

Rachel West - Everything Under the Sun

A horn blasted from behind him and Chris jumped, opening his eyes to find that the pickup had moved another few feet. "Yeah, yeah," he muttered, closing the distance again. *Because it's so fucking vital that we be as close as possible to each other while we're sitting here in the fucking parking lot otherwise known as the 405.* Running his hand through his hair, he shot the driver behind him a dirty look. But then he took off his

sunglasses, throwing them on the passenger seat and rubbing his eyes. He was grouchy. Probably just tired. He hadn't been sleeping well lately. Which wasn't exactly anything new.

He was happy with the lifeguarding gig, in theory. Definitely happy that he'd bucked the trend and not shipped off to college last fall like everybody else in his class. He'd decided that he was going to figure out his own way, and his mom could just deal with it. But the plan had been to work at the pool for a few months until he'd figured out something else, gotten a real job, moved into his own place, maybe even gotten a boyfriend. None of which had happened. Particularly not the boyfriend part.

There had been exactly *nothing* going on in the boyfriend department, not even a date, nothing. A few furtive trips to an all-ages gay club, but he couldn't get up the nerve to talk to anyone. And he spent the rest of his time shuttling between the pool and his mom's house, neither of which tended to present him with a lot of romantic opportunities. The only new person he'd spoken to lately was his neighbor, a recent transplant from the east coast named Alex who was almost certainly straight and who was ridiculously, frustratingly hot. Dark hair and eyes against perfect pale skin, with an athlete's body and a deep voice that held just a hint of a Boston accent, just enough to make him mysterious and different from the rest. Alex had crept into Chris's thoughts an embarrassing amount recently, just more proof of how pathetic and hard up he was. Damn it. Chris rolled his eyes at himself, cursing himself for drooling over his straight neighbor again, thumping the steering wheel with the heel of his hand, wondering yet again what the hell he was doing with his life. He'd been wondering that a lot lately. And ever since Seth's last e-mail, in which he'd said he'd be home all summer and was looking forward to seeing him, fucking *looking forward to seeing him*, he'd been sleepless with excitement. He'd actually been counting down the days until Seth's arrival, and how pathetic was that?

It couldn't all be in his head. It couldn't be. Chris shifted in his seat, licking his lips involuntarily as his mind filled with images of the last time they'd seen each other before Seth left last summer. When they'd had a few beers, or maybe more than a few, and then Seth had been on his bed, on top of him, his mouth pressed against Chris's in that hard, strong, demanding way he had. And everything else had been hard and demanding too. And it was different from the other times they'd done this, when Chris had tried so hard to hold back, not to touch anything below Seth's neck, not to make a move that would freak him out and send him running for the door again. And that was okay. Seth's hair was a mass of thick honey-brown curls, soft and messy, so different from Chris's, and Chris loved running his hands through it when they kissed. Loved the approving little sounds Seth made when he did that. Loved how Seth would take off his glasses and toss them to the side, pull Chris a little closer, kiss him a little more. But he always stopped, always freaked out,

always left. Once, he ran out so quickly that he had to come back for his glasses. Chris just handed them to him wordlessly, and he took them without speaking, freezing in the doorway for a moment, staring. But then he turned his back and hurried out the door again.

The next part was always the same. Seth would avoid him for a little while, and then start talking to him again, pretending everything was normal, that they were just buds, that they hadn't been playing tonsil hockey on the floor of Chris's room the previous Friday night. Then it would happen again, and then Seth would freak out again. And Chris never called him on it, never pushed him on it, never said a thing. Which maybe, yeah, sucked. But Seth was beautiful, and he had these deep brown eyes that Chris couldn't get out of his head, and a long, lean body that Chris couldn't stop thinking about when he jerked off. So every time Seth came back, Chris played along. One of these days, he wouldn't freak, and they could finish what they started.

And the weekend before Labor Day, that's sort of what happened.

