ll discuss what you can do for me later.”

We ate the rest of our meal in silence, then I rinsed the dishes off, planning to wash them later before Bernie picked me up. Chad looked for his shoes.

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“Did I have shoes last night?”

I shrugged and helped him search. After five minutes of looking, I gave up.

“You must not have had any on. There aren’t a lot of places you could leave them in this apartment and you went from the door to the futon.”

Chad frowned and scratched his head. “I wonder where I left them. Hopefully they’re in my car.”

“Do you need a ride to your car?”

“No. It’s still in the parking lot. I started drinking while I finished the last batch of dishes. Didn’t even consider going anywhere. Not that I have many places to go.”

I studied the man for a moment, running through scenarios in my mind. I might come to regret the decision I came to, but I didn’t have a choice. Chad needed a friend and it seemed he’d picked me to be that person. Going to a small bowl on the end table, I dug out my second set of keys.

“Here.”

I held the keys out to him.

“What are these for?”

“If you ever need a place to stay, you can crash here. I don’t want you sleeping in your car or going somewhere when you’re drunk.”

“Why would you do that?” He stared at me suspiciously, taking the keys carefully in his hand.

“I don’t want to wash dishes at the diner all the time. If you crash here, I can get you up and moving, so I don’t end up with dishpan hands.”

I knew he didn’t buy that explanation, but I also knew he needed to keep his pride and he wasn’t going to take charity. Not

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that giving him my apartment key was a handout. I trusted him not to steal me blind or kill me in my sleep.

“Thanks.”

He left, and I cleaned up the kitchen. I had time before Bernie came to straighten up my apartment and do some laundry.

By one, my apartment sparkled and the few clothes I had were folded, nice and neat, and had been put away in the closet. I thought about going down to the diner and talking with Cookie, but I didn’t want him to ask me to work a few hours this afternoon. This afternoon was the time I’d get to be naked with Bernie without any interruptions.

Footsteps raced up my stairs and I flung open the door just as Bernie hit the landing. He hauled me tight to his chest and kissed me. I yielded, allowing his tongue to thrust into my mouth, just like I wanted his cock to do in my ass. I lifted one leg, wrapping it around his thigh and rubbing against that rock hard muscle.

He sucked on my tongue and an image of him kneeling in front of me with his lips encircling my prick flashed through my brain. I whined, needing more, but not wanting to lose his touch to get it.

A whistle broke us apart, and I glanced down to see Cynthia standing at the back of the diner. She flashed me a thumbs-up, and I flipped her the finger. I saw her grin as she waved and went back inside.

Bernie licked his lips and turned, heading down the stairs as fast as he’d just come up them. “Let’s go.”

Arguing wasn’t in my mind. I grabbed my phone, wallet, and keys before locking the door and following him. We got to his truck without anyone stopping us, and he was pulling out of the parking lot while I buckled my seatbelt.

Reaching over the console, I rubbed my hand over his thigh,

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heading for the bulge in his jeans. I skated my fingers over his jean-covered cock, and he growled, his hips lifting off the seat to press his package into my palm. Squeezing caused him to jerk and he grabbed my hand, removing it from his groin.

“Any more of that and I’ll drive us into the wall.”

“I’ll be good. I don’t want to die before you get a chance to fuck me.”

I’ll admit if anyone asked me to give them directions to Bernie’s house, I wouldn’t be able to tell them anything. All I knew was that it took too long.

We squealed into his driveway, and he slammed the truck into park. We met in front of the vehicle, and I followed his tight ass inside without even glancing at the house. I didn’t care what it looked like. As long as it had someplace private he could take me, it was a great place as far as I was concerned.

## CHAPTER 10

He unlocked the door and stepped back, gesturing for me to enter first. Taking a few steps in, I waited until he shut and locked the door behind him before I grabbed his shoulders and slammed him back against it.

A wicked leer crossed Bernie's face and he knocked my hands off his body. His hands landed on my shoulders, pushing me down. Since that was where I wanted to be anyway, I relaxed and dropped to my knees.

My hands trembled as I unbuckled Bernie's belt and got his jeans open. I was on more familiar ground. Aaron liked blow jobs, and I'd found I enjoyed driving a man crazy with my mouth.

I freed Bernie's cock from his underwear, pushing the fabric down to give myself access to his balls as well. Rocking back on

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my heels, I stared at Bernie's prick, anticipating how heavy it would feel on my tongue. It was thicker than Aaron's, but not as long.

Mentally slapping myself, I shoved all thoughts of Aaron out of my head. It wasn't fair to constantly compare them. Aaron had been a boy who feared his father so much he would hurt two people to avoid any punishment. I had a feeling Bernie didn't need anyone's approval, that he lived his life as he wanted and not how others would like him to.

Bernie tapped my cheek and I glanced up at him.

"What are you thinking about?"

"I've never seen anything so gorgeous in my life." I grinned.

He gave me a skeptical look. "Something tells me you haven't seen a lot of cocks to begin with, so I'm not sure who you're comparing mine with."

"I'm not a virgin," I protested, even though he was right about not seeing many cocks. I'd only seen Aaron's.

"I never said you were, baby. Just that you don't strike me as being very experienced."

Embarrassed, I leaned forward and swallowed Bernie's cock, taking his shaft in until it hit the back of my throat. A thud sounded above me and I tilted my head slightly to look up. Bernie's head rested against the door with his eyes closed. Just as I'd thought it would, filling my mouth with him shut him up.

I applied suction as I let his prick slip out, drawing a groan from him. Pressing my flattened tongue against the bundle of nerves underneath made Bernie jerk, shoving his cock back in before I could stop him. Gagging, I gripped his hips and pinned him.

"Sorry," he muttered.

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I pulled off him with a pop and cradled his heavy balls in my hand, rolling them with my fingers. Bending a little more, I licked the wrinkled skin and, easing back, I blew a puff of air along the wet trail. His balls drew tighter to his body and the musky scent of sex filled the air.

Turning my attention back to his cock, I wrapped my hand around the base of his shaft and lowered my lips, creating a tunnel for Bernie to thrust into. With a low hum, I let him know he could move, and move he did. With strength and control, he took my mouth, making me forget about any other cock I might have sucked.

I gripped his hip with my other hand, giving myself support and something to hold onto so I didn't fall over. His hands slid into my hair and held my head still while he slammed into me. His grunts filled his front hall and my soft noises served as counterpoint to his.

My hand stroked him while I sucked, milking his climax from him with each swallow. I knew he was close as his rhythm stuttered or sped up. The smooth movement of his hips changed and his pre-cum coated my tongue, warning me. I released him and dipped to the side while pumping faster.

His hot cum covered my hand and dropped to the floor at his feet. I nipped his hipbone, bringing blood to the surface and marking him, besides driving him farther along his climax. When he stopped moving, his legs gave out and he slid down the door to sit on the floor. I curled up next to him, my cock throbbing and painful.

He encircled my waist, tugging me closer while, with his other hand, he brought my cum-covered fingers to his mouth. Shuddering, I pressed closer as he cleaned sticky liquid off my skin



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with his tongue. I rubbed my hand against my groin, and he chuckled.

“You’re evil, Bernie. Please, I’m dying here,” I begged.

“So hot,” he murmured, brushing his lips against my ear before turning my head and kissing me.

I tasted the saltiness in his mouth and wished I had drunk down his cum instead of wasting it on the floor, but I didn’t know if he was clean and I wasn’t going to run that risk.

Bernie got my jeans opened and forced his hand down under my briefs, gripping my erection in a tight fist.

“Fuck,” I yelled, body arching and sparks shooting in my head.

There was no mercy in his touch. He drove me higher and higher with each stroke. His callused thumb pressed into the slit in the crown of my cock. Pleasure quickly absorbed pain and more pre-cum leaked from me, slicking my skin for him.

“Bernie.”

The air left my lungs and lightning exploded along every nerve of my body. I rocked as my cum spilled from me over his hand and onto my jeans. Bernie’s touch didn’t leave me until every last drop had been squeezed out of my cock.

He moved away from me a little and stripped off his shirt, wiping his hand clean before tossing it aside. I cuddled close to his warm skin, blinking slowly and trying to get my limbs coordinated enough to stand or do anything. He hugged me, nuzzling his face into my hair and I rested my head on his chest, listening to his breathing.

“Somewhere Over the Rainbow” blared through the silence, and I jerked.

“Is that your phone?” Bernie ducked to meet my gaze.

Frowning, I struggled to work my phone out of my back

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pocket. I glanced at the number on the screen and tensed with worry.

“It’s my Aunt Judy.”

“Makes sense,” Bernie mumbled, climbing to his feet and tucking his soft cock back in his pants. After straightening his clothes, he offered me a hand.

I took it while answering the phone. “Aunt Judy, what’s wrong?”

“Tim?”

Confused, I held the phone away from me and stared at it for a second. Bernie looked puzzled, but he cleaned me off and got my jeans buttoned up for me.

I put my ear to the receiver again and asked, “Aaron?”

“Yes.”

“Why the hell are you calling me from Aunt Judy’s phone?”

Anger surged through me. Aunt Judy didn’t know Aaron and I had been lovers. She’d always assumed we were just friends, and I figured Aaron probably used that assumption to get my phone number from her, but to use her phone was even lower than I thought Aaron would go.

“I know you don’t want to talk to me, Tim, but your Uncle Bill is in the hospital. He’s really sick and your aunt has been with him since yesterday. I figured you’d want to know.”

I staggered, and Bernie grabbed my elbow, helping me over to his couch. He sat and pulled me down on his lap. I snuggled as close as I could get, needing his warmth and solidness while my world cracked around me.

“Is he going to...”

“I don’t know. They transferred him to County General and that’s all I know.” Aaron paused. “I miss you, Tim.”

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"I can't do this right now, Aaron. I said all I'm going to say to you the night I left." I bit my lip and my hands trembled so badly, I dropped my phone.

Bernie caught it before it hit the floor. Tucking me tighter against his chest, he spoke into the phone. "Aaron, I'll make sure Tim gets up to Minnesota as soon as possible."

He paused and I could hear Aaron talking.

"I'm a friend of Tim's." Bernie rolled his eyes, and I chuckled despite the shock I'd just suffered. "A good friend."

His statement tempered my fear slightly. To be honest, I wasn't sure what we were. We hadn't gotten to the actual sex part of being lovers yet, and I didn't know if he thought of me as a friend since we'd only been out on a date once.

"Tell his aunt to call him when she gets a chance, and he'll call to let her know when he'll be arriving."

Bernie pushed the end button and handed me the phone before he wrapped me in his strong arms and pressed his lips to my forehead. I shuddered, not wanting to think about my uncle dying. Uncle Bill and Aunt Judy had been my foundation for years and, though I understood they were older, I wasn't ready for them to die yet.

"Sh-h-h...it'll be okay, Tim."

Shaking my head, I pulled out of his arms and stood. I paced in front of him, holding myself. "I have to get up to Minnesota, but I don't have any money. I can't take a bus. It'll take too long and I don't know how sick Uncle Bill is."

Bernie snatched his phone off the table behind the couch. I moved to the window and stared out over his front yard. The houses across the street looked well-lived in, but also that the owners took care of them.

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“Hey, Cookie, I wanted to let you know Tim’s going to need some time off.”

I stiffened. How would Cookie react to his newest employee taking time off? Even though it was an emergency.

“His uncle in Minnesota is very sick and he needs to get back home to check on his aunt.”

Resting my forehead on the cool glass, I fought back my tears. Uncle Bill was tough and had never been really sick since I had gone to live with them. It broke my heart, knowing he was in the hospital and my aunt was alone.

*Don’t be over dramatic, Timothy.* I could almost hear Aunt Judy say it. I knew she wasn’t alone. The ladies from her church would be with her and my uncle. They had lots of friends in town.

“Yes, I’ll be going with him. I have to call and get a flight for us.”

“What?” I whirled around to stare at Bernie in surprise. “You can’t go with me.”

Bernie raised an eyebrow and grinned in my direction. “Don’t worry. I’ll call you when I get the times. Thanks, Cookie. Sorry to leave you shorthanded.”

God, I was going to lose my job. I scrubbed my hand over my face and sighed. I’d worry about that later. There were other issues I needed to deal with, like Bernie coming to Minnesota with me.

“Why did you tell Cookie you were going with me?”

He pushed to his feet and took my hand. “You shouldn’t go back alone. I don’t have any jobs for the next week or so. I can get us plane tickets for a flight out tonight.”

“I don’t have money to pay you back.”

Shaking his head, he smiled. “We’ll figure something out, but we’re friends, Tim, and friends help each other out.”

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I wanted to say no and not accept his charity, but common sense told me that it wasn't charity. That, like my offering keys to Chad, this was Bernie's way of helping me.

"Okay, but make sure you keep track of how much the tickets are because I plan on paying you back, every penny of it."

He nodded and led me down the hallway to his kitchen. "Why don't you make a couple of sandwiches while I'll call the airport to get us a flight."

"Okay."

I needed something to do, so I didn't dwell on all the bad things that could be happening to my uncle. How much money did a long haul trucker make? I studied the very modern kitchen with stainless steel appliances. The pots and pans hung from a steel grid over the granite-topped island in the middle of the room. Opening the refrigerator, I found everything I needed for sandwiches.

Setting all the fixings down on the island, I searched through his cupboards to find plates, glasses, and silverware. Bernie wandered in as I started to put together the first sandwich.

"We have a flight out of Austin in two hours. I've got someone to keep an eye on my place while we're gone." He swiped a tomato and winked as he left, calling over his shoulder, "I'm going to pack and we'll head to your place afterward to get your stuff."

"Thank you," was all I could say.

## CHAPTER 11

We grabbed our bags from the luggage claim area, and Bernie led the way to the rental car place. I was still a little numb with the speed by which Bernie had gotten us to Minnesota. I'd left a message for my aunt, letting her know we would be at the hospital in an hour, depending on how long it took us to get a car.

Fifteen minutes later, we were pulling out of the parking lot, Bernie behind the wheel of our luxury sedan. I fidgeted with my seatbelt and the radio, curiosity eating away at me.

"We could've gotten a smaller, less expensive car," I commented.

"I do a lot of driving, sweetheart. I know the importance of a smooth ride."

Whether he meant it to be suggestive or not, I blushed. I bet he

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did know all about a nice ride.

“Do you think I’ll ever get to find out how smooth a ride you give?” I muttered under my breath.

Bernie rested his hand on my thigh and squeezed. “In time, Tim. At some point, there won’t be any more emergencies and we’ll get some time alone.”

“I hope so.”

Staring down at his hand, I noticed blue flecks on his fingers and thumbs.

“Have you been painting something?”

“My guest bedroom. I finished remodeling it last month, so the painting was next.”

Something in his tone made me suspicious, but I kept my mouth shut. As much as I wanted to know what he was hiding from me, it wasn’t the right time. Relaxing in my seat, I leaned back and closed my eyes. We still had a long night in front of us, so a short nap was probably a good idea.

What seemed like only seconds later, Bernie shook my shoulder from where he crouched down next to my side of the car. Stretching, I cupped the back of his head and drew his mouth down to mine. Our lips met in the faintest of kisses, a whisper of promise and caring.

“I see you were really heartbroken, Tim.”

I jerked away, and Bernie straightened. Scrambling out of the car, I tripped into Bernie’s arms. Once we got ourselves arranged, I turned to see Aaron glaring at us, his arms crossed over his chest.

“What are you doing here?”

“I came to make sure your aunt was doing all right.” Aaron’s eyes shifted to Bernie.

“That might be partly true, but I think you really came to check

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out my friend.”

“Don’t you mean your *good* friend?” Aaron sneered.

Bernie stepped between us and offered Aaron his hand. “I’m Bernard Capley. You must be Aaron. Tim has told me about you.”

That really wasn’t a lie. I had told him about Aaron, just never called him by name. Aaron’s gaze narrowed, and I knew he wasn’t going to shake Bernie’s hand. My ex-boyfriend had a jealous streak and even though I was no longer his, Aaron wouldn’t like the idea of me finding someone else to spend time with.

“He did, huh? I’m sure it was all good.”