Kind of. Seth came over with the beers in his backpack, smuggling them past Chris's mom and up to Chris's room. They played Final Fantasy, and they drank beers, and they turned the stereo way up, and they drank some more beers. And then Chris had been spinning around to the music, laughing, and Seth just grabbed him and kissed him so hard he took his breath away. And they fell onto the bed together, or maybe Seth pushed him onto the bed, maybe that was it. But Seth was on top of him, his glasses on the floor, his tongue in Chris's mouth, grinding into him. And Chris's hands were on Seth's ass and Seth was *not stopping him*, and their legs got all tangled up as they moved together, and one of them was moaning, or maybe both of them were, and within about ten seconds Chris was bucking his hips and squeezing Seth tight and gasping into his shoulder as he came in his jeans. And then Seth's breathing got even harder and he kept pushing forward and then he came too, his ass clenching tight under Chris's hands, a desperate groan coming out of him. He kind of fell off him then, sliding to the side, and Chris held onto his hand and somehow drifted off to sleep. And when he woke up, it was late, his jeans were cold and sticky and gross, and Seth was gone. Which didn't even really surprise him.

He had waited a few days, and then called. But he got voice mail, which meant Seth was avoiding him, because he always picked up his phone. So he didn't call again, and then Seth left for college, and he thought maybe that would be it, he'd never see him again. Which was okay. He told himself it would be okay. It was fine. It would be.

But a month later, Seth e-mailed him out of the blue. *Hey, what's up man. Casual and sloppy and poorly punctuated. Just like Seth. Havent talked in a while. School sukcs. Hows the pool?*

Chris had stared at that e-mail for a long time, trying to decide whether to respond. *You don't need this shit*, he thought. *He's closeted and stupid and can't deal. Don't let him off the hook. Get yourself a real*

boyfriend. Don't even answer him. He was still thinking that when he typed his reply.

So now here it was, seven months later, and Seth was coming home today. A year of college under his belt, of classes and parties and all kinds of new experiences. He was probably a whole new person by now. And Chris was exactly the same. Still at his mom's house, still working at the pool, still spending his free time drawing his dumb sketches, like he always had. And still very, very single. Painfully single, you might say. Not like his neighbor, who had that cool, confident, sexy thing going, that way about him that could make anybody smile. Alex probably dated women by the dozens, leaving a string of broken hearts from Orange County to Boston and back again. Chris knew he could never be like that, strong and brave and the kind of guy who drew others to him. Even if he were as fucking beautiful as Alex was. Which he wasn't, not by a mile. And so that one stupid time with Seth, that stupid fucking sexual accident, was still the only time Chris had ever come with another person in the room. *Pathetic.* He glared at himself in the rearview mirror, then looked out at the cars ahead of him. The cars shifted, a space opened up, and he cut over to the next lane, then drove up onto the shoulder and sped toward the exit. He was tired of fucking waiting.

GOD, it's hot. Alex wiped the sweat off his brow with the back of his hand, setting down the garden shears for a moment to stretch. He hadn't been in California long, just a couple of months so far, and he wasn't used to the way the damned sun just *never went away*. Boston could get hot in the summers, no doubt about it, but not like this, not this unending stream of sunniness that could make even the happiest of guys wish for a cold and rainy day. *There's something downright unnatural about a place where it doesn't rain.*

Picking up his water bottle, Alex looked over his hedges as he took a long, slow drink. For a Saturday, there sure weren't many people around. He never should have moved to the suburbs—he was used to a bustling neighborhood, sitting on the stoop and hanging out with his friends, walking through a street fair and piling into a cab with three other guys when it was time to go home. Here, there was no walking, no street fairs, and so far, not many friends. Just Marty, but an old ex-boyfriend from five years ago only carries you so far. And he'd been out with Marty a few times, but he couldn't get into the club scene here, the way it was all about the clothes, the hair, the look. And living in a rented house in Costa Mesa turned out to be not the coolest possible choice for a twenty-six-year-old software engineer. Not that the place had kept him from hooking up at *all*, but he certainly wasn't doing as well as he had back east.

It was his own fault for renting the house online, but he'd needed something quick, and he hadn't had time to check out the neighborhoods. So he'd ended up here, surrounded by het families with their dogs and their minivans and their two point five kids, and now he was spending his Saturday afternoon trimming his hedges. *Trimming his fucking hedges.*

How had his life come to this?

He glanced over to the house next door, and saw that the unfamiliar car was still sitting in the driveway. He'd gotten to know his neighbors a little bit by now, at least well enough to know who lived here and what they drove. And the kid in the convertible definitely did not belong. Tall, with a mop of curly hair, a pair of trendy heavy-rimmed glasses, and a vaguely uneasy expression on his face. Twice already, he'd started to back out of the driveway, but then pulled back in again. Right now, he was sitting in the car with the engine running, staring at the front door. Like he was trying to work up his nerve.

It was the Bennett house, one of the less crowded places on the block. Just a single mom named Lois and her son Chris, a good-looking nineteen-year-old with clear blue eyes and California blond hair that had a tendency to flop forward into his face in an endearing kind of way. Alex and Chris had chatted a few times in the past few months, enough that Alex's gaydar had activated, enough that he knew Chris was bored and restless and looking for something new. And okay, maybe Alex had wondered if an older guy might be the something that Chris was looking for. But he squashed the thought immediately. This was southern California; the place was crawling with gays. There was no need to hit on a teenager just because he lived next door. And had the body of a God, and a habit of walking around shirtless. He closed his eyes, mentally smacking himself on the forehead. *Don't go there*, he warned. *Twenty-six is too young to be a dirty old man*.

When he opened his eyes again, wouldn't you know it, Chris was pulling up to the house, and Curly was already out of his car, walking up to him. Chris got out, and they stared at each other. *That* kind of stare. And then Chris smiled a little, and Curly nervously smiled back. Without talking, Chris walked to his front door, and Curly followed right behind him, eyes glued to Chris's ass. Alex grinned, shaking his head a little. *Looks like Chris found what he was looking for without your help*. Rolling his eyes, he took another sip from his water bottle and checked his watch. *Fuck! Marty's going to kill me*. He grabbed his shears and headed into the house. The hedges would have to wait.

SETH stood by the bookshelf in Chris's room, arms folded, staring at the titles, not seeing any of them, not really. Pretending not to listen to the sound of the shower in the next room. Pretending not to think about the fact that Chris was naked in there, soaping himself, touching himself, maybe thinking about Seth. *Stop it*, he told himself. *Don't make this a bigger deal than it is*. Shoving his hands in his pockets, he turned around and walked to Chris's doorway, leaning against the jamb, wondering for the hundredth time what he was doing there.

"So how've you been?" he called, toeing the carpet. Talking would make it easier. The silence was getting to him.

"Okay." Chris's voice came floating back to him, calm, quiet, like Chris always was. Fucking impossible to read. "Not much changes around

here.”

“Yeah.” *Shit. Say something else. There’s got to be something else to say.*

Luckily, Chris found something for him. “What’s Maine like?”

“Oh, y’know, good. Really different.”

“I bet. Can’t get much farther from Orange County than that.”

Seth furrowed his brow. *What did he mean by that?* “That’s not why I went there.”

Chris was silent for a beat. “I know,” he said at last. But there was something else in his voice. *Fuck. What the hell is he talking about? What the hell are you doing here?*

Exhaling in frustration, Seth moved away from the door and walked back into the room, looking out the window, crossing his arms again. This was stupid. He hadn’t even planned on coming here. He’d only been back in town a few hours, and there were a lot of people he wanted to see.

Maybe he should just take off. The shower shut off, and Seth’s chest got tight. This was definitely a bad idea. *Make up an excuse. Tell Chris your parents want to see you, or you forgot about dinner plans. Something.*

“Hey,” Chris said, the voice soft behind him, and Seth turned around, ready to explain. But Chris was right there, a towel around his waist, droplets of water clinging to his bare chest, his eyes boring into Seth’s with the clearest invitation in the world. *Stay, they said. Stay and I’ll make it worth your while.* And somehow, all of Seth’s words disappeared. Rational thought disappeared. Everything disappeared except the need to throw Chris on the bed and get rid of that stupid towel. “I—” Chris began. But Seth was on him, having crossed the room without even realizing he’d moved from the window, crushing their mouths together, grabbing his naked flesh, backing him toward the bed.