“Not really. Where’s your wife?”

I winced, and Aaron actually took a step back. That wasn’t what I thought Bernie would say. Inching closer, I set my hand on Bernie’s back and smiled tentatively at Aaron.

Aaron ignored me, his entire attention on Bernie, which was what my lover wanted, I’m sure. Unfolding his arms, Aaron leaned closer to Bernie and me.

Before anyone threw the first punch, I started toward the hospital entrance. I wasn’t the type of guy who wanted people fighting over him. It didn’t feed my ego or anything like that. I was finding it made me feel more like a possession than a person.

“Tim, wait,” Aaron called out, but I ignored him.

Bernie caught up with me as I reached the front desk.

“Can you tell me what room William Gapin is in? Please.”

The lady checked her computer and wrote down the number. “Room 1324.”

“Thank you.”

I strolled to the elevator, not acknowledging Bernie until we were in the car. Aaron hadn’t followed us.

“What the fuck was that?”



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Bernie looked at the floor and shuffled his feet. “Just reminding him that he threw you away. He shouldn’t play the injured party.”

“I don’t want either of us to play the injured party, Bernie.” I pinched the bridge of my nose. “I just want to forget about the whole thing. I loved him, I can admit that, and it hurt when he married her, but once I left, I tried to move on.”

“But you can’t stop loving someone just like that.” He seemed earnest.

The elevator door dinged opened and I stepped out.

“I know and I didn’t say I stopped loving him.” I turned on him and cradled his face in my hands. “Bernie, some part of me will always love Aaron, but he isn’t mine to have anymore, and I refuse to waste any more time on a man who would turn his back on me for money.”

“I would never do that to you. I know...I know. We just met and haven’t spent that much time together. Why should you believe me?” He rested his hands on my hips.

He rested his forehead against mine, and we stared into each other’s eyes. I saw the sincerity in his gaze.

Smiling, I said, “I’m willing to try and learn how to trust you, Bernie. I know there are things you haven’t told me yet, and we’ll get to those later. For right now, just knowing you’ve got my back, especially with Aaron, is enough for me.”

“I’m here for you as long as you want me.”

I gave him a quick kiss, saying as I turned away, “You should get used to being at my side because I don’t see me letting you go any time soon.”

## CHAPTER 12

I checked the room numbers as we made our way down the hall. When we got to Room 1324, I pushed open the door and went in. Aunt Judy sat in a chair close to the bed, holding Uncle Bill's hand and talking quietly.

"Aunt Judy?"

Her head shot up and her faded blue eyes gleamed with pleasure when she saw me. Jumping to her feet, she raced to me with her arms held open. "Timothy."

I held her to me and how frail Aunt Judy had become hit me. Tears filled my eyes and I tightened my grip on her. Why did I have to leave to find out how dear they were to me and how old they had become?

"How is he, Aunt Judy?" I nodded at Uncle Bill.

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She led me to his bed and touched his hand. "William, Timothy is here."

His eyes fluttered open, and I smiled at him. "Hey, Uncle Bill, is this the only way Aunt Judy would give you a day off?"

"Timothy, my dear boy, I told your aunt not to call you. I'll be out of here in a day or two." Uncle Bill's voice was thready and low.

I glanced at my aunt and she gave a little shake of her head.

"I was looking for a reason to take some time off my new job."

"Who is your friend?"

We all looked over at Bernie, who stood near the door and was trying to be unobtrusive.

"His name is Bernard Capley, Uncle Bill. He drives truck for a living."

Bernie took Uncle Bill's hand in his and shook it carefully. "Nice to meet you, Mr. Gapin. Mrs. Gapin."

"Please call me Judy. It's nice to know Timothy isn't alone down in Texas. He's doesn't make friends easily."

"Aunt Judy."

They all chuckled at me, and I didn't mind their laughter if it meant Uncle Bill got a little color in his cheeks.

"Have you eaten yet?"

I wanted to get my aunt alone to talk about what was wrong with my uncle.

"No, but I don't want to leave your uncle."

"Now, Judy, go and let these young men take you out for dinner. I'm not going anywhere, and it'll be good for you to get out of this hospital for an hour or so."

"I can keep an eye on him, Mrs. Gapin."

I froze, turning to face the doorway and there she was. Did God

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hate me? Is that why the two people I didn't want to see would show up the minute I got into town?

"Are you sure you don't mind?" Aunt Judy beamed at her.

"It's my job." She stepped farther into the room, and that's when I noticed she was dressed in scrubs.

"You're a nurse."

Stupid, I know, but my mind went blank at the sight of her.

"Yes."

"Valerie, I'm not sure if you were ever introduced to my nephew, Timothy. This is Valerie Stinson, Aaron's wife."

As much as I wanted to run away, I couldn't. It wasn't her fault she'd married the man I loved. I'm sure she hadn't known about us until the night I left.

"Sorry I missed your wedding. Congratulations...Aaron is a lucky man."

She studied me for a moment as if she was assessing the truthfulness of my words. No matter how I felt, I truly did mean them.

"Thank you."

She smiled, and I nodded.

"Grab your purse, Aunt Judy, and we'll go out to get something to eat."

Aunt Judy kissed my uncle, then picked up her purse and coat. I leaned down to kiss my uncle on the cheek.

"Make sure she eats, son," Uncle Bill said softly to me.

"Yes, sir."

Bernie offered Aunt Judy his arm. "We'll bring her back in an hour or so."

"I'll take good care of Mr. Gapin."

Outside the hospital I gave Bernie directions to the nearest

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chain restaurant. I waited until we ordered before I opened the conversation. "What's wrong with Uncle Bill, Aunt Judy?"

Sighing, she took a sip of her water first. "He's got cancer. The doctors say he's really sick, but there's a fifty percent chance they caught it in time."

*Cancer.* The word turned my heart into ice and my hands shook. I tucked them in my lap, not wanting to let my aunt to see my reaction. Bernie grasped one of my hands in his and squeezed. The evidence of his caring helped steady me.

"Have they given you any treatment options?"

"He's going to have radiation and chemotherapy. His operation is scheduled for tomorrow, so I'm glad you made it down tonight."

"Aaron called me," I informed her.

"I know. He stopped by last night and offered to call you for me."

"That was nice of him." I couldn't keep all of my bitterness out of my voice.

Aunt Judy leaned forward and placed her hand on my arm. "I know he broke your heart, Timothy."

My mouth dropped open and I stared at her. I wasn't surprised that she knew about me being gay. I never told them, but they were observant people. I was shocked she knew about Aaron and me, though. "You never said anything."

"Of course not. It must have been difficult for you to be gay and live in a small town, and we didn't want to make it harder on you. Besides that, Aaron seemed so scared and I mean look at what he did. He married Valerie to make his father happy and broke your heart in the process."

She glanced over at Bernie, who was trying to act like he wasn't listening. Looking back at me, she winked. "I think you got

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the better end of the deal.”

Bernie grinned.

I silently agreed with her.

Our meal came and we discussed what was going on with Uncle Bill. I promised to help them out the best I could with money. Cookie would let me pick up more hours at the diner if I needed them. I wanted to tell her that I would move back home, but I couldn't do it. I'd only been in Texas for a little under a month and it already felt more like home than the town I grew up in. I met Bernie's gaze and his soft smile warmed me. The feeling of home might have more to do with the people I'd met than the place itself.

Bernie and I drove my aunt back to the hospital and escorted her up to my uncle's room. Valerie was just walking out as we approached. She smiled at my aunt. “Did you have a good supper, Mrs. Gapin?”

“Yes, I did, Valerie. How is William?”

“He's fine. I was just giving him his medicine.” She pursed her lips and checked her watch. “I'm sorry, but visiting hours are over for all but Mrs. Gapin.”

“That's fine,” I said. “We've got two rooms at the hotel, Aunt Judy. I expect you to come back with us there tomorrow night and get some sleep. It won't help Uncle Bill if you got sick as well.”

“I'll take you up on that, Timothy. Valerie brought me some clothes this morning.” Aunt Judy hugged both of us. “Now get out of here. You've been traveling all day. Come back around eight tomorrow. William's surgery isn't until ten.”

“Okay. Good night, Aunt Judy. We'll call before we come over tomorrow, so if you need anything, we can bring it.”

Bernie and I left the room, but instead of going to the elevator,

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I went to the nurses' station. Valerie stood there talking to one of the other nurses. I waited until they finished before I spoke.

"Valerie?"

Her smile dimmed.

"I wanted to give you my cell number, in case something happens during the night." I wrote down the number and handed it to her.

"I can do that." She fingered the edge of the paper for a second, then looked up at me. "I'm sorry."

I knew what she was talking about. "So am I."

We understood each other.

## CHAPTER 13

I flopped down on the bed closest to the door and stared up at the ceiling. Bernie dropped our bags on the other bed before sitting next to me. He rested his hand on my stomach and, looking over at him, I covered it with my hand.

“How are you doing?”

I heard the hysterical touch in my chuckle. “I’m not sure. It’s almost too much to think about.”

I rolled on my side, curling into Bernie, and laying my head on his thigh. Bernie carded his fingers through my hair and the soothing motion eased my racing thoughts.

“Uncle Bill might be dying and I have to think about money for the bills. Aunt Judy can’t afford them on her own, so I’ll have to pick up more hours at the diner, which means you and I won’t be



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able to see each other much if I'm working all the time. I don't want to lose the chance we have to make a solid relationship. Saying that out loud makes me feel like I'm being selfish. I should be worried about my uncle instead of what's going to happen between us."

Bernie shifted and maneuvered me until we were both lying on the bed, wrapped in each other's arms. I pressed my face into the crook of his neck and breathed in his warm male scent.

"Try not to worry about us, Tim. I won't walk away when things get tough." Bernie's voice rumbled in his chest, and I let the vibration shiver through me. "I'll help you out any way I can."

"I know, but you shouldn't have to. We haven't known each other long enough for you to get saddled with my problems."

"I'd like to think that even if I didn't want to sleep with you, I'd still help you out as a friend." Bernie kissed my cheek. "How did seeing Aaron feel? I'm assuming from your interaction with him and Valerie that it was because of him that you left."

"I told you how I felt about Aaron. It was meeting Valerie that threw me. I'd never talked to her or anything. I didn't go to their wedding...told Aunt Judy I was sick. I don't hate her, though. It isn't her fault Aaron lied to both of us."

My lips brushed the base of Bernie's neck. I licked him, just like before, and he moaned. I decided I didn't want to talk about anything anymore. All my problems and issues would be there in the morning when we left our room, so I wanted to forget for a while. Also, I wanted to take advantage of having time alone without the possibility of anyone bothering us since no one knew what room we were in.

Leaning back, I unbuttoned his shirt and stripped it off him. He lay there, letting me do as I would with him. I brushed my fingers

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over his nipples, watching the nubs harden. His chest was lightly furred and a trail of hair wandered over his abs to disappear under the waistband of his jeans.

Leaning down, I flicked one nipple with the tip of my tongue, and he shifted. This time I was determined nothing would stop us from finally having sex. I needed more from him than just a hand job. I needed him to fill me.

Quickly, I undressed him the rest of the way. His erection stood proud and straight from the nest of brown curls at the base of his shaft. I trailed my finger over the length of his hard flesh, swiping through the beads of pre-cum seeping from his slit. I brought it to my lips and tasted him.

“Stay here,” I ordered him as I climbed off the bed.

“Like I was going to go anywhere.” He laughed.

I scrambled to find my shaving kit, digging out the condoms and lube I had packed in hope they’d get used at some point while we were here. Holding them up, I turned to find Bernie laying there, jerking off.

“None of that. I plan to ride you, and I can’t if you climax before I’m ready.”

“Well, then hurry up already.”

I tossed the stuff at him and stripped, not wanting to waste time. Bernie opened the foil packet and rolled the condom on while I crawled onto the bed and knelt to kiss him. Our tongues battled, stroking and sucking. I heard the pop of the tube and prepared for the cool drizzle of lube down my crease. I took a breath and relaxed as he penetrated me with his fingers. Rocking back, I took him farther in, letting him stretch me and get me ready for his cock.

“Please.”

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I held out my hand and Bernie squeezed some lube on my palm. Reaching back, I slicked up his cock and positioned it at my stretched hole. We sighed as he impaled me. I froze when his entire length filled me.

“Bernie,” I gasped, clenching my muscles around his shaft.

“Tim, you’re so hot and tight,” he murmured, running one of his hands up my chest to pinch my nipple and wrapping the other around my prick.

I moved then, easing up and shoving back down. Our flesh slapped together and grunts filled the air. Bending his knees, Bernie braced his feet against the mattress and set a rhythm counterpoint to mine. I tilted my hips and his next thrust nailed my gland. Light sparked behind my eyelids and I cried out.

“Shit.”

With a heave of his body, Bernie flipped us and I wrapped my legs around his hips. I arched my back, begging with every inch of my body for him to take me harder and faster.

Each bump against my gland drove my need higher and higher, and pressure built at the base of my spine and throughout my entire body. My balls tightened and I reached down between us to grasp my own cock and let Bernie’s thrusts slide it through my fingers.

“Gonna...any minute now,” I warned.

Bernie sped up and his smooth strokes became jerky, but deep. Sweat dripped from his face to run down my chest. The room filled with the scents of man and sex.

“Come on my cock, baby. I want to feel you come,” Bernie growled out the words, leaning forward and biting my shoulder.

My cum coated my hand and stomach as my climax exploded through me. Bernie grunted as my inner muscles milked his dick until I drew his own orgasm from him. His cock swelled and he

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froze, filling the condom he wore with a flood of cum.

All the air in my lungs rushed out when Bernie collapsed on me. I tried to laugh, but breathing wasn't possible at the moment. I ran my hands over his back and waited until he found the strength to roll off me.

"Hmmm..."

I got the feeling he wasn't going to move another inch for a while, so I tumbled out of bed and went to clean up in the bathroom. After I finished, I took care of him and the condom.

Climbing back into bed, I lay on my side, and Bernie cuddled spoon-like to me. He wrapped his arm around my waist and held me tight. I fell asleep, finally finding out what it was like to share a bed with someone all night long.

## CHAPTER 14

At the hospital the next day, Bernie and I introduced ourselves to the day shift nurses as we made our way to Uncle Bill's room. I knocked and waited until Aunt Judy called out before we entered. Exhaustion lined her face and she seemed so fragile when I hugged her. I wished there was something I could do for her.

"Good morning, Uncle Bill." I leaned down and kissed his cool cheek.

"Morning, Timothy." He nodded at Bernie. "Bernard."

"Mr. Gapin, how are you doing this morning?" Bernie touched my uncle's hand with his fingers.

"I'm still alive." His brown eyes sparkled with humor.

"That always makes the day start out right." Bernie grinned.

We laughed, and I was glad to see Uncle Bill up to joking

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around. I started to help Aunt Judy get seated again.

“Wait.” Uncle Bill gestured at Bernie. “Why don’t you take Judy to get some coffee, Bernard? I want to talk to Timothy privately for a moment.”

“But, William,” Aunt Judy protested.

“Certainly, Mr. Gapin.” He steered her toward the door. “I’ll bring you back a cup, Tim.”

“Thanks.”

I sat once the door shut behind them and met Uncle Bill’s gaze. “What did you want to talk about?”

“Your aunt and I are selling the farm.”

“What?” I leaned forward, surprise raising my voice. “You can’t do that. I’ll come back and help out.”

He reached out and I put my hand in his. “No. We were discussing selling the farm before I ever got sick. I’m just too old to run it anymore and, to be honest, it was too much even while you were here.”

I gripped his hand, trying not to squeeze too hard. “Why didn’t you say anything to me?”

“You wouldn’t have left if we said something to you.”

“Damn right, I wouldn’t have. You took me in when my parents died, and I owe you more than I can ever repay. If staying means you can keep your farm, I’ll move back.”

Uncle Bill shook his head. “We don’t expect to be paid back for taking you in, Timothy. First of all, you’re family and you’ve become our son in every way, even though Judy never gave birth to you. Second, you wouldn’t have been happy staying. You might be a small town boy at heart, but not our town. Not with Aaron and Valerie married and making a life for themselves.”

I hung my head, staring at our hands clasped together. “Why

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don't you hate me?"

"Hate you? Why would I hate you?"

Lifting my head, I met his puzzled gaze. "Because I'm gay."

He frowned. "I might not understand why, but I won't turn my back on my son because of how God made him. If I believe God created everything on Earth and that He doesn't make mistakes, then I have to accept you are the way God wants you to be."

"Not many people think like you do, Uncle Bill."

"Too many people are caught up in the hate and fear that being different creates. They aren't willing to see the things we all have in common. We all live and die. It's important to do some good before we leave this earth and maybe leave it a little better than we found it."

"Thanks."

"I love you, Timothy. Aaron treated you wrong, though I understand why he hid. His father isn't the most open-minded man out there."

Nodding, I let go of his hands and stood, pacing between his bed and the window. "I know, and once the hurt wore off a little, I even was willing to forgive him. He's had a hard life, trying to please his father. I was angrier with him over the fact he never told me and he involved someone who doesn't deserve to be just a front."

I stopped at the window and rested my forehead against the cool glass, staring into the reflective surface. I didn't see my image as I remembered the last night Aaron and I were together. He'd met me out at Uncle Bill's cabin. I was excited because we hadn't been together for over a week and more than missing the sex, I hated not talking to him.

When he stepped into the cabin, I knew there was something

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wrong. His expression was unhappy, but hopeful.

"We have to talk," he said.

"About what?"

"Why I haven't been around this past week."

He moved close to the fireplace and held his hands out to the flames. I shivered, wrapping my arms around my waist. Something in his voice sounded ominous.

"I figured you were just busy."

"Yes, I was busy getting ready for my wedding."

My heart stopped for a second and air rushed from my lungs like he'd just sucker punched me. I doubled over, gasping and trying not to throw up. He didn't move toward me, understanding I didn't want his touch at the moment.

"Your wedding?"

Aaron nodded, not looking at me. "It's this Saturday. You should be receiving your invitation tomorrow, which is why I asked you to meet me here. I wanted to tell you myself."

"How very polite of you." I gritted my teeth and straightened, clenching my hands by my side. "How long have you been engaged?"

"Since last Sunday," he whispered.

My jaw dropped and I stared at him. "You've been engaged for three days. Is she pregnant?"

Aaron looked slightly horrified. "No. My father's very excited about the whole thing and wants us married as soon as possible. It's a good alliance for him business-wise."

"You're marrying her for your dad's business goals?" Nausea rolled in my stomach again. I collapsed into the chair behind me, scrubbing my hand over my face.

My uncle coughed, drawing me back from my memories.



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Closing my eyes, I grimaced.

“We fought, mostly just yelling, though I wouldn’t listen to his excuses. I was angry at him and her.” Shaking my head, I frowned. “I shouldn’t have been mad at Valerie. She didn’t know about Aaron and me.”

“You were angry at her because she was taking away what you loved. It makes sense.”

I couldn’t believe I was talking about this with my uncle. The last thing Aaron said to me as I walked out of the cabin rang in my ears.

“He told me he didn’t love her.”

A gasp caused me to whirl around and my heart dropped when I saw Valerie standing in the doorway. Tears welled in her eyes and she whirled around, the door slamming behind her.

“Shit. Another thing I screwed up,” I muttered.

“No, son. You didn’t do anything wrong. Aaron and his father chose to deceive her, not you.”

I didn’t believe Uncle Bill. I made up my mind to search Valerie out and talk to her the first chance I got.

Uncle Bill pointed to the chair next to his bed. “We’ve already put the farm up for sale. The realty lady has our permission to take people around. Your aunt will know more about that part. We haven’t decided where we’ll move to, though I’m pushing for someplace warm.”

“You should come down and check out Austin when you’re feeling better, Mr. Gapin,” Bernie said as he ushered Aunt Judy back in.

I stood, letting her have my seat. When Bernie handed me my coffee, our fingers brushed, and I relaxed. He was here and I didn’t have to go through this all alone.

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“There’s an idea. We might have to look into that.” Aunt Judy studied Uncle Bill, spotting the pain and exhaustion he was trying to hide with a practiced eye that came from being together for thirty-five years.

Soon the doctors arrived, explaining what was going to happen during the surgery. After they left, the nurses came to take him and prep him.

We walked down with him to the OR prep room. Bernie and I stayed long enough to wish him well, then we headed to the waiting room. Aunt Judy joined us a few minutes later, and we settled in to wait.

Bernie left to make a call and when he returned, he sat next to me. “Cookie says to tell you they’re all praying for your uncle down there,” he whispered.

I bumped his shoulder with mine, wanting nothing more than for him to hold me tight, but it wasn’t the right place or time for that. “Thank you.”

Bernie nodded and he kept me grounded by his very presence when I wanted just to break down. Uncle Bill was the solid foundation on which I’d built my life. I’d always trusted that he and Aunt Judy would be there when I needed them, and I wasn’t ready to give up that safety net.

## CHAPTER 15

Two hours into the procedure, a nurse came out and reassured us everything was going well. I'd been dozing, but after the nurse left, I grew restless. Bernie was scribbling in a battered notepad he'd brought from the hotel. As engrossed as he was, I didn't have the heart to bother him. Aunt Judy was knitting a bright blue baby blanket for one of the ladies at church whose daughter was pregnant.

When I stood, they glanced up.

"I'm going for a walk. I'll be back in a few minutes."

Aunt Judy nodded, but Bernie eyed me, trying to make sure I was okay. I smiled and grasped his shoulder.

"I'm fine, just restless."

He covered my hand with his for a second before letting go.

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“Would either of you like something to drink?”

They both asked for coffee, and I strolled off, figuring the walk to the cafeteria would burn off some of my energy.

By the time I got back to the waiting room, I’d made some plans. I gave them their coffees and took my place next to Bernie again.

“Aunt Judy, once we know Uncle Bill’s recovering okay from the surgery, I think you should go to the hotel and spend the night there. Get some sleep.”

“Oh, I’m fine, Timothy. The chairs in the rooms are very comfortable,” she protested.

“I’m sure they’re very good chairs, but you need to start getting more rest. You getting sick won’t help Uncle Bill. You have your car, so you can come back first thing tomorrow and the nurses will call you if something happens.”

She didn’t really like the idea, but I could be as stubborn as she was and I wasn’t going to cave.

“Fine. It’ll be nice to take a bath,” she mumbled.

“I thought Bernie and I could go out to the farm and check things out. I want to show him where I grew up.”

Bernie took my hand, and I blushed, feeling slightly silly for wanting to show him around where I used to live.

“Sounds like a wonderful idea. You can give him a tour of the town on your way back tomorrow.”

With that settled, I leaned over and snatched Bernie’s notepad out of his hand. He made a grab for it, but I blocked him long enough to open it and see what filled the pages.

“Oh, wow,” I gasped, flipping through the notepad.

Each page held a sketch. Bernie brought every person he drew to life. He got it away from me before I could get to the last several

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pages.

“You never told me you could draw.” I pouted.

“It’s nothing important, just something I do at night on long haul jobs.”

“Nothing important?” I waved at the book. “Your sketches are amazing. I bet you could make a fortune with those.”

His cheeks pinkened, and I chuckled. Turning, I found Aunt Judy watching us, a fond smile on her face. I was about to comment when one of the doctors came in.

\* \* \*

Relief rolled through me as we stared at Uncle Bill. He was still very groggy, and the nurse told us he’d be like that until morning. Good, that meant Aunt Judy wouldn’t feel guilty about spending the night at the hotel.

“Tell Uncle Bill good-night and we’ll follow you back to the hotel.”

She gave him a hug and a kiss, informing him that she would be back in the morning. I gave Uncle Bill a quick kiss on the cheek and ushered Aunt Judy out. If I didn’t get her moving, she’d find a reason to stay with him and I really wanted her to sleep at the hotel that night.

We made sure the night nurses had her cell phone number in case something went wrong. I drove her and her car to the hotel with Bernie following us. After getting her settled in, we grabbed our bags and headed out to my hometown.

It was a three-hour drive from the hospital to the farm. We were driving through the town around seven that night when Bernie pulled to a stop in front of a restaurant.

“Why are you stopping?”

“I’m hungry,” he said, turning the car off and getting out.

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“We could grab something from the store and make supper at home.”

Now that we were here, why was I so reluctant to have him meet the people I grew up with?

I joined him inside, somehow managing not to turn and run when Wanda squealed and raced over to me. “Tim Gapin, as I live and breathe. I can’t believe you’re here.”

She embraced me and almost broke two ribs with her hug. I gasped and wriggled out of her arms.

“Of course, I’m here. Did you think I wouldn’t come with Uncle Bill being sick and all?”

She waved us to a table in front of the big bay window. I stifled a groan. Now everyone walking by would be able to see me and I knew more people would be stopping in to say hi.

“Who is this handsome man?” Wanda flashed her bright smile at Bernie.

I hesitated. Would Bernie expect me to introduce him as my boyfriend? I didn’t have a problem with that, but I wasn’t sure how far along we were in our relationship. Were we just friends with benefits right now or were we more?

“I’m a friend of Tim’s from Austin—Bernie Capley.” He offered Wanda his hand.

“Such a polite man.”

She shook his hand, gave us our menus, and took our drink orders.

After she moved away, I leaned forward. “I’m sorry.”

“About what?” Bernie studied the menu.

“About not introducing you. I wasn’t sure how you wanted me to do it. Are you my boyfriend?”

God, now I felt like I was in elementary school, asking a crush

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to be mine.

He set the menu aside and reached out to touch the top of my hand for a second. When he pulled back, I wanted to ask if it was because he didn't want to be seen holding my hand or if he did it for my benefit.

"You introduce me however you feel comfortable, Tim. I'd love for the world to know I'm yours in ways more than just friends, but this is your hometown and you have to be comfortable here."

His words calmed me. I decided to talk to Aunt Judy about it. She and Uncle Bill would be living in Frankfort for a while. I didn't want my coming out to cause problems for them.

"Thank you. I want to talk to Aunt Judy first. Make sure my being gay won't cause too much trouble for them before I announce it to the world."

"Smart idea."

Bernie sat back to let Wanda set our drinks down and he gestured for me to order first.

## CHAPTER 16

Halfway through the nightly special, which was the best meatloaf I'd tasted since I left Frankfort, I heard a commotion at the front of the restaurant. Glancing up, my jaw dropped when I spotted Aaron barreling towards me with Valerie drifting in his wake.

Maybe it was his clenched hands or the scowl on his face, but something told me this wasn't going to be a friendly encounter. I stood, moving away from our table, hoping I wouldn't involve anyone else in the drama.

Aaron's first punch connected with my stomach, and I doubled over, grunting at the pain. I knew he was getting ready to swing a second time, but there wasn't any way I could stop or block him. His fist never struck me. Gasping, I peered up to see Bernie



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holding Aaron's arm and glaring at him.

"What's wrong with you?" I whispered, not being able to get more strength behind my words.

"You told her I didn't love her."

I shot a look behind Aaron at Valerie and her apologetic look told me that she hadn't gone to Aaron to get back at me. I straightened and moved closer to him, confident Bernie wouldn't let him hit me again.

"We aren't doing this here," I muttered.

"Why not? Afraid I'll embarrass you?" He sneered at me, and I could see that rage had taken hold of him.

"Embarrass me all you want, but I refuse to let you embarrass Valerie in front of her friends and acquaintances."

"Are you trying to break us up? Is that why you came back—because you couldn't stand seeing me happy?" Aaron jerked, but Bernie didn't let go of his arm.

I shook my head. "If you want to have this conversation, we'll have it outside. I will not be the nightly entertainment for Frankfort."

Valerie turned and headed outside. I pushed through the crowd, knowing Bernie would ensure Aaron followed us. When I stepped out, Valerie caught my arm and I met her tear-filled eyes.

"I shouldn't have said anything," she admitted.

"No, it was my fault. I should've paid more attention while I was talking to my uncle. I never planned on you knowing any more than you did about us. It was never my intention to hurt you."

"Why not? You had to have been hurt and angry when you found out we were getting married, especially since you were more than best friends."

Scrubbing my hands through my hair, I grimaced. "All right. I

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was mad and hurt when Aaron told me. I hadn't heard one word from anyone about the possibility, and he never mentioned you until three days before the wedding. I never once thought that you were to blame about the whole situation."

"Why not?"

I glanced around. Bernie and Aaron hadn't made it out of the restaurant yet, probably because Aaron was fighting my lover every step of the way. Other people stood on the sidewalk, but they gave Valerie and me our privacy.

"Did you know about Aaron and me?" I kept my voice low, not wanting anyone to figure out what we were talking about.

She shook her head. "All I knew was that you were best friends. His mother talked about how when you were younger, you were inseparable. Once you grew older, you seemed to grow apart and no one knew why."

Searching her face, I sighed. "Do you really want to know?"

"Yes."

Aaron burst through the doors, heading straight toward me. I pushed Valerie behind me, not wanting her injured if Aaron decided to take another swing at me. I held my hand out, pressing it against his chest and stopping him.

"Have you completely lost your mind, Aaron?"

Bernie loomed behind him, ready to pull him off me if needed, and I shook my head.

I leaned forward and pinned Aaron with my gaze. "You brought all of this on yourself by marrying Valerie to please your father. I don't think he'd be thrilled to hear about you brawling in the street like a thug."

He blinked, and I knew embarrassing Valerie never had mattered to him. He was more concerned with what his father

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would say about this incident. Aaron stepped back, almost running into Bernie before gesturing for Valerie to follow him. She shook her head.

"I have one question for you, Aaron." Her voice rang out, loud and clear over the murmurs of the crowd.

Cringing, I bumped her. "You don't want to do this now. Wait until you get home."

"No. I need to know something before we go any further with this."

Aaron whirled around and grabbed her arm. "We'll talk about this when we get home. I won't have our private business aired out in front of the town."

I eased her away from him. "Now I've reminded you that your father might not take kindly to you fighting in the streets, you're worried about your reputation."

"Tim, you should stay out of this. It's between them," Bernie suggested.

"I know and I'll let them go home to talk this out, but not if he manhandles her."

Valerie tugged her keys out of her pocket. "I'm going to my mother's, Aaron. Don't try to see or talk to me until I call you."

"But, Valerie, baby, we can work this out. Tim's just jealous." Aaron groveled, trying to block her from leaving.

I snorted, but kept my mouth shut. Jealousy never crossed my mind after the initial shock had worn off. Once I rode away on that bus, whatever I'd felt for Aaron slowly had dissolved until now all I felt for him was pity and disgust.

As she walked away, the crowd dispersed, leaving Bernie, Aaron, and me standing in the cool night air. Bernie encircled my waist, drawing me back into his side. I leaned on him, suddenly

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tired from all the drama.

“Why did you tell her that, Tim?” Aaron stared after his wife.

“I didn’t tell her. She walked in during a conversation I was having with my uncle. I’d never have said anything to her about us. Our relationship is in the past and has been since you told me you were getting married.”

“I thought you loved me,” Aaron commented.

“At one time, I did, but did you ever love me, Aaron? Or was I just a way of getting your rocks off and spitting in your father’s eye at the same time?” I saw Wanda in the doorway of the restaurant, holding our check in her hand. “I’m done talking to you. It’s up to you whether or not you can salvage your marriage, but the worst thing that happened in all of this is that Valerie got hurt.”

“What’s my father going to say if she divorces me?” Aaron glanced at me with a wild look in his eyes.

I shrugged. “I don’t know and don’t care, Aaron. Thanks for some good times over the years, but this is where our friendship ends.”

Turning, I took Bernie’s hand and we walked away. Just like when I left on a rainy night weeks ago. Only this time I had someone to leave with me. Someone who would hold me and tell me that I wasn’t alone and that I wasn’t second best or a secret.

Bernie paid Wanda, and I avoided everyone’s eyes. I didn’t want to talk to anyone or discuss what had gone on among Aaron, Valerie, and me.

“I’m sorry,” I apologized to Wanda.

A rueful grin crossed her face. “Don’t worry about it, Tim. Aaron has been causing problems ever since he got married. Maybe now we know why.”