Sometime before they reached it, the towel dropped away

CHAPTER TWO

THE phone was ringing. “Shit. Coming,” Alex yelled, running toward the sound, laughing at himself as he did. *Why do people do that?* he wondered. *It’s not like the receiver can hear me.* He reached the phone on the third ring and grabbed it, grinning when he saw Marty’s name on the caller ID. “I’m not late yet!” he said.

“Asshole. I’m psychic. I predict you will be.”

“Fuck you. I’m two seconds from heading out the door.” Okay, so that wasn’t exactly true. He tucked the phone between his ear and his shoulder, adjusting the towel around his waist and trying to keep from dripping on the floor.

“Yeah, yeah, big talk. See you in an hour.”

“I’ll be there in ten minutes!” He laughed, turning to his closet, pulling out a pair of black pants. Or maybe he should wear jeans instead?

“You’re pretty enough, sweetheart. Quit changing your mind about your outfit and get your butt in the car. You have the address?”

Alex rolled his eyes. *Maybe it is possible to know a person too well.*

“Shut up. And yes. I’ll be there soon.”

“Hour and a half, right, good. Bye.”

“Mar—” but the line was dead, Marty had hung up already. Still grinning, Alex set the phone down and turned back to the closet, contemplating his choices. He was looking forward to tonight. It was what he needed—a few beers, a few laughs. With any luck, he could get laid, too, and he could definitely get behind that plan. He selected a dark blue silk button down, throwing it on the bed with his pants, reminding himself to cut the tags off before he put it on. He’d just bought it last weekend, and it was way too fucking expensive, but it hugged his chest in just the right way, and fuck if he was going to let all those hours in the gym go to waste. Ever since the breakup, he’d been spending a lot of time working out, not so much to make himself look better, but because it felt good to do something physical, something repetitive, something that didn’t make him think about John. And even he had to admit it was starting to pay off. He stopped in front of the mirror, running his fingers through his hair. He was wearing it shorter now, which was *not* because John liked it long. He didn’t give a fuck about what John thought anymore. Barely even thought about him these days. The three thousand miles between them helped with that, not that that was why Alex had decided to move. He just needed a change, and the job opportunity had been there, and he grabbed it. And he liked California, he did. He was starting to. Sort of.

Turning away from the mirror, Alex pulled on a pair of boxer briefs and threw the towel on the bed, letting his mind wander as he continued to get dressed. It would be okay here. He had never had a problem making friends, and he was sure California wouldn’t be any different. There was already the kid next door, who was probably in bed with his boyfriend at this very moment, and good for him. Alex let a smile creep across his face as he finished buttoning up his shirt, then grabbed his wallet and keys and headed for the door. *Five minutes flat*, he thought, already anticipating the gloating he’d do when he showed up for Marty’s birthday party *exactly on time*. He headed out the door, then turned halfway through it to head back in for a pair of scissors. *Fucking tags*, he thought, blushing slightly.

Goddamned Marty was laughing at him in his head.

OH MY God, oh my God, oh my God. This was real. It was really happening. Seth was here, really here, on top of him, kissing him, just like that time last summer. Only now, Chris was naked. And he really needed Seth to be naked too. He groped at Seth’s back, sliding a hand under his Tshirt, sliding another one down to squeeze Seth’s ass. And Seth moaned, *oh my God*, he fucking *moaned*, and the kiss got more desperate, harder, better, *more*. Seth’s tongue was in his mouth, and Chris was so hard, so fucking hard, and he could feel that Seth was too. *Holy shit holy shit holy shit*. He yanked Seth’s shirt up, moving fast now, and Seth broke the kiss