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I flushed, and Bernie touched my shoulder.

"Let's go. I want to see the house you grew up in."

He rested his hand at the small of my back and I left with him, proud everyone could see I belonged to him, whether they understood what that meant or not.

After we settled in the car and buckled our seat belts, he turned to look at me. I met his gaze with a small smile. "Well, that was fun."

"You certainly know how to show a guy a good time." He laid his hand on my thigh and squeezed.

I covered his hand and rested my head on the back of my seat. "I was hoping all of this would just get swept under the rug."

"Did he really tell you he didn't love her?"

"I wouldn't make that up. He told me that the last time we spoke before he got married. We met at my uncle's hunting cabin and if he hadn't said anything, I'd have slept with him. I had no clue he was engaged." I closed my eyes as a faint echo of the shock I'd felt that night rippled over me. "I can't believe he thought I'd be willing to share him with his wife."

He trailed his fingers over my cheek. "Some guys don't see anything wrong with that. It's not cheating to them when it's with another man."

I kissed his thumb as he brushed it over my lips. "Take me home, Bernie."

"Tell me how to get there."

I gave directions and we headed to my family's farm.

## CHAPTER 17

The driveway wound through a cornfield, leading up to a two-story house. Bernie parked the car behind my uncle's truck, and I climbed out as soon as the vehicle stopped. He grabbed our bags from the trunk while I went up and opened the door.

I turned on the light in the hallway, and Bernie stepped in. As he glanced around, I followed his gaze, trying to see what he saw.

The furniture was worn, but in good condition. Aunt Judy had never seen the point in getting rid of it because she believed there were still many more years of use in all of it. The walls were a soothing cream and tan. No matter how much I'd argued for different colors, they stuck with what they liked. Any other color was too flashy for them.

"Do you want something to drink?"

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It was only eight-thirty, but I yawned. Somehow, today had ended up being far more exhausting than I'd thought it would be. Bernie caught me and shook his head.

"I think we should take a shower and head to bed. We've had a long day and there was more excitement than we planned on."

Agreeing with him, I snatched up my bag and gestured for him to follow me upstairs. "My room is at the end of the hall. The bathroom is right here."

I pointed at the second door on the left as we walked.

"My aunt and uncle sleep in the room at the front of the house. We have one guest room."

I paused for a second, thinking of the small double bed in my bedroom. Opening the guest room door, I glanced over my shoulder at Bernie.

"We should sleep in here. You'll be more comfortable on a bigger bed."

He eyed the queen-sized bed with a favorable look. "I was afraid you were going to put me in here by myself."

"Why would I do that?" I set my bag down, opening it and pulling out my shaving kit.

"Not wanting to sleep together under your uncle's roof and all that," he pointed out as he retrieved his toothbrush from his bag.

"Maybe if they were here, I'd be uncomfortable about it, but since they aren't, there's no reason why we can't sleep together." I shrugged. "Who knows? They might not have a problem with it anyway."

"How about we grab a shower and crash?"

It sounded like a good idea to me, so we wandered to the bathroom where I turned the water on to heat up while Bernie brushed his teeth. I stripped and stepped under the shower. Bernie

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joined me, wrapping his arms around me and pulling me back against him.

Sighing, I leaned my head back, resting it on his shoulder and enjoying the rough texture of his chest hair against my back. We stood like that for a few minutes, absorbing the warmth from the shower and the comfort from each other's touch.

He reached out and snagged the soap sitting on a shelf in the stall. I watched as he lathered his hands. Anticipation caused my nipples to harden and my cock to take interest. At the touch of his fingers on my chest, my exhaustion slid away like soap bubbles in a cascade of liquid. Inside the shower, under the pounding water, all fears disappeared. Bernie, with his gentle touch, surrounded me, and I surrendered willingly.

Bernie massaged every inch of my body, driving tension out with the strength of his hands. Soon, I braced myself against the shower wall, hands plastered to the cool tiles and ass tilted toward him, offering everything I had for his inspection.

Kneeling behind me, he spread my cheeks to let the warm water sluice down my crease and over my hole. I moaned and blushed. Being exposed like that to my lover's eyes embarrassed me. Of course, my only other lover was more interested in fucking me than making me feel good.

I banged my head against the tiles. Aaron had no more place in this shower than he did in the rest of my life. With the flick of Bernie's tongue over my puckered opening, I forgot about everything. I think my mind went completely blank for the first time in my life.

I craned my head around, trying to see what Bernie was doing. He met my incredulous gaze with a wink.

"Don't worry. I think you'll like this."



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Facing the wall again, I closed my eyes and relaxed. Something told me Bernie was about to blow my mind.

Bernie pushed the tip of his tongue into my ass, and I gasped, going up on the tips of my toes with the sensation. Bundles of nerves I never knew existed fired as he licked and tongue-fucked my ass.

Soon I was shoving back, begging loudly for him to put me out of my misery and let me come. His chuckle sounded rather evil.

“You want to come from just my tongue or do you want me to fill your ass with my cock?”

God, what kind of choice was that? There wasn’t any doubt which option I’d pick.

“Your cock,” I demanded.

“Hmmm...somehow I knew you’d go for plan B.” He stood and, reaching around me, shut off the water. “Dry off and get in bed.”

I whimpered and my ass clenched, remembering what it had felt like to be filled with his prick last night. I swiped carelessly at my body, not caring how dry I was. Stumbling across the hall, I made it onto the bed without falling or hurting anything vital.

I shoved the blankets aside and tugged the top sheet to the foot of the bed. I sprawled in the middle, my legs spread like the slut I had a feeling I was going to become, though only for Bernie.

He growled softly as he entered to the sight of me laid out like a sacrifice and desperately stroking my cock. He dug out a condom and lube, tossing them to me before climbing on the bed. Bernie sucked up a mark on my hipbone, drawing blood to the surface and a cry from my throat.

How was it possible that he’d gotten under my skin so quickly? There was still a lot I didn’t know about him, but that didn’t seem

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to matter. Bernie had worked his way into my life in a few short weeks, so much that I couldn't imagine him not being there.

"Turn over," he ordered.

Rolling over, an undignified squeak issued from me when Bernie lifted my hips and stuck a pillow under my belly. He nudged my knees apart before running a lube-covered finger down my crease to press into my ass.

I rose onto my knees and elbows, pushing back and taking his fingers deeper into me. I had no idea how many he used to stretch me. My ability to count had disappeared along with every other of my functions except to breathe and feel.

"Such a pretty ass. It was the first thing I noticed about you when I walked into Cookie's that night. You were bent over, picking something off the floor, and it was all I could do, not to come up and grab a handful of you."

His voice caressed me while he slid his other hand down and around to fist my cock. I jerked and shoved my shaft through his rough grip, needing the measured strength of his hand to hold me tight because I thought I just might fly off the bed.

Bernie removed his fingers from my ass, and I protested. He brushed a kiss over the soft skin at the base of my spine. The rustle of the foil packet being ripped open shot through the room.

Shivers chased one after the other down my spine as I peeked under my arm to see him roll the condom on with one hand because he wasn't willing to let go off my dick.

"Bernie," I whispered as he set the flared head at my stretched entrance.

"I'm here, honey. Just breathe."

He shoved in without stopping until he buried himself deep inside me and the hair at his groin scrubbed against my ass.

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“Fuck,” I cried, accepting the slight burn and the almost overwhelming fullness.

Grunting, he started thrusting, and I bent to his will. His grip on my cock tightened with each stroke. I sobbed, the need to come building higher and higher. He bumped my gland, causing fireworks to spark behind my eyelids. I dropped my head to rest on my forearms and tilted my hips for a better angle. With every shove in, he hit my gland, and my cries filled the air as he fucked me harder and faster.

A pinch to my ass made me jump.

“I’m going to come,” he warned me.

“Please.”

If he came, it would drive me over my own edge.

He slammed in and froze, a low groan tearing from his throat as he filled the condom. The swelling of his cock was enough to push me into my climax. I writhed and shifted, covering his hand, along with the pillow under me, with my cum.

I fell face-first into the sheets, not concerned with the wet spot or his hand. I doubted my slight weight would crush him, though when he covered me, I thought my ribs might break.

“Bernie,” I gasped, reaching back a limp hand to pat his hip.

“Sorry,” he mumbled, rolling off me and the bed.

I listened to him stagger to the bathroom where I heard the water ran and the toilet flush before he made his way back. I didn’t even have the energy to move when a warm cloth cleaned me off. He took the cloth back and returned, moving me around to throw the pillow off the bed and cover us both with the blankets.

“Night,” I muttered, snuggling closer to his warmth.

Kissing the nape of my neck, he slung an arm over my waist. I drifted to sleep to the light snores of my lover.

## CHAPTER 18

Ringling woke me up. I tried to figure out where the alarm clock was. I didn't remember setting the alarm last night and I wasn't sure there was one in the guest room. Sitting up, I scrubbed my hands over my face, trying to wake up enough to process any information.

"Go answer the door, Tim," Bernie said sleepily.

*Fuck. The doorbell.* That was what was making that noise. I jumped out of bed and grabbed my jeans off the floor. I dashed down the stairs, after slipping on my jeans and zipping them up, somehow managing not to trip and break my neck.

Yanking open the door, I wheezed, "What the hell do you want?"

Valerie reared back, her eyes wide and her mouth open in

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surprise. She started to turn, so I grabbed her arm. She looked at me, and I held up a hand, catching my breath before I said anything else.

“Sorry. You woke me up. You want to come in?”

“I’m sorry, too. I work the night shift at the hospital most of the time, so I’m usually up at this time and I don’t always remember that other people tend to sleep later than I do.”

She walked in, and I shut the door, thumping my head against the frame quickly. Why was she here? Wasn’t that embarrassing scene last night enough for her?

I led the way to the kitchen. Gesturing for her to take a seat at the table, I wandered around, gathering the ingredients for coffee. As I finished getting it ready to brew, Bernie strolled in. He approached me, slid an arm around my shoulders, and kissed me good morning without one glance at Valerie. I tasted the mint of toothpaste on his lips and wished I could delve deeper, but at Valerie’s gasp, we pulled apart.

“Good morning, Valerie.” Bernie nodded at her as he opened the refrigerator. “It looks like your aunt’s neighbors set her up so she didn’t have to cook when they got home.”

“Good. Grab some stuff, and I’ll run up to take a quick shower. You’ll stay for breakfast, won’t you, Valerie?”

I didn’t give her a chance to answer before I trotted out of the kitchen and back upstairs. I knew Bernie would be all right with her, but I still took the fastest shower ever.

Within ten minutes, I was back in the kitchen where Valerie and Bernie were laughing about something. Bernie waved me to a chair while he poured me a cup of coffee.

“Breakfast will be another five minutes.” He set the cup down in front of me, kissed me again and walked away. “I’ll clean up

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now and be back down in a little bit.”

We sat in silence for a few minutes after he left. Valerie turned the cup in her hands, staring down at the light brown liquid in it.

“He seems like a nice man.” Her comment was soft and tentative.

“Yes, he is.” I settled back, stretching my legs out and resting my hands on my stomach. I met her gaze. “Why are you here, Valerie? Didn’t everything that needed to be said get said last night?”

She shook her head. “No. I want to know about you and Aaron.”

Sighing, I glanced out the back door and asked, “Why? It’s in the past and all it’ll do is hurt you.”

“I’m finding that not knowing hurts worse,” she stated.

“It won’t change anything.”

I stood, walking to the stove and checking on the egg casserole in the oven. In so many ways, this conversation wasn’t a good one. I didn’t want to relive any part of the past, not even the good ones. Valerie didn’t need to hear about her husband’s pre-marital affair with a man.

“No, it won’t, but it might help me understand Aaron a little better.”

I snorted and leaned against the counter. “Understand him better? What do you mean by that?”

She frowned and shifted slightly in her chair. “He’s obviously very confused and since he isn’t willing to admit he’s gay, he allowed his father to pressure him into a marriage he didn’t want.”

The thought that had surfaced the night I’d asked Aaron if he’d ever loved me showed up in my mind again.

“Are you sure he’s gay?”

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She threw her head back, staring at me in surprise and puzzlement. "You and he were lovers for several years. Doesn't that usually mean both of you are gay?"

I shook my head, but didn't answer. The timer went off and I pulled the dish out of the oven, setting it on the stove top. I gathered three plates and silverware before dishing it up for all of us.

Bernie joined us as I put the food on the table. He glanced between us and picked up his plate, obviously ready to leave us to our talk.

"You don't have to leave, Mr. Capley. You're Tim's boyfriend, so I'm sure you've heard this story already." Valerie gave him a brave smile. "I already embarrassed myself in front of you last night. It can't get any worse."

His gaze met mine, and I saw the question in his eyes. Did I want Bernie to hear all the sordid details and lies I had managed to tell myself during my relationship with Aaron?

I decided he might as well know everything now before our relationship grew closer and nodded toward the other seat. It would hurt if he chose to leave after this, but there was no point in keeping any more secrets from him.

After he sat, Bernie reached over and squeezed my hand tightly, letting me know he was here for me. That small gesture eased me more than any words he could have said.

"Valerie, why do you suppose you never even heard a hint about what was going on between Aaron and me? I mean Frankfort is a small town and things like two boys doing sexual things with each other would spread like wild fire if anyone knew."

She shrugged, pushing her food around her plate and not meeting my gaze. "I guess I never really thought about it. Maybe

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people were just being polite, plus you two had stopped hanging around with each other when you turned sixteen.”

“That’s when I fell in love with Aaron.”

She winced, and I knew my words were blunt, but she wanted to know. I didn’t see the point in protecting her anymore.

“I figured out early that girls didn’t do anything for me. Breasts and curves turned me off, but get me close to Aaron—or any other boy at that time—and I’d get hotter than a bonfire. He was my best friend and the first person I ever loved.”

I stood, abandoning my food to pace the kitchen. Bernie and Valerie stopped eating as well, their attention fully on me.

“Aaron always talked about girls, about who he was dating and what they were doing together. I finally couldn’t deal with it anymore, so I stopped hanging out with him. It was easier to pretend to be his acquaintance than listen to his list of conquests. I never doubted what he was telling me was true.”

I paused, organizing things in my head. “Then one night, on his eighteenth birthday, he invited me to his family’s lodge out by the lake. I brought the food and he stole some booze from his father.”

Goose bumps covered my arms and I shivered. Bernie stood and embraced me. I soaked up the heat from his body and relaxed. The next part wasn’t easy for me to tell. It didn’t matter that it had happened.

“I was shocked that he’d invite me. He’d never seemed to miss my friendship, so I’d figured I’d always have an unrequited love for him.”

Bernie put his lips to my ear and whispered, “You don’t have to tell her anything more. She has no right to ask you.”

He was right and if I was recounting this for just Valerie, I’d have stopped by now, but I also wanted Bernie to know what had



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happened. I turned in his arms, lifted my hand to cup his cheek and smiled at him. "I'll be all right."

He eased away, letting me have room to tell the rest of my story.

"Aaron was angry at his father for some reason. He wouldn't tell me, but I didn't push very hard. I'd always thought his father was a mean ass who expected way too much from his only son. We ate, but mostly we drank. After a couple of hours, any restraint I might have had was gone. Aaron looked so sad I couldn't help it. I kissed him."

I remembered the thrill of his lips touching mine, the taste of whiskey on our tongues as the kiss went deeper.

"He kissed me back and it went on for a minute or so before he jerked away from me, horror on his face. I thought for sure he'd beat me up or proclaim he was straight. That it was only the alcohol that had made him lose control like that."

I turned away from them, staring out the window above the sink. The large oak tree swayed in the breeze and I smiled at the memories of picnics under those broad branches.

"Tim?"

Bernie's voice brought me back to my story.

"As I stared at Aaron, this look crossed his face that, even today, I can't describe. He grabbed my arms and jerked me to him. Right before he kissed me, he muttered something about his father."

Touching my bottom lip, I felt the ghost pain of it splitting under Aaron's assault.

"I'm not sure I want to know the rest," Valerie spoke up, her voice small and hesitant.