long enough for Chris to pull the shirt over his head. Seth froze for a moment as Chris threw the shirt to the floor, staring, panting, but there was no fucking way Chris was going to let him run out of here this time. He grabbed Seth's head in both hands and pulled him down into a deep kiss. And Seth kissed him back, running his own hand down Chris's body now, grabbing at his ass. Chris lifted a leg to give him better access, wrapping it around Seth's waist, and Seth pushed forward, grinding their hard-ons together through the thin fabric separating them. Which was so good, *my God, so fucking good*. But he needed more than that this time. Chris's hands were shaking when they moved to Seth's fly, but not so much that he couldn't unfasten the button and pull the zipper down. Seth broke the kiss, staring down at Chris's hands, watching them, and Chris couldn't tell which one of them was breathing harder. Which one of them wanted this more. He swallowed hard and pushed his hand inside Seth's underwear, grabbing his cock, so hard already, leaking for him. Seth let out a little whimper when he first touched it, and Chris looked up, locking eyes, a silent question there. And Seth swallowed too, then nodded, and that was all Chris needed. He began to move his hand, stroking firmly, pulling, twisting, just the way he liked it when he did this to himself. Seth's eyes closed as his mouth opened, the muscles in his arms tensing as he braced himself over Chris. But Chris was looking back down now, staring at Seth's cock as it disappeared in and out of his fist, moving his other hand down to cradle Seth's balls. Seth groaned and started moving his hips, pumping in time with Chris's hand, and now he was kissing him again, and his rhythm was stuttering, and just as Chris's brain caught up to what that meant, it was happening, Seth was coming, shooting all over Chris's stomach, groaning into his mouth, then collapsing forward, body limp, panting. Chris stroked Seth's back with his clean hand, kissing his ear, his neck, anything he could reach. His own cock was painfully in need of attention, but he couldn't reach it without dislodging Seth, which he absolutely was not going to do. But eventually, Seth raised up a little, kissing him again, more softly this time. He broke the kiss and stared deeply into Chris's eyes, and then suddenly Chris became aware of a hand on his dick that wasn't his own. "Nnngh," he grunted, dropping his head back. Seth's hand was moving fast, jerking him hard, and Chris rode with it, clutching at Seth's back and gasping for air. He tried to make it last, tried so hard to hold back, but he had wanted this for too long, wanted this too much, and his hips were thrusting with a mind of their own. Too soon, much too soon, it was over, he was coming, clutching Seth close to him, breathing hard. As Chris gradually floated back to reality, Seth rolled over onto his side, and Chris moved to face him, their bodies mirroring each other. They were looking at each other, not touching, just staring. Just breathing. Chris reached a hand out to touch Seth's face, but Seth flinched a little, pressing his lips into a thin line, and Chris wasn't sure what that meant. "Seth," he said quietly, but then the sound of the front door opening jolted them out of it,

and they quickly sat up.

“Chris,” his mom called, sounding tired, like she always did. *Shit.*

Shitshitshitshitshit. Seth was already on his feet, hurriedly zipping up his pants, and Chris grabbed a pair of jeans from the floor and pulled them on as quickly as he could.

“Hi, Mom,” he yelled back, as Seth pulled his shirt on and Chris ran to the dresser to find one for himself. He grabbed a handful of tissues from a box on the nightstand and quickly wiped down his stomach, then tossed the box to Seth so he could do the same.

“Honey, please come out here to speak to me. You know I don’t like to yell. And whose car is that in the driveway?” Yanking a shirt over his head, Chris shot a look at Seth, whose face had drained of all color. He was scanning the floor, brow furrowed, and Chris suddenly realized he had lost his glasses. Spotting them by the bed, he dove for them and handed them to Seth, who shoved them onto his face an instant before Chris’s mother came barging into his room. “Didn’t you hear me? I—oh! Well, hello, Seth. I didn’t know you were back in town.”

“Hi, Mrs. Bennett.” Seth’s voice sounded a little strained. *Maybe she won’t notice. Please don’t let her notice. God, the room even smells like come.* “I, uh... I’m not. I mean, I am now. I just got back. Today.” The color was back in Seth’s face now. Too much color. He was *blushing*, damn it.

“Oh,” she said, looking at him a little oddly. *Shit. She can tell something’s up.* “Well, you’re welcome to stay for dinner, if you’d—”

“No!” Seth’s voice was sudden, loud, and half an octave higher than Chris had ever heard it. This was not going well. Seth cleared his throat. “I mean, thank you, Mrs. Bennett, but I can’t. I... my parents are expecting me. I’ve got to go.” He glanced quickly at Chris and then walked out, rushed actually, nearly tripping on his way out the door. Chris watched him go, wishing he could stop him, wishing he knew what to say. Which was not an unfamiliar feeling.