I whirled. "You wanted to know what went on between us. I'm

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telling you. You can make your decisions about your husband after I finish my story.”

She nodded, and Bernie poured more coffee for the both of them. My hands shook so badly, I knew I wouldn’t have been able to hold a cup without spilling it.

“I don’t remember much about the next hour or so. All I know is that there was pain, anger, and hatred in our coupling. The anger and hatred came from Aaron. I loved him and being drunk, I didn’t have the facility to stop him, though I probably wouldn’t have, even if I hadn’t been drunk. I wanted him with such passion and need that I never questioned the fact he hurt me.”

All the strength left my legs, and Bernie caught me before I hit the floor. Straightening, he carried me into the living room where he sat, cuddling me on his lap like a hurt child. I shuddered, drowning in the doubts and fears I’d hidden for years.

A noise drew me to the living room archway. Valerie stood there, tears streaming down her cheeks. I’m not sure why I did what I did next, but I held open my arms. She fell into them, and Bernie held us both as we cried.

“He hurt you, too,” I whispered, and she nodded.

Bernie ran his hands over our backs, soothing us with his touch. I slumped against him, needing a connection to something good in my life while the rest of it crumbled around me. Valerie stayed curled up with us and it was like we were a family, bound together by mutual pain.

When I could speak again, I finished, “He left me lying on the floor in front of the fireplace, bruised and bleeding. He explained he wasn’t gay and that it was my fault. I seduced him and teased him, plied him with alcohol, and I got what I wanted.”

Bernie growled under his breath, and I placed my hand on his

chest, easing him.

"I believed him. I figured it was my secret yearnings that had brought this on. Of course, at that time, I believed being gay was wrong and perverted, so everything was my fault. Yet every time he called me, I'd go to him, knowing it would end in pain for me. I learned some things so Aaron didn't hurt me physically as much as time went by. After a while, the only pain was mental." I closed my eyes, fighting back the tears again. "He wouldn't tell anyone about us. He dated women and flaunted them in my face."

She shifted to see my face. "That night at the bus stop, you seemed so hurt, like Aaron had broken your heart."

I nodded and smiled ruefully. "Ah, that's the contrary nature of abuse. Aaron made me believe anything he did to me was either because I caused it or because he loved me. I was naïve when he started the whole thing, and I fell for it hook, line and sinker."

I breathed deep. "I'll admit that by the time he married you, I was already working out my issues, and I probably would've broken it off with him, but not as soon as it ended up being. Even though it hurt like he'd stabbed me with a knife, it turned out to be the best thing ever to happen to me."

Both Bernie and Valerie stared at me, confusion in their eyes. I laughed, set Valerie to the side and climbed off Bernie's lap to pace in front of them.

"If his father hadn't picked you for him to marry, Valerie, who knows how long I'd have allowed him to use me like that. Once I got over the whole shameful perverted feeling about being gay, I realized I had every right to expect to be treated like a real person and not just a body for him to fuck when he couldn't get what he wanted from his girlfriend. Yet some part of me always knew he was doing this to get back at his father for some imagined slight."

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Valerie nodded and sadness shadowed her eyes. I sat down next to her and took her hands in mine.

When our eyes met, I asked, "Do you love him, Valerie?"

Her smile was slightly embarrassed and her tone a bit sarcastic. "After everything he's done to you and me, you'd think I'd want to show him my boot heels. At the moment, dumping him sounds like a great idea, but he has his moments when he can be so sweet."

I knew all about that. "Yes, he does, and most of the time, those good times outnumber the bad. You have to watch him, though, because as long as he's under his father's thumb, his self-destructive behavior will continue and you could get caught in the cross-fire again."

Determination squared her jaw and put steel in her spine. "I'm not afraid of Aaron's father. He should fear me because my father would do anything for me, even if it means giving Aaron a job across the country."

It seemed like Aaron's father had met his match.

"Good for you."

As I hugged her, the phone rang. Bernie stretched behind him to reach it. He handed it to me before standing and offering Valerie his hand. He pulled her to her feet and herded her to the kitchen.

"Hello?"

I heard water running and splashing. They must be going to do the dishes.

"Timothy?"

"Good morning, Aunt Judy. How's Uncle Bill?"

"He's doing well. I just got to the hospital and talked to the nurses. They want him up and moving today, maybe after lunch."

"That is good news." I wandered over to grab my shoes from the hall. Sitting, I tucked the phone between my ear and shoulder

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so I could put them on.

"I also talked to the billing people. Did you arrange anything with them?"

Her odd tone put me on guard.

"No. I haven't had anything to do with them. Why? I know money will be tight, so I'd already decided to pick up as many hours as I can at the diner when I get back down there."

"There aren't any bills. It's all been paid for and any other expenses that might come up."

Her confusion mingled with mine and I finished tying my shoes before I said anything else. "I don't know what to say, Aunt Judy. I don't have that kind of money, though if I did, I'd give it to you."

"I know, Timothy. I just don't know who would do this for us. It means that whatever money we make from the sale of the house can go toward buying a new one somewhere else, maybe even down by you."

I stood and went into the kitchen where Bernie and Valerie were putting the rest of breakfast away. I leaned in the doorway and caught Bernie's gaze.

*Everything okay?* he mouthed at me.

"I'll tell you later," I whispered back.

"Are you and Bernard coming to the hospital?" Aunt Judy must have decided a change of subject was called for.

"Yes. We're just cleaning up from breakfast and we'll be on our way."

"Good. Tell your young man hello and we'll see you when you get here. Drive safe."

"We will, Aunt Judy. Love you."

"Love you, too, Timothy."

She hung up, and I turned the cordless phone off before setting

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it on the kitchen table.

“How’s your uncle doing?” Valerie asked, folding a towel and hanging it over the stove handle.

“Good. The nurses want him up and walking this afternoon.”

“That’s great news, so what’s wrong?” She eyed me with suspicion.

“Nothing really. Just that someone’s paid Uncle Bill’s hospital bills.”

Valerie’s jaw dropped. “No kidding?”

I shook my head. “The billing people talked to Aunt Judy this morning. They said any other expenses have been covered as well.”

“Wow. You must know someone who’s rich, Tim. Those bills aren’t cheap.”

“I know.”

Bernie busied himself making sure the coffee pot was off and the back door locked.

## CHAPTER 19

“Do you happen to know anything about this mysterious benefactor, Bernie?”

He shot me a look and then looked at Valerie. Whatever he wanted to say, he wasn’t going to speak in front of her.

“Valerie, we’re heading over to the hospital. I want to see my uncle for myself.” I cupped her elbow and ushered her down the hall toward the front door.

Bernie followed us, grabbing our keys and wallets as we went by the table in the front entryway.

“Of course, and I’ve ruined enough of your morning already.” She hugged me tight. “I’m sorry about this whole mess, but I’m glad we got to talk. I don’t feel as guilty as I did when I first found out about you and Aaron.”

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“Keep your chin up, Valerie. Don’t let those men run over you.” Bernie gave her a hug as well.

He went to our car while I locked the door and waved good-bye to her. I joined him and we headed for the hospital.

I waited until we got on the highway before I angled myself to look at Bernie. “Do you know anything about how my uncle’s bills got paid?”

Bernie didn’t say anything for a few miles, though his hands gripped the steering wheel tightly enough for his knuckles to go white.

“Bernie?”

He pursed his lips and nodded. “I paid them.”

“How is that possible? Do truck drivers make so much money that you can pay all the hospital bills? You didn’t wipe out your savings, did you?”

Checking behind him, he pulled over to the side of the road and put the car in park. He turned to face me and clasped my hand in his, resting them on his thigh.

“I drive a truck because I get restless at times. I like driving across country, seeing new things and going different places.” He stared at our entwined fingers and rubbed one thumb over my knuckles.

“You don’t need to drive?” I wasn’t sure what he meant.

“No. After I got out of the army and divorced my wife, I moved to Austin and started driving, but I also started doing something I loved.”

He reached into the backseat and grabbed another sketchpad, handing it to me with a small smile. “I was painting, though just not walls in my guest room.”

I took the pad and started flipping through the pages. Most of



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the sketches I had seen while at the hospital with my aunt. It was one I hadn't seen that made me pause and glance at Bernie.

"You painted the picture in the gallery window?"

Blushing, he nodded. "Yes, and I was thrilled to hear how much you liked it."

Liked was too weak a word for the emotions I had experienced while looking at the painting in the window. Staring down at the sketch, I wondered who his body model for these drawings was. "Who did you have model for you?"

Bernie took the pad from me and studied the drawing for a second. "Oh, that was Wes."

He said it like I knew who Wes was.

"And who is he?"

Giving me back his sketches, he grinned. "Officer Edson."

"I always thought he had a nice body under those uniforms," I mumbled. "And you seriously don't have to drive anymore?"

"Not anymore. When I first started, after the divorce, I did because I hadn't established a name in the art world. I was lucky to pick up a few influential patrons and they got things rolling for me." He looked a little uncomfortable. "I've had some shows in Austin and out in California. In fact, my agent is setting up one for me in New York."

"That's great."

I managed to sound excited, though I still hadn't processed the whole idea that my boyfriend was a nationally known artist. The last sketch in the book drew a gasp from me.

It was me, sprawled out on a bed, sleeping, with a sheet barely covering my groin. I only knew who it was because the man had a freckle near his belly button like I did.

"You're really good if you can make me look that hot," I joked.

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"I draw what I see, Tim. I don't add anything or take anything away. What you see in that picture is what I saw when I drew it."

Nice of him to say so, but I didn't believe him.

"Why did you pay the hospital bills?"

Bernie shifted around to face the steering wheel and start the car. Checking the traffic, he pulled back onto the highway. "Same reason I came up here with you. You're a friend, Tim, and I've learned we need to take care of each other because most people can't or won't help."

He drove a few miles before saying, "Besides, I have all this money and what am I going to do with it? I have enough to keep me comfortable and alive. The rest is just going to sit in my bank account until I die and there's no one to leave it to."

"You don't have any family?"

"Not anymore. My parents are both gone and my brother won't talk to me because I'm gay. That's the other reason I drive—there was no reason to stay home. The clubs got old after a while or maybe it was me who got old."

I rested my hand on his thigh. "I'm sorry about your family."

He gave me a quick smile. "It happens. My story isn't much different than any other person's out there."

"Will you take me to the gallery in Austin and show me your paintings?"

His laugh rang through the car. "Is that sort of like showing you my etchings?"

I leered at him. "It might get the same results."

"We have a date." His expression turned serious. "You won't tell your aunt I was the one who paid the bills, will you?"

"Not if you don't want me to. I can respect your privacy, Bernie. I won't even tell her you're a painter unless you say it's

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okay.”

“Thanks. I’m not looking for gratitude or recognition. I wanted to do something that would free all of you from worry.”

I leaned over and pecked him on the cheek. “I’d love to repay your generosity.”

He winked. “I’m sure we can figure out a way for you to pay me back.”

We settled into a comfortable silence broken only by the music on the radio. I’d been pleased to discover we both liked classic rock. It made traveling together a lot easier. While we drove, I decided that, even though Bernie didn’t want us to pay him back, I would take as many extra shifts at the diner as I could and start saving. Someday I might have enough to pay him back a fraction of what he’d spent. Of course, I would do my best to make sure those shifts didn’t interfere with our time spent together.

Bernie parked the car in the visitors’ lot and turned it off. He stopped me from getting out by placing a hand on my arm. “I wanted to let you know I hired a nurse to come and stay with your aunt and uncle when he’s ready to go home.”

“Bernie, you’re spending way too much money,” I protested.

“It’s pure selfishness on my part,” he admitted. “I want you to come back to Austin with me and I knew if there wasn’t anyone else around to help your aunt, you’d end up staying here.”

That was true. There was no way I would let my aunt bear the burden of my uncle’s recovery on her own.

“I don’t know what to say,” I stuttered.

“Just say thank you. Like I said before, you’re my friend, but more than that, you’re my boyfriend, and anything I have is yours.” He looked down and then back up. “Because at some point in the future, I want to be able to call you my partner.”

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Panic tried to rear its head, but I squashed it. He said in the future, meaning there was time to get to know each other and make sure we were compatible in every way before we made a serious commitment to each other.

Cradling his face in my hands, I kissed him with all the gratitude and caring I could muster. His smile teased my lips, and I smiled as well.

Easing away, he took the keys out of the ignition and opened the door. "Let's go see your family."

I jumped out of the car and waited for him to join me before I headed into the hospital.

The doctor was leaving as we got to Uncle Bill's room. I nodded at him, but didn't stop to talk. I knew Aunt Judy would tell me what I needed to know. By the sparkle in her eyes when she greeted us, I knew the report was good.

I hugged and kissed her while Bernie greeted my uncle. I smiled at Uncle Bill, and he grinned back.

"You're looking great," I commented as I leaned down to kiss his forehead.

"I'm not a hundred percent yet, but I've got no doubt I'll get back to my former self soon."

"Good. We saw the doctor leaving. What did he have to say?"

I sat in the chair when Aunt Judy sat on the bed next to Uncle Bill. Bernie propped himself up against the wall closest to me.

"They got all of the tumor and sent it to the lab for tests. Unfortunately, it does look like it was malignant, but we caught it soon enough that with chemo and radiation it should go into remission."

Relief overwhelmed me and I hung my head, fighting tears. Bernie laid his hand on my shoulder and I reached up to cover it.

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When I glanced up again, Aunt Judy was wiping her eyes and Uncle Bill looked suspiciously choked up as well.

“If all goes well, William can go home in two days. There’s still a lot of medical stuff that needs to be done, but I think being in our home will help out with the healing process.”

“It’s hard to get any sleep when the nurses come in at all hours of the night to check on you,” Uncle Bill complained.

I caught Aunt Judy’s amused gaze and nodded. Yep, Uncle Bill was getting back to his grumpy self.

“What will we need to do about help for you, Aunt Judy? You can’t take care of everything on your own.”

Frowning, Aunt Judy stood and went to dig around in her purse. “When the billing person came this morning, she told me a home nurse had been arranged for us when William is ready to go home.”

Managing to look surprised and not glance at Bernie, I said, “Really? I’d love to meet this anonymous benefactor. He—or she—has thought of everything, it seems.”

They nodded.

“It does and the nice thing is, it frees you to go back to Austin.”

Why did hearing that from my uncle fill me with relief? I had been dealing with a little guilt ever since I left Frankfort. I’d never wanted to abandon my family. I simply couldn’t live in the same town with Aaron anymore.

“I don’t mind staying, Aunt Judy. You’ve both taken care of me since I was four. It’s time I repay all the love you’ve given me.”

Aunt Judy came over and framed my face with her fragile, soft hands. Her faded blue eyes scanned my eyes like she wanted to make sure I truly meant what I said.

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“Timothy, it was no hardship for us to take you in. You gave me a son I could never have. There’s no such thing as repaying family. We’ve never regretted our decision to open our home to you.”

I embraced her, not wanting to think about how small she felt in my arms.

“I don’t know if I can ever say thank you enough,” I whispered.

She smoothed her hand over my hair and laughed. “Just being you is thank you enough, Timothy. Plus you’ve added someone to our family.”

Leaning back, I noticed she was looking at Bernie. My boyfriend stared at Aunt Judy in shock or surprise...I wasn’t sure which.

“There’s something special going on between the two of you. We can see that.” Uncle Bill held out his hand to Aunt Judy. “Judith and I have been together for thirty-five years. We know what love looks like.”

Both Bernie and I sputtered. She patted Bernie’s cheek before taking Uncle Bill’s hand.

“Oh, you probably haven’t said the words yet, but it’s there, and we’re happy for both of you.”

I laughed in embarrassment. There was no way I could be mad at them because I knew they meant well. Bernie chuckled along with me.

“You might be right, Mr. Gapin, but I think I’ll wait a little longer before professing my undying love for your nephew.”

“Just make sure your intentions are honorable, Bernard.” Uncle Bill shook his finger at Bernie.

“I guess it depends on your definition of honorable.” Bernie winked at me and, groaning, I buried my head in my hands.

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A nurse walked in to check my uncle's vitals at that moment and I never thought I'd be so glad to see her.