He couldn’t look at his mother. They were quiet for a moment as they listened to the sound of Seth starting his engine, and Chris felt her eyes on him, but he couldn’t meet her gaze. *Don’t. Just don’t,* he thought. He couldn’t handle another lecture from Mom at this moment, and he sure wasn’t going to talk about Seth with her. Not until at least one of the three of them knew what the hell there was to talk about.

Finally, she sighed and turned away. “Your shirt’s on inside out,” she said quietly as she headed out of his room. “Fix it and then come help with dinner, okay?”

Chris exhaled with relief. *Thanks, Mom.* “Okay.”

THE place was loud, the music pumping. Marty seemed to know every gay man in southern California, and the ones who hadn’t come to the birthday dinner were now all showing up at the club. Which meant there was plenty of opportunity for Alex to get some, if Marty would quit insisting on making him talk. “Quit acting like you’re over him,” Marty

shouted, leaning in close to be heard. Alex shook his head.

"I don't want to talk about this," he shouted back. He looked away, locking eyes with a cute dark-haired guy in an orange muscle tee who was leaning by the bar. All alone. Which was a terrible shame.

"Alex, three years is a long time. You can't just expect to—"

"Marty." He turned his head back to his friend, gripping his shoulder, touching their foreheads. "I don't. Want. To talk about this. Okay?" He let his gaze drift back to the cutie, who was now tilting his beer bottle to his mouth in a delightfully suggestive way. Marty followed his gaze.

"Okay," he said, sighing. "Go get him."

Alex grinned, kissed Marty quickly on the cheek, and made a beeline for Mr. Orange. When he reached him, he leaned on the bar next to him, giving him a long, slow look up his body. "Having a good night?" he asked, when his eyes met the stranger's.

"Not really," Orange said, licking his lips.

"Me neither. Want to change that?"

Even in the darkened room, the gleam in the stranger's eyes was unmistakable. "Definitely."

It wasn't a long walk to the parking lot, but it was a long drive to Alex's place, and that was much too long to wait. Luckily, Orange—no, *Jason*, it turned out his name was Jason—knew this club well, and led him to a back room where all kinds of interesting activities were going on. Once they got in the door, the time for talking was over. The guy's name was Jason, he was hot, and the gleam in his eyes picked up a notch when Alex pressed him up against a wall. That was all Alex needed to know. Alex kissed him breathless, licked up the side of his neck, pinned his hands over his head. "You want to get fucked, Jason?" he whispered, his voice husky. Jason's cock throbbed against Alex's in response.

"Yes," he whispered back, as if a verbal response was necessary.

Alex kissed him again, letting Jason's hands slide down, and those hands immediately found their way to Alex's belt, unbuckling with impressive speed. Alex would have commented on that, but Jason was already on his knees, already pushing Alex's pants and underwear off his hips, already sliding Alex's half-hard cock into his eager mouth. The boy sure was in a hurry.

"Fuck," Alex groaned as Jason went to work, sucking him deep. This was not a man who believed in teasing. He bobbed his head quickly, his lips forming a warm, wet vise around the shaft, tongue moving deftly around the head before he took him into his throat. After a minute, Alex pulled Jason off. Much more of that and he'd never make it to where he really wanted to be. Jason grinned up at him, licking his lips again, and Alex yanked him to his feet, kissing him once more before spinning him around to face the wall. He wasn't usually rough like this, but it was obviously what Jason wanted, and Alex was certainly capable of delivering. He held Jason's crossed wrists against the wall above his head

with one hand while the other undid Jason's jeans, shoving them quickly off his ass. Jason was conveniently commando underneath. "Nice," Alex said, cupping the bare ass before him, but Jason was beyond responding in words. So Alex reached down to the pocket of his own pants, which had not made it past his knees, and retrieved a condom, tearing the package open with his teeth so he could keep Jason's hands pressed against the wall. He kissed Jason's neck again as he slid the latex over himself, then bit down as he covered his fingers and cock in lube. Luckily, he had the dexterity to perform all these tasks one-handed, since he had a feeling that half of what was making Jason breathe so hard was the hand holding his arms above his head.