We stayed at the hospital until visiting hours were over. After following Aunt Judy to the hotel and making sure she got to her room okay, we drove back to the farm. We grabbed take-out because I wasn't up to another confrontation like the night before.

I settled on the couch in the living room and grabbed the remote to turn on the TV. Bernie was in the kitchen, cleaning up our wrappers and putting the dishes in the dishwasher. A knock sounded on the front door, and I sighed.

"Why can't they just leave us the fuck alone?" I grumbled under my breath as I went to answer it.

Yanking open the door, my jaw dropped when I saw Aaron's father standing on my aunt's front porch.

"Can I come in, Timothy?"

As much as I wanted to say no, I'd never gotten the hang of being rude, so I nodded and stepped back. Bernie emerged from the kitchen, drying his hands on a towel and scowling at Mr. Stinson. Father and son looked so much alike that there wasn't any need to guess who his son was.

"Why are you here, Mr. Stinson?"

He stuffed his hands in his pocket and stared around the living room. I had no idea what he was thinking and I didn't care. That his son was so fucked up because of him and his approval or disapproval was never anything I cared about.

Mr. Stinson glanced at Bernie. "Who is your friend?"

"Not that it's any of your business, but Bernie's my boyfriend."

He winced and a fierce wave of pride swelled through me. I wasn't going to deny Bernie's place in my life to make Mr. Stinson comfortable.

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“Nice to meet you.”

Rolling his eyes, Bernie turned and retreated to the other room. We were all aware that this wasn't a social call.

“What do you want?” I asked bluntly, not up to dealing with this man.

“I want you to leave Aaron and Valerie alone. They're married and you shouldn't be trying to destroy their happiness because you're jealous.”

Stunned, I stared at Mr. Stinson for several seconds, trying to formulate some response that didn't involve kicking his ass out of my house. Finally, all I could do was laugh. His narrow-eyed stare was supposed to intimidate me, but all it did was make me laugh harder.

I breathlessly flopped on the couch and wiped the tears from my face. “Your arrogance amuses me, Mr. Stinson.”

“It's not arrogance, Timothy. Aaron told me you started a fight with him and Valerie last night in town.” He frowned and paced. “I always thought your uncle and aunt had raised you better than that, but I guess, being what you are, you can't help it.”

“Being what I am?” I straightened. “What would that be?”

“A homosexual.” He said it as if I should have known what he meant without making him say it.

“And what's wrong with being a homosexual?” I kept my tone even.

He shook his head with a sorrowful expression on his face. “If you have to ask, son, you're already condemned and nothing's going to save you from hell.”

I stood toe-to-toe with him. “First of all, I'm not your son and I thank God for that every day. Second of all, don't concern yourself with my soul. If I'm going to hell, I'll be seeing you there, so don't



get self-righteous on me.”

He gaped at me. He’d probably never had anyone stand up to him before, but I wasn’t about to back down from someone so ignorant. If he had approached me in town, I would have walked away, but I was furious he would come to my house and act so superior to me because he was straight.

“I might be gay, but at least I’m not a complete bastard who forces his son to marry someone he doesn’t love because he’s too afraid to say no to me.” I poked him in the chest. “And, in forcing your son to marry, end up possibly ruining the life of another person.”

I stalked away from Mr. Stinson, anger bubbling deep inside me.

“Ruin whose life? Valerie wanted to marry Aaron. She’s in love with him,” he protested. “Their marriage was just fine until you came back.”

“Tell yourself whatever lies you wish to make yourself feel better. You might want to talk to your daughter-in-law and find out what her definition of fine is. It might not be the same as yours.”

Suddenly, Mr. Stinson lunged forward, spun me around and grabbed my shirt. He shoved his face in mine and snarled.

“Aaron was a good boy until you got your little faggot hands on him and seduced him in that cabin on his birthday.”

I froze. How did he know about that?

“Oh, yes, Aaron told me all about the way you blackmailed him into having an affair with you for years. How he finally found the courage to say no and marry Valerie. You hated him and told him you’d get revenge. That’s why you came back, isn’t it? If you can’t have him, no one else can either.”

“When did he tell you all this?”

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"The night before his wedding." He shook me, snapping my head back and forth. "He stopped me from coming out here and beating you. How could you pervert my son like that?"

Stunned, I didn't stop him from shaking me. The lengths Aaron would go to keep his father from learning the truth appalled me. His father's hatred for gays made me the perfect scapegoat for the whole thing.

"Hold it right there, asshole."

Bernie tore me away from Aaron's father, pushing me behind him as he glared at the older man. "Don't you dare touch him."

"Was Aaron so perfect you had to soil him with your dirty urges? You couldn't just let him go either. You had to come back and ruin any chance he had at happiness."

He jumped at me again, his hands curled into claws and his face distorted with hatred and disgust. Bernie grabbed him and slung him back across the room. Mr. Stinson's eyes widened as Bernie advanced on him.

"We might be gay, but that doesn't mean we're helpless."

The other man scrambled back, making his way to the door quickly. Resting my hand on Bernie's arm, I stopped him, and we watched Mr. Stinson trip down the steps, heading down the driveway to his car.

"You should double check your facts with your precious son, Mr. Stinson," I called. "That isn't exactly how I remember his eighteenth birthday."

After the car peeled away, I shut the door and locked it. Leaning back against it, I caught Bernie's gaze. "God, I'm beginning to hate this town."

"Good thing you'll only be here for a few more days. After that, we'll head back to Austin and you won't have to deal with

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anyone from here again.” He paused as he shut off the lights. “Well, except your aunt and uncle.”

“Yeah, but they aren’t crazy, so I think I can deal with them.”

With a sudden move, Bernie swept me into his arms and carried me upstairs. I didn’t have the energy to protest. I encircled his neck with my arms and laid my head on his shoulder.

He set me on my feet outside the bathroom door. “Go, brush your teeth and get ready for bed. I have to make a phone call.”

It sounded like a good suggestion, so I went with it. While I was finishing up, he came in to do his nighttime routine. We climbed into bed together and I curled up next to him, finding his warmth chased away any leftover chill from our encounter with Mr. Stinson.

I buried my face in the crook of his neck and breathed deep of his unique scent. I couldn’t wait to get back to Cookie’s Diner. It was definitely time to leave my old life behind and get on with the new one.

## CHAPTER 20

Four days later, I stood on the porch of my aunt's house, saying good-bye to them. Bernie threw our bags in the trunk of our rental. He came back up to get his hugs as well.

"Now the visiting nurse starts tomorrow. She'll be here at eight in the morning and will stay until you're ready to go to bed." I pulled the schedule out of my pocket, taking another look at it. "I hired Phil and his boys from down the road to come and take care of the farm for you, Uncle Bill. His oldest son might be interested in buying it."

Uncle Bill looked thoughtful. "Talk to Phil when he stops by today."

"I'll do that and talk to our realty lady as well."

He hugged me and while his embrace wasn't as strong as it

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used to be, it was better than when I first arrived.

"We look forward to visiting you as soon as the doctors say it's okay for William to travel," Aunt Judy called to us as we went to the car.

"I'll call you when we get back to Austin."

I waved as Bernie drove down the driveway. At the road, he stopped and looked at me. "How are you feeling?"

"About what?"

"Knowing that this is probably the last time you'll get to call this farm home."

I tilted my head and thought about it. "I'm not too upset. I've had some great times growing up here, but it's time to move on."

Clasping his hand in mine, I grinned at him. "It's time to make some better memories with you."

\* \* \*

Our plane landed around seven that night in Austin and we were back at my place by eight. Bernie went into the diner while I took my bag to my apartment. I stepped inside and stared. I wasn't a slob by any means, but my apartment sparkled now and everything was neatly organized. I tossed my bag on the washer to deal with later.

Wandering into the kitchen of the diner through the back door, I greeted Mel and Cynthia. She ran to me and threw her arms around me in a hard hug. "Bernie said your uncle is doing better. I'm so glad."

"So am I. Did you have any trouble while I was gone?" I wiggled out of her grip and shook hands with Mel.

"No. Chad stepped up and worked your shift." Mel inclined his head toward Chad.

I strolled over to the sink and leaned against the counter. He

rinsed a few plates before he looked up.

“Thanks.”

He knew I meant for more than doing my shifts. He dried his hands and reached into his pocket.

“You’ll probably want these back,” he said as he held out my extra set of keys to me.

“Keep them.” I edged closer and whispered, “I don’t think I’ll be using my place all that much from now on.”

He tucked them away and grinned. “Things going well with Bernie then?”

I smiled. “I’d say it was going really well, though I’m going to have to think about getting a car.”

“Good for you.”

I winked and laughed, stretching before heading toward the main room. “I’m hoping to get something to eat and a shower before I sign in for my shift.”

“It’s good to have you back, Tim.” Cynthia swatted my ass as she passed me.

After the cold reception I had received back home, their happy greetings warmed me. I searched for Bernie and found him sitting in his regular booth with Cookie. I poured myself a cup of coffee and joined them.

Cookie stood and gave me a quick hug. I grunted at the strength of his embrace.

“Glad you’re back, Tim, and that your uncle is doing better.”

“It was nerve-wracking, but the doctors think with radiation and chemo, Uncle Bill will be fine.” I slipped in next to Bernie. “They put the farm up for sale and we’re hoping to convince them to come down here.”

“We?” Cookie looked at them.

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Bernie bumped our shoulders together, and I rested against him for a moment. Cookie's face broke into a huge grin.

"I'm glad to hear that. I'll put your orders in."

I turned to face Bernie after the older man walked away.

"Will you move in with me?"

My mouth dropped open, and he rushed to fill in my surprised silence.

"I know it's probably too soon and I'm rushing things, but I don't want to go home alone tonight. I got used to having you with me."

I wasn't sure how to respond. He'd caught me off-guard. As much as I liked Bernie, maybe even loved him, I wasn't sure moving in together so soon after starting our relationship was a good idea.

"Can you give me a day or two to think about it?"

He grimaced, and I knew he didn't like my answer, but after spending several days with Bernie, I knew he wasn't the type to force me into making a decision right away.

"Sure."

I put my hand on his knee and squeezed. "I'm not saying no. I just need a day or two to wrap my head around the idea of moving in with you. A month ago, when I left Frankfort, I wasn't thinking about anything except getting away from there. Now, I find myself in a new relationship that I'm afraid to screw up because I'm moving too fast."

He nodded and covered my hand with his. "I'll admit I wish you had said yes right away, but I know where you're coming from. You've only been in one relationship and it wasn't the healthiest one around. I won't pressure you into making a decision. We have all the time in the world."

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“Thanks.”

“Here you two love birds go,” Cookie teased as he set our meals in front of us. “Are you working tonight, Tim?”

I nodded. “Yeah, might as well get back into the swing of things.”

“Good. I think Chad is getting antsy. He’s never said anything and has been really good about not coming in drunk or anything, but it’s wearing on him.”

“Maybe that’s what he needs, though,” Bernie commented. “He needs to keep busy, so he doesn’t give in to the craving for the alcohol.”

“Once you get taken by that addiction, Bernie, you never stop wanting it.” Cookie sounded like he spoke from experience.

I stayed quiet, fixing my burger the way I liked it. I understood addictions and how bad they could be for you. Also, how hard they were to break, but given the right incentive, I believed Chad could conquer his dependency.

We finished our dinner and after paying the bill, we wandered back to my apartment. Bernie glanced around when we stepped inside. “Who’s been staying here?”

“Chad. I gave him a key after the night we found him on my stairs. I figured it might help him to know he always had a place to crash if he needed it.”

Bernie came up behind me and encircled my waist with his arms, pulling me tight against him. I relaxed, letting him bear my weight, and nestled my ass into his groin. His cock moved and lengthened as I continued to rub. He nuzzled my neck, nibbling up to take my earlobe between his teeth.

Moaning, I reached back and grabbed his hip, silently asking him for more. He slid one of his hands up my shirt to tease and



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pinch my nipples. He trailed his other hand down, cupping my cock through my jeans and squeezing.

“There’s time for me to fuck you before you have to go to work,” Bernie whispered in my ear, and I shivered.

“Condoms and lube are in the bag by the bathroom.” I gestured toward the hallway.

Another twist of my nipple and a harder bite on my ear made me cry out.

“Strip and kneel on the futon,” he ordered before he left me to get the stuff.

Not caring where my clothes landed, I tore them off and tossed them over my shoulder as I headed for the futon. Kneeling, I braced my arms on the back and lifted my hips, giving Bernie quite a sight to appreciate when he entered the room again.

A drawn-out hiss made me glance over my shoulder. Bernie stood in the entry to the large room and stared at me.

“That is the prettiest ass I’ve ever seen.”

Embarrassment heated my skin and I looked away. Accepting compliments wasn’t easy for me, most likely because I received very few of them in my life. My being uncomfortable with them didn’t mean I wanted Bernie to stop saying them, though.

He placed his hand between my shoulders and trailed it down my spine to tease his fingertips along the soft skin right above my ass. I whimpered as goose bumps danced over my body, raising the hair on my arms and neck. Not out of fear, but out of almost overwhelming need.

“Shush.” He breathed against my spine as he brushed his mouth over the curve of my ass.

“Bernie.” I sighed.

“Don’t worry, love. I’ve got you.”

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I laid my forehead on my folded arms and drifted, jerking slightly as his lube-coated fingers stroked over my hole twice before pushing in. I grunted and shoved back, taking his fingers as deep as they could go. He twisted them and hit my gland with his knuckles.

“Damn,” I gasped as electric shocks danced through me before settling in my cock.

My wet cock head slapped against the back of the futon and I had a quick thought of thanks that there was a blanket thrown over the cushions. Rolling my eyes, I undulated, fucking myself on Bernie’s fingers. As I rocked, he added another finger and the burn caused me to grit my teeth for a second.

Slow, shallow thrusts and deep, quick strokes had me begging in minutes. I needed more than his fingers. I wanted his cock filling me, claiming me with each plunge in and out.

“Bernie, please,” I ground out as I slowly lost myself to passion and lust.

“Just a second, honey.”

I protested the emptiness of my ass after he removed his fingers. The crinkle of a foil package brought my gaze over my shoulder and I shuddered with anticipation as Bernie rolled the rubber down over his prick. He popped the top off the lube and squirted some into his palm. His head dropped back as he pumped his cock to coat it with the slick.

“No.”

Turning, I reached out and swatted his hand away. His eyes opened and he stared at me in amazement.

“That’s mine,” I informed him. “I don’t want you coming until you’re inside me.”

“Being a little bossy, aren’t we?”

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His grin told me he wasn't upset.

"I just know I want that in me."

I wiggled my ass at him. A stinging slap to one cheek made me squeak and I threw a glare at him. He quirked an eyebrow at me, daring me to say something. There was nothing more I wanted to say because all this talk delayed what I really wanted.

One of his hands gripped my hip as he placed the flared head of his dick at my stretched opening. Two soft sighs filled the room as he sank into me, slowly but without hesitation, until he was buried balls deep inside my ass. I froze, allowing my body to grow accustomed to his girth and length. I was full in a way only he could achieve.

With a tap of his finger, he warned me that he was going to move. I arched my back and wrapped my hands around the wooden frame of the futon. Both of his hands clasped my waist as he pulled me back on his shaft in short, smooth movements.

"Yes," I murmured, giving over everything of myself to Bernie.

Fast and deep, he drove into me, bumping my gland and building my climax. I fisted my own cock. I fell into rhythm with him and soon pre-cum leaked, easing the skin-on-skin friction.

My climax exploded from me, painting the blanket under me with strings of my cum. I clamped down on Bernie's prick, demanding he give all of himself to me. Three hard thrusts later, he froze and his flesh swelled inside me.

"Tim..." He groaned as he filled the condom.

The spasms I still experienced encouraged his climax to last longer. When my knees gave out, I fell forward into the wet spot, and he covered me with his body. The fabric from his shirt scratched my back and a thought hit me.

I squirmed my way out from under him and stood. He sprawled

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on the edge of the futon, shirt still on and pants wide open to frame his soft cock.

“You fucked me with your clothes on.”