"Ungh," Jason grunted, the first sound he'd made since they got started, when Alex slid a finger inside.

"You like that?" Alex whispered, pushing against his new friend's prostate.

"Yes." His hips rocked back. "Fuck." When Alex added a second one, Jason groaned louder, rolling his head back, taking the fingers deeper.

"You want that, don't you? You want my cock?"

"Fuck yes. Unnh. Fuck."

Alex was breathing just as hard now. He loved this, being in charge like this, making a gorgeous man fall apart from his touch, his words, his cock. He eased his fingers out and lined up behind Jason, finally letting go of his wrists as he grabbed Jason's hip with one hand and used the other to guide his dick inside.

"Oh, fuck... oh God yes...."

Now there was no thinking, there was only this sweet pressure, this tightness, this heat. Alex thrust forward, pushing into Jason's prostate, delighting in the groan that met him. He took hold of Jason's hips with both hands now, fucking into him again, and Jason reached back behind him, clutching at his back.

"Harder," Jason moaned, and Alex was happy to oblige. He thrust in again, and again, and again. Jason's hips moved with him, and they quickly found their rhythm, breathing hard and slapping together, letting everything else fade away. Jason used one arm to brace them against the wall, leaning forward on his forearm, and Alex slid his hand around to Jason's dick, which was hard but surprisingly small. *You can never tell.*

"Yes," Jason panted. "Fuck, Alan, that's so good."

Alex chose to ignore the fact that Jason had gotten his name wrong.

It was loud in the bar. And who the fuck cared? He just snapped his hips a little faster, fucking him a little harder, jerking Jason's dick now in time to the motion of his hips. Jason's moans were getting higher in pitch now, and that was good, because Alex was close too.

"Oh, fuck... fuck, I'm gonna come...."

No shit, Alex thought, but he kept that thought to himself. And then Jason threw his head back hard, shouting loud, thick ropes of come splattering one after another onto the stained club wall. Alex closed his

eyes and thrust forward four more times before releasing into the condom, biting down on Jason's shoulder as he did, trying to ignore the unpleasant taste of polyester, or whatever the hell fabric Jason's shirt was made out of. Neither of them had bothered to remove any clothing above the waist. When they had recovered a bit, Alex gently pulled out, then slipped off the condom and tied it off, looking around for a trash can. Instead, he saw half a dozen other used condoms lining the floor. *Ugh.*

"That was hot," Jason said. He was leaning back against the wall now, zipping up his pants, eyeing Alex with a grin on his face. "Call me, okay?" Before Alex could protest, he had slipped a card into Alex's hand, kissed him sweetly, and then walked away. Alex finished rearranging his clothing and followed him out, finding a garbage can just outside the door and dropping the condom and card in it together.

Looking around the club, he saw that Marty had left already. *Just as well.* He wasn't ready for another relationship discussion, and Marty just wouldn't leave him alone about it recently. Running a quick hand through his hair, Alex pushed the door of the club open and headed outside.

NOBODY knew about this place. Seth had discovered it a long time ago, a quiet side road on a hill with a nice view, a place where he could sit and be alone and think things through. He hadn't been here in a while, but then, he hadn't been anywhere in Costa Mesa in a while. He was a New England guy now, a college guy. That's how everyone saw him. It's how he saw himself.

But there were still a few things that nobody saw.

Seth lay back on the grass, staring up at the night sky. It was late.

He'd managed to sneak out alone, telling his parents he had plans with friends and his friends he had plans with his parents. Which he'd done before, on occasion. Not too often. He didn't really like to be alone. He never had.