Yes, I realized I was pointing out the obvious, but for some reason, it shocked me.

Bernie nodded. “You were so hot, and I’d spent most of the day wanting you. I didn’t want to wait until I was naked as well. Are you mad?”

I laughed. “No, just slightly shocked, I guess. There’s something amazingly erotic about me being naked and you fully clothed while you fuck me.”

I meandered to the bathroom and cleaned up. Before I headed back to the living room, I wet another washcloth with warm water and grabbed some tissues. Bernie was still where I’d left him, eyes closed and chest moving slowly. I knelt and took care of the condom before washing him off. When I was done, I stared at him, and he opened his eyes to meet my gaze.

Reaching out, he cupped my face and smiled. I nuzzled into his palm and brushed a kiss there. A yawn snuck up on me and I stretched.

“You have time for a nap before your shift starts.” Bernie checked his watch. “I should get home and check on things.”

He stood and offered me a hand getting up. I snuggled in his embrace for a moment, savoring the warmth of his body and scent of sex that clung to him. He placed a kiss on the top of my head. Bernie tucked himself back in and straightened his clothes.

“Call me when you get up tomorrow and we can grab lunch.”

“I will.”

I followed him to the door and accepted the quick peck he gave me before he left. I gathered the washcloths and the blanket and

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stuffed them in the washer. I'd start the laundry later.

I burrowed into a couple clean blankets on the futon and smiled. It was good to be home.

## CHAPTER 21

Sunrise the next morning found me stumbling into my apartment after finishing my shift. I didn't bother to turn on any lights. The rays of sunshine blasting through my shades were enough to get my tired ass from the door to the futon. I stripped as I staggered, not caring where the items went. They'd get picked up later.

I lifted the blankets and crawled under them. I fluffed my pillow and buried my face into the case. God, all I wanted to do was sleep for a day. My body had forgotten how much work the midnight shift was and had gotten used to sleeping most of the night.

"Tim." A sleepy voice spoke right next to my ear.

"Shit." I sat up straight and rolled off the bed as I turned to see

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who was in bed with me.

Chad sat there, covers down around his waist, squinting at me. He shoved his hands through his hair and grimaced. "Sorry. I guess I thought you'd be heading to Bernie's after you got done with your shift." He started to climb out the other side of the bed.

"Wait."

I hauled my ass back onto the bed and pulled a sheet over my naked groin. He gazed at the wall on the other side of the room. An awkward silence hung over us.

Sharing a bed with a guy wasn't the same as sleeping with him, was it? I didn't know the answer to that, but I did know I wouldn't feel right kicking Chad out right then. I would explain everything to Bernie later on and see what he thought, but I went with my gut on this situation.

"We can share the bed. I trust you and, personally, I am way too tired to worry about anything."

I slipped down on my side, looking away from him. I cradled the pillow in my arms and closed my eyes, waiting to hear what Chad would do. There wasn't a sound for a few minutes, then Chad sighed and it sounded full of relief. The mattress dipped as he got comfortable on his side of the futon. He probably didn't have anywhere else to go. I fell asleep to the sound of his breathing.

\* \* \*

The shutting of the door woke me up eight hours later. I noticed my clothes had been neatly folded and set on top of the dryer, plus the blanket I washed the night before sat on the table, waiting to be returned to the futon.

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I dialed Bernie's number. I got his voicemail.

"Bernie, it's Tim. I'm awake. I'm going to take a shower and give you a call back."

My phone was ringing when I got out of the shower. As I started to towel my hair dry, I grabbed the phone.

"Hello?"

"Hey, love, did you get enough sleep?"

Bernie's voice made my heart jump.

"Yeah. So do you want to do something? I don't have to be back to work until midnight."

I started to toss the towel to the floor, but the overwhelming neatness of the place gave me pause. I hung it on the rack in the bathroom.

"Great. I'll be over to pick you up in twenty minutes."

"Can't wait. I need to talk to you about something. I'll be in the diner when you get here."

"Okay." Some of the happiness in Bernie's voice dimmed.

"Don't worry. It isn't bad news," I reassured him.

"Thanks for letting me know. Now I won't worry you're going to break up with me. See you soon."

I hung up and got dressed. I greeted some of the regular customers I'd met over the last month or so I worked there as I entered the diner. Most of them asked about my uncle and told me he was in their prayers. It seemed strange to me, how much like a small town the diner really was.

Cookie stood at the till as I slipped behind the counter to pour myself a cup of coffee. He greeted me with a nod while he rang up a young couple. After they left, I touched his arm. "Can I talk to you?"

He studied my face and whatever he saw there reassured him.



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He grabbed his own mug and we sat down in a back booth.

“Bernie asked me to move in with him last night.”

The older man didn’t look surprised. “I figured that was coming with the way you two were eyeing each other. What did you tell him?”

“That I’d think about it. It was a surprise to me and I was worried we were moving too fast.” I swirled my coffee around my mug, just barely keeping it from spilling onto the table.

“And did you?”

“Sort of, though I’ll admit there wasn’t that big a decision to be made. I really like Bernie and the thought of being able to spend all my free time with him makes my heart happy in a way it never has been before.” I blushed, feeling silly and sentimental.

“If you’ve decided, what seems to be the problem?” Cookie leaned back and met my gaze.

I fidgeted, wondering if I was making a mistake, but my instinct told me it was the right thing to do. “I wondered if you could let Chad use the apartment once I move out.”

“Chad? Doesn’t he have a place of his own?” Cookie’s brow furrowed.

I shook my head. “I don’t think so. He’s been crashing at my place while I was gone.”

“Shoot, if I’d known, I’d have offered him the apartment in the first place.” He started to stand.

“Wait,” I said, holding out my hand to get him to stop. “Tell him you want him to stay there so you don’t have to worry about vandals breaking in or something like that. Make it sound like he’s doing you a favor.”

I glanced over to where I could see Chad working in the kitchen, washing dishes. “Chad’s a proud man and something tells

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me he knows the path he's taking is only going to lead to destruction, but he hasn't got a reason to change his direction yet. Maybe this will help him."

Cookie clasped my shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "You're a good kid, Tim."

Ducking my head, I didn't answer. I wasn't completely sure about the good kid part, but I did know helping Chad out would start easing the man onto the right path.

Ten minutes after Cookie left me, Chad stood beside me as I sat in the booth. I glanced up and he said, "Are you sure?"

"About moving in with Bernie? Yes. It's a little scary since I've never had that kind of relationship before, but I think we're both ready for this next step."

"Good for you, but that isn't what I meant. Are you sure about giving up your apartment here?"

I gestured for him to sit across from me. He'd brought me a full cup of coffee, and I added cream while I thought. "Why would I need the apartment if I'm living with Bernie?"

He ran restless fingers over the nicks and cuts in the Formica tabletop. "What if it doesn't work out? Shouldn't you have a place you can crash at?"

After taking a sip of coffee, I chuckled. "I'm not planning on this relationship failing, Chad, but if it does, I'd hope you'd be willing to let me sleep on your floor until I found someplace else."

Nodding, Chad squared his shoulders and looked up at me, his bloodshot eyes filled with pride. "Yes, I would. You're a friend now, Tim. I'd look after you like you were one of my squad mates."

I held out my hand and waited until he took it. I closed my fingers around his and held tight. "In many ways, I think we're a

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family here at the diner. We each ended up here, looking for something. Some of us have found it. Others are still looking.” I winked. “But you will find it. I have faith.”

A cough broke the intensity and I sat back, looking around to see Bernie standing next to our booth. I grinned and slid over, patting the seat next to me. He kissed me while Chad exited the booth.

“Thanks,” Chad said before leaving.

“Did I interrupt something important?” Bernie picked up my mug and took a drink from it, wrinkling his nose at the sweetness.

“Oh, no, just a bonding moment. This morning when I got off shift, I went back to my apartment and climbed in bed. I was so dead tired I didn’t even wonder how the futon got to be unfolded. I’d buried my face in my pillow when Chad said my name.”

“He was in your bed?”

Bernie’s eyes narrowed and a spark of worry shot through me.

“Yes. He stayed at my place while we were gone. He just assumed I’d be staying with you now that we’re back. We shared the bed.”

I could see the wheels turning in his head and I wondered what he was thinking about.

“It was nice of you not to throw him out.”

“I don’t think he has anywhere else to go. I wouldn’t be surprised if he stays at the homeless shelters in Austin from time to time.” I gripped Bernie’s hands tight. “If it’s in my power to help a friend, then I’ll do it. I don’t want him to have to sleep in the city anymore.”

“You’re a good man, Tim,” Bernie said softly as he leaned over and kissed my cheek.

“So,” I said slowly, staring at our entwined hands, “I was

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wondering if that offer to move in was still open.”

He tensed for a second before pulling his hand away and throwing his arms around me. We laughed as our heads bumped together. I wanted him to give me a serious kiss, but discretion was the better part of valor and some customers didn’t look kindly on that sort of touching.

“Let’s move you right now.”

Bernie jumped to his feet and dragged me out of the diner. I waved to Ramona as we flew past her. We made it up the stairs without either of us falling and breaking something. I hadn’t gathered much in the month I’d been living behind the diner, so moving me involved me stuffing my clothes back in my duffle bag and Bernie collecting my stuff from the bathroom.

I made a quick stop in the diner’s kitchen to let Chad and Cookie know I’d moved out. I tossed Cookie my set of keys and winked at Chad.

“Privacy once again,” I joked.

“See you tonight,” Cookie yelled.

I waved vaguely as we practically ran to Bernie’s truck. I don’t know why I was so excited, except there was something special about the fact we were moving into a different level in our relationship.

Luckily, we made it to Bernie’s house without being stopped for speeding. I grabbed my bag as he swept me up in his arms and carried me across the threshold.

“I’m not a blushing bride, Bernie, and we didn’t get married,” I couldn’t help but point out to him.

“Moving in together is the closest thing to us getting married,” he murmured, kicking the door shut with his foot and heading right up the stairs.

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Well, that was true. There were very few states open-minded enough to let two men get married, so we would have to take what we could get because I didn't see the laws changing any time soon.

Without breaking a sweat, he carted me into his room and tossed me onto the bed, where I bounced twice. When I stopped, I lay sprawled, propped up on my elbows and legs spread. I licked my lips as he stripped, baring his muscular body to my devouring gaze.

"We should celebrate your moving in," he said as he crawled onto the bed with me.

"I think that's a wonderful idea," I murmured, holding out my arms to him.

He came to me and we proceeded to christen his bedroom for the first time as roommates.

\* \* \*

My stomach rumbled a short time later, and Bernie laughed, pushing up on his elbow to look down at me. "I should feed you. I want you to keep up your strength."

"That would be perfect. I haven't had anything to eat since around three this morning."

"I'll head down to the kitchen. You can join me after you get your stuff put away, if you want."

He gestured to the closet doors in the wall to our left. I nodded, and he left the room. I hung up my few items of clothing before going to brush my teeth in the bathroom. As I made my way downstairs, I found myself pausing every few feet to study the paintings hanging on the walls.

I spied Bernie's signature in the corner of some of them. The rest of them were all done by the same artist, but I couldn't make out the person's name. Yet I recognized their use of color and

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brush strokes. Laughing at myself, I wandered into the kitchen. I sounded like I was an expert on art. I didn't know anything about technique. I just knew what I liked and didn't like.

Wearing a pair of low slung jeans, Bernie stood in front of the stove, making grilled cheese sandwiches. I wrapped my arms around him and rested my chin on his shoulder. He relaxed into me and we stood, comfortable in our silence, while he fixed dinner for us.

"Why don't you grab some drinks from the refrigerator?" He slipped the sandwiches from the pan to our plates.

"What do you want?" I opened the fridge door and grabbed a soda for me.

"I'll take a beer."

I snagged a bottle and joined him at the table. We exchanged sandwich for beer and settled down to eat. I rubbed my foot over his ankle and he grinned at me.

"Aren't you tired or sore?"

"Tired? A little, but in a good way. Sore? Definitely. This is the most I've had since I started having sex." I shifted on my chair, my ass aching pleasantly as I moved.

Bernie's smile was smug. I nudged him with my foot.

"Who did the other paintings you have hanging around here?"

His smile dimmed, then disappeared altogether as he leaned forward, resting his elbows on the table and poking at his sandwich.

"Sorry. Didn't mean to bring back bad memories."

Sighing, he shook his head. "You didn't really. Not bad ones anyway."

He pushed back his chair, grabbed his bottle, and walked out into his backyard. I took care of the sandwiches, throwing them

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away and setting the plates in the sink. I tossed my can into the recycling bin as I followed my lover outside.

“Wow,” I said as my eyes took in the vision greeting me.

Bernie’s backyard was a riot of color. Vivid flowers grew in every inch of the ground, except where a gravel pathway wound through the beds. I strolled out into the middle and spun around, absorbing the scents and colors.

“This is amazing,” I shouted, racing back to hug him.

“Why do you sound so surprised?”

“I shouldn’t be, I know. Hell, you’re a painter. You fill your life with color and beauty all the time, but I guess I just never expected to find something like this in the backyard of a suburban home.”

Bernie avoided my gaze, heading toward the back of the yard where a small gazebo stood. Something was going on and I wanted to know who or what had provoked such a strange response from my lover.

He sat on one of the benches, staring down at the blue mosaic tiles making up the gazebo floor, but I could tell he was not really seeing them. I joined him, not saying anything. He would tell me if he wanted to.

“When I moved to Austin after my divorce, I went a little crazy. I hit the clubs and bars, looking for everything I hadn’t known I was missing.”

“Did you find it?”

“All and more than I ever wanted to find.” He chuckled and shook his head slightly. “Found some stuff I didn’t even know was out there.”

I nodded. I did some looking on the internet when I was trying to figure out what was different about me. I doubted I’d ever try

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half of the kinky shit I saw, but it was an education nonetheless.

"I'd been living here for a year when I met Pierre. He was flamboyant, beautiful and crazy, but I fell in love with him the moment we met."

Bernie smiled, so I knew Pierre was a good memory. Yet it was clear the memories were tinged with sadness.

"He was my first serious gay relationship. I'd only had one-night stands or quickies in the alleys behind the clubs and bars. Pierre showed me how amazing sex could be when it was between two people who loved each other."

Was it wrong for me to be jealous of this man who was no longer in Bernie's life? I bit my lip to keep from asking anything.

"We moved in together two weeks after we met. He began teaching me how to paint. I'd always loved to sketch and draw, but Pierre taught me how to bring those sketches to life with colors and bold brush strokes. He was the most talented artist I've ever known and he died before his brilliance could be discovered." He gestured to the flowers around us. "I created this garden for him, so even when he couldn't pick up a brush anymore, he still had color in his life."

"How did he die?"

"Complications from pneumonia. He had HIV and because it weakened his immune system, the pneumonia killed him."

Horror filled me. "HIV?"

He nodded. "Yes, but don't worry. I'm not infected. I've gotten tested every six months since before Pierre died. To be honest, we never had unprotected sex. He was already sick when I met him and while we enjoyed an active sex life until he got really bad, he would never risk me becoming infected."

My fear must have shown on my face because he took my hand



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and stood, pulling me to my feet. "Come with me."

I followed him, still stunned by his revelation. We went inside, and he led me to what I assumed was his office. He let go of me to start rummaging through a file cabinet. I wandered over to check out the painting on the far wall.

It was Bernie, gloriously naked, standing in a rainstorm. His arms were outstretched as if he was encouraging someone to come to him. He was laughing and the joy in his face brought a smile to mine.

"That was the last painting Pierre ever did. After he finished it, he was too weak to hold a brush again."

"It's beautiful," I murmured as he joined me in front of the painting.

"Thanks. Here, I wanted you to look at this."

Turning, I saw he was blushing. I took the paper he held out to me. It was his results from the last test he'd had done a month ago. Bernie was clean like he'd said.

"I was planning on telling you before you left for work tonight. I couldn't let the fact I might have been exposed to HIV be a secret any longer, especially now you've moved in and I'm in love with you."

I eyed him, disbelieving his proclamation of love. I didn't believe in love at first sight, or even so soon. I knew I really liked Bernie, even possibly loved him, but I wasn't ready to say it out loud.

"I know it's probably too soon to mention the 'L' word, Tim, but I do love you and I'm willing to wait until you can say it back to me."

I framed Bernie's face with my hands and placed a gentle kiss on his lips. I might not be able to say the words yet, but I could

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show him how much I cared. I let the paper drop from my hand as I stepped around him toward the door. I took his hands in mine and, walking backward, I led him to his room.

## CHAPTER 22

I let the silence blanket us as I slowly undressed him next to his bed. When he stood before me, naked, I gestured for him to lie on the covers. He sprawled on his back, and I studied him as I stripped. I reached into the bedside table and pulled out a condom and some lube. Tossing the lube to him, I held up the condom, asking an unspoken question.

“Are you sure?” he whispered.

“I’ve been getting tested since the first time I had sex with Aaron. He didn’t always use a condom with me, no matter how much I begged him to. I couldn’t be sure he didn’t fuck other guys, and I knew about all the girls he slept with, so I wanted to make sure I didn’t get anything.”

Bernie growled. “The more I learn about that guy, the more I

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wish I had beaten his ass while we were in Minnesota.”

Shaking my head, I put the condom away. “He’s not worth it, Bernie. I learned some things from him. Mostly what I didn’t want from a partner. But he’s not important enough to worry about anymore. I don’t want him ruining what we have. Let’s leave him in Minnesota.”

“Sounds good to me.” He held out his arms. “Now come here.”

I climbed on the bed, settling my torso between his spread legs and wedging them farther open with my shoulders. Breathing deep, I caught the scent of salt and musk, making my mouth water. I cupped his balls in my hand and nuzzled them, drawing a soft gasp from him.

He patted my head with his hands, but otherwise, didn’t try to show me what he wanted. Of course, it wasn’t that hard to figure out what he wanted me to do with my mouth. I imagine sucking on his balls wasn’t first on his list, though he didn’t complain when I did.

Drawing in first one and then the other, I bathed them with my tongue. I licked, sucked and nibbled, teasing him with every move I made. I reached up with my free hand and encircled his shaft, squeezing slightly, and he arched off the bed.

“Tim, please.” He scrambled to grab hold of the sheets, twisting them in his hands.

I eased away from his balls, letting my warm breath blow over his wet skin. “What do you want?”

Bernie shuddered. “Suck me, please.”

“Hmmm...I think I can arrange that.”

I gave his balls a good-bye kiss before focusing my attention on the straining cock in front of me. The head was swollen and deep red, while the shaft throbbed in beat to Bernie’s heart. I gave

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it a quick flick from my tongue, gathering some of the clear precum weeping from his slit. He shivered as I scraped my teeth gently up the vein running along the underside of his cock.

He muttered something, but I was too caught up in what I was doing to try to figure out what he said. Wrapping my lips around his flared head, I swirled my saliva around it, while managing to press the tip of my tongue into the slit, making him cry out. Finally, I swallowed him down, taking him all in until his cock hit the back of my throat.

I lost track of time as I worshiped his prick, using my tongue to learn the shape and taste of him. I trailed my fingers over the parts of his body I could reach with my face buried in his groin. Soon I had to pin his hips to the bed because he was thrashing too much and I didn't want him to injure himself or me.

"Tim, love...soon."

As much as I enjoyed the salty taste of his skin, I wanted him to come in my ass. I let him slide out of my mouth and rose onto my knees, holding my hand out for the lube. He squirted some on my fingers, and I braced my dry hand on his chest as I reached around behind me. I didn't waste much time getting myself ready. Feeling the burn as his cock stretched me was part of what made me love sex.

"Are you ready?" His voice strained, like he was barely holding onto his control.

I moaned as I buried my fingers deep inside one last time and grazed my gland. "Yes," I murmured, removing them and shivering at the emptiness.

Bernie filled his palm with lube and coated his cock before gripping my waist with both hands and helping me position myself above him. I grasped his shaft, placed the head at my opening and

slowly impaled myself on it.

My head fell back and a sigh pushed from my throat as I relaxed, allowing him farther into my inner channel. We both froze when his groin rested against my ass. I clenched my muscles, and he jerked.

“Shit, you’re so tight and hot.”

The thought of Bernie being inside me without any protection made my balls draw tight to my body. I knew it wouldn’t take much for me to climax. Bernie lifted me until only the head of his cock was inside me. He flexed his fingers and drove up into me.

“Argh,” I cried, clasping my hands over his on my hips, needing to ground myself as he taught me how to fly.

A heave of Bernie’s body and I found myself on my back, legs wrapped around his waist, and him pounding into me, every thrust sound-tracked with grunts and groans. He stared down at me, sweat glistening on his forehead and dripping from his chin as he fucked me. I grabbed hold of the sheets beneath me, angling my hips enough that, with each shove of his cock into my ass, he hit my prostate.

We rocked together, cresting each wave with soft cries, and me begging him to fuck me harder or faster or whatever my mouth could get out as my mind slowly melted under the heat of his gaze.

“Bernie,” I screamed as my climax broke over me like a tsunami.

I shot, strings of cum painting our stomachs. The waves of my pleasure rippled through me and urged Bernie to come with me. He jerked and shuddered, and the smooth, easy way he’d been fucking me disappeared as his own climax hit him.

“Tim, love...” He groaned as he slammed deep into me and flooded my ass with his spunk. The hot liquid coating my channel

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shocked me and my cock twitched, expelling a few more drops.

Bernie rolled to the side, collapsing next to me instead of on me. I whimpered as his prick slid from me, leaving me hollow and wet. I considered going to the bathroom to clean up, but for the moment, my bones were Jell-o and my muscles had no strength whatsoever.

“Wow.” Bernie rose up on his elbow and looked at me, a stunned expression dancing across his face. “That was far more intense than I thought it would be.”

“Mmm...” I hummed, still not functioning at my normal level.

He leaned over and kissed me. “I love you,” he whispered after he pulled away and climbed out of bed.

I did love him, but I decided that my first time saying it shouldn’t be right after he nailed my ass. He might not take me seriously with the afterglow of a good fuck tingling through my body.

Returning, he cleaned me up, tossed the washcloth close to the door and snuggled up beside me under the blankets.

“We have time for a nap before you have to get up and take a shower.” He brushed a kiss on my shoulder and settled.

Letting the sound of Bernie’s breathing lull me, I closed my eyes and drifted off.

\* \* \*

Bernie pulled to a stop in front of the diner around eleven-fifty that night. After unhooking my seatbelt, I leaned over the center console and kissed him.

“Are you sure you’re going to be awake at six to come and pick me up?”

“I plan on painting tonight and that usually keeps me up all night. Call me at five-thirty to remind me, though. I have a

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tendency to lose track of time when I'm working."

"Alright." I gave him another kiss and opened the door. Before I slid out, I turned back and said, "I love you, Bernie."

He flashed me a grin.

"I just had to say it, you know."

"Yeah, I know." He waved for me to get out. "I don't want you to be late. Cookie might not be so happy about our new living arrangements if I start making you late for your shift."

Chuckling, I jumped from the truck and headed into the diner. I stopped and blew Bernie a kiss before he drove away. I whistled as I hung up my jacket and grabbed my apron. Cookie looked up from where he stood, talking to a stocky, muscular man near the register.

"Hey, Tim, can you come here for a second?"

"Sure, boss." I slapped him on the shoulder as I halted next to him.

"Tim, this is Zane Smithson, one of Chad's army buddies."

"Nice to meet you. I'm Tim Gapin." I held out my hand and grimaced slightly at the firm grip he had.

"Good to meet you, Tim."

"Do you know if Chad had any plans for today?"

I shook my head. "Did he not show up for his shift?"

Cookie sighed. "No, and he was doing so well, too. He hadn't missed one shift while you were gone."

"Sorry, I can't help you, but did you try the apartment?"

The older man nodded. "First place we went to look when Zane got here. Nothing and his car's gone from the parking lot."

Worry rocketed through me, but I managed not to let it take over. "I'm sure he'll show up before too long."

Zane's expression said he was concerned about Chad, so they



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must have been really close while they served.

“Why don’t you go into Austin and check some of the bars and clubs?”

“Which ones?” Zane asked me eagerly.

I shook my head and shrugged. “I’d think you’d have the best luck checking out the gay ones.”

“Gay? But Chad isn’t gay.”

“He’s not?” I inquired. “I wonder how he knew my boyfriend used to frequent those places.”

“Tim.” Cookie’s tone held a warning.

“You know, I’m not saying he is or isn’t, but it’s a place to start and a good-looking guy like Chad could probably get free drinks in some of them. If those don’t work out, check out some of the homeless shelters in the city. He might be too drunk to drive back here.”

My words seemed to surprise Zane. “I didn’t know his drinking had gotten that bad.”

“I think it’s gotten to the point where he loses days from it,” I commented, tying my apron and finding my order pad.

“Thanks for the suggestions. I’ll head out and look for him.”

“He’s staying in the apartment above the garage behind the diner,” Cookie let Zane know. “You’ll have a place to crash when you find him.”

“Oh.” I turned back. “If you don’t find him right away, you might want to talk to Ned and Wes, the state troopers who stop in here. They might be able to get the city cops to keep an eye out for Chad.”

“Good idea, Tim. I’ll talk to them when they come in tonight.” Cookie slapped me on the back.

“I do have those once in a while,” I joked, grabbing some

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menus and heading to the two new customers who had just sat down.

Zane left shortly after that, and I worried the rest of my shift about Chad. Though we had never really talked about personal things, I still considered him a friend and a member of this odd family I was making here at the diner. I hoped Zane would find him and that everything would be all right. I didn't want Cookie to worry any more than he already was, so I stayed quiet the rest of the night, working my tables and trying not to panic whenever the phone rang.

By the time my shift ended, I was exhausted. Bernie picked me up and asked what was wrong.

"Chad didn't come in for his shift last night." I leaned my head back against the seat.

"That's nothing new," Bernie pointed out as he pulled out of the parking lot.

"I know, but I'm worried all the same. A friend of his from the army came in, looking for him." I gave a tired chuckle. "I told him to go check out the gay clubs in Austin."

"Why would you do that?"

I shrugged. "Chad said he'd seen you there once in a while, so I just assumed he hung out there."

"You assumed he was gay." Bernie shot me a look.

"So sue me. I don't know many straight guys who go to gay bars."

"True," Bernie agreed. "You're probably right about him being gay. I've just never heard him mention anything about it."

"Another case of don't ask, don't tell, I'm sure." I closed my eyes and sighed. "Just take me home, love. I could sleep for a week."

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He took my hand in his and drove us home where I curled up in our bed, knowing when I woke up, Bernie would be there, waiting to love me.

## EPILOGUE

I burst into the diner, laughing at something Cynthia said. She was working the midnight shift with me, so I could leave whenever Bernie showed up. He'd been gone a week this time on his last cross-country haul. The open road held no allure for him anymore now that we were together.

Cookie grinned at us from where he sat with Edson and Ned. I waved to the troopers. Edson had warmed up to me over the last eight months I'd worked at the diner. He seemed to have gotten over my taking Quinn's place. I didn't know if the trooper was still seeing Quinn, deciding it was none of my business unless Edson chose to tell me.

Mel glanced up from where he stood over the stove, shaking his head,. "Young kids have too much energy these days. So when

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does Bernie pull into town?"

I checked my watch. "In about two hours."

"I bet you can't wait."

"It's been lonely without him at the house, but luckily I have you all here at the diner to keep me company when I need it."

I added my other big news. "Hey, Bernie and I want to invite all of you to a party next Saturday. My aunt and uncle are coming for a visit. The doctors cleared him for travel and they're coming down. They want to check out houses around the area to see if they find anything they like."

"Shelby and I will definitely be there," Cynthia crowed. "I've wanted to meet your family since you started working here."

What fascinated her most about my family was how accepting Aunt Judy and Uncle Bill were of my homosexuality. Her parents had kicked her out as soon as she told them she liked girls instead of boys.

"They're looking forward to meeting everyone as well."

My cell phone rang and I tugged it out of my apron pocket. I frowned when I saw it was my aunt's number. Flipping it open, I headed toward the back of the kitchen.

"Hey, Aunt Judy, isn't it a little late for you to be up? Is everything okay?"

"Yes, everything is fine, Timothy. I just wanted to let you know we'll be bringing someone else down with us on our trip."

"That's fine. There's extra space at Bernie's. Who are you bringing?"

"Valerie Stinson."

I pulled the phone away from my ear to stare at it for a moment before setting it back and asking, "Did you say Valerie Stinson?"

"Yes." Her voice was serene.

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“Why would Valerie be coming with you?”

There was no good reason for Valerie to come to Austin with my relatives. I’d have thought it was a practical joke, if I didn’t know my aunt.

“William is doing fine, but the doctors said they’d prefer a nurse or someone else traveled with us, in case of an emergency.”

That made sense. “But Valerie?”

“She approached us when she found out we were going. I couldn’t say no, Timothy. She’s paying her own way, and I think she needs to get away from Frankfort.”

I leaned against the doorframe, staring out over the back lot behind the diner.

“What’s been going on up there, Aunt Judy? Has Aaron being causing problems?”

She sighed. “Aaron and his father have been causing Valerie and everyone else in this town problems.”

“They haven’t done anything to you, have they?” I clenched my hand and straightened. If those two had bothered them, I’d be on the next plane to Minnesota to deal with the issue myself.

“No.” Her tone was definite, and I knew she wasn’t hiding anything. “They leave us alone, but Aaron keeps getting drunk and starting fights at the bars. Mr. Stinson preaches such hateful things.”

That didn’t surprise me. The kind of hate Aaron’s father had inside him spilled out in an attempt to poison all around him.

“Valerie’s gotten fed-up with the whole situation. I believe she’s given up on ever breaking Aaron free of his father, so she’s getting away while she still can. Her father is supporting her a hundred percent. From what she said, he’s looking to move the headquarters of his company from Frankfort and is breaking off

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any association he has with the Stinsons.”

“She did say he’d do anything for her.” I relaxed, knowing they had everything under control on their end. “Tell her she can stay with us as long as she wants.”

“Valerie’s just looking to get away for a little bit. To clear her head is what she told us when she asked if she could travel with us.”

“No better place to do it than down here.”

“Tim.”

I turned and Cynthia stood behind me.

“You have a customer.”

*Thanks*, I mouthed at her. “Aunt Judy, I have to get going, but tell Valerie she’s more than welcome to come. It makes me feel a lot better to have someone else with you as well.”

“Good night, Timothy. We love you and we’ll see you soon.”

“Love you, too, Aunt Judy. Give Uncle Bill a hug for me.”

I closed the phone and shoved it in my apron pocket. Heading back to the dining area, I frowned, thinking about how much Aaron had screwed up his life, all because he couldn’t stand up to his father. He’d given up two chances at love to follow the rigid path Mr. Stinson had set.

Stepping through the swinging doors, I glanced around at my tables. My eyes widened and I barely suppressed an undignified squeal of joy when I saw Bernie standing there. I skidded to a halt in front of him, managing not to launch myself into his arms in front of the customers.

Bernie had no such issues. He swept me into his arms and whirled me around, love shining on his face as he held me. I planted a hard kiss on his lips, letting him know without words how much I’d missed him.

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“Take him home, Bernie. He won’t be any good for me the rest of the night.”

Cookie’s cigarette-roughed voice broke us apart. I blushed, but Bernie kept his arm around my shoulders and nodded.

“Thanks, Cookie. We’ll see you all tomorrow. It’s time for me to take my partner home.”

As catcalls and whistles followed us out of the diner, I realized something. I had left Frankfort almost a year ago not knowing who I was really and where I was going. Yet somehow, I’d ended up in exactly the right place for me. I’d found love and myself while I’d created a family here at this diner in the middle of nowhere.



# T. A. CHASE

T. A. Chase lives a life without boundaries. Being fascinated by life and how different we all are, he writes about the things that make us unique. He finds beauty in all kinds of love and enjoys sharing those insights. He lives in the Midwest with his partner of twelve years. When he isn't writing, he's watching movies, reading and living life to the fullest.

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