Not like Chris. Another thing they didn't have in common. It never really made much sense that they had become buddies; they were nothing alike, and they didn't exactly run with the same crowd. Chris was quiet, detached, one of those guys who just kind of drifted through high school without really grabbing on to anything. Seth was just the opposite. Student government. Track team. He had a lot of friends, and his fair share of girlfriends. He had a plan for his life, and it was working out pretty well so far. Chris was not a part of that plan. When they first started hanging out, his friends had been pretty surprised about it, but Seth convinced himself that they were just being small-minded homophobes, not hip and sophisticated like him. Cool enough to have a gay friend, to insist that it didn't bother him. Which it hadn't. Until that first kiss happened. And then the second one. And then, Jesus, the third one, that insane night a week before Labor Day. He didn't know what the fuck came over him that night. That was definitely *not* a part of the plan.

Luckily, he hadn't had to avoid Chris for long. The summer was over, and Maine beckoned. A whole new world, new people, new

challenges. Except he still thought about Chris. A lot. Fantasized about him, sometimes. Sometimes while he jerked off. Sometimes, even, while he was in the middle of having sex with some hot girl. Not that he meant to. But Chris always seemed to find a way into his head.

“Shit,” he muttered, pulling out his cell phone and pressing a number into it quickly. It rang once, twice, three times. Finally, someone picked up.

“Hello?” The voice was groggy, thick with sleep.

“Amy? Shit, did I wake you?”

“Seth? What the fuck, man? Wait, hang on.” He heard the clank of the receiver landing on the table, then a rustle of sheets and the click of a lamp being turned on. Seth checked his watch. *Fuck, forgot about the time difference.* “Seth. It’s two o’clock in the morning. What the hell is going on?”

“I’m sorry. I woke you up. Look, forget about it. Go back to sleep.”

“Fuck that shit.” Seth grinned. Amy was one of the cutest girls he’d ever met, tiny and pretty and deeply cool. But she had a mouth like a sailor, and it always made him laugh. “I’m up now. Better make this worth my while.”

“I just... I was thinking....” He exhaled, running a hand through his hair. “Remember when you made out with Kenley Thomas at Mookie’s midterm relief party?”

“Do I remember? I had my tongue down the girl’s throat. Hell yeah, I remember.”

“Yeah. So... I mean, what was it like?”

“Dude. Did you call me up at two o’clock in the morning for jerkoff material? Seriously?”

“No, I...” His voice trailed off. How could he explain?

“Fuck it,” she said, sighing, and he could hear her settling back against the pillow. “It was hot. She was seriously hammered. Tasted like peppermint schnapps.”

“But, I mean.... Was it weird? Y’know, kissing a girl? Had you done that before?”

“Sure. Girls are nice. Pretty, soft hair, soft lips. What’s not to like?”

“But you’re... I mean, you’re not a lesbian. Are you?”

Amy snorted. “Seth, if you’re seriously not sure about the answer to that question after the little romp you and I had after the Syracuse game, I need to get to work on my skills.”

“Well, right. So....”

“So, what’s the big deal? It’s all a part of the spectrum,” she said, yawning. “Human sexuality’s not so black and white.” He nodded. Which was stupid, since they were on the phone. But before he could get another word out, she was talking again. “Seth, seriously, man, I’ve got to get some sleep. My parents are waking me up at the butt crack tomorrow to drive to some family reunion thing in Bangor. Can I—”

“Yeah, yeah, sure. Go back to sleep. Night, Ames.”

“Night.”

She hung up, and Seth slid the phone back into his pocket. Amy was probably right. He was overthinking this. Why did it have to be such a big deal? He could get together with Chris on the side, and it didn’t mean anything. It’s not like he was *gay*. Chris was, everybody knew that, he’d been out forever, but that didn’t mean Seth had to be. It was just hanging out, having fun, getting off. A gray area. That’s all. And nobody had to know.

Right.

So why was he feeling this way?

He brought the heels of his hands to his eyes, pressing down, rubbing. Like he did when he was a kid. Seeing stars.

What the hell are you doing?

After a minute, he took his hands away.

CHAPTER THREE

“I WANT you,” Seth whispered, his cheek pressed against Chris’s, his mouth against Chris’s ear, his naked body pressing Chris into the mattress.

“Want to fuck you so bad. I’ve been dreaming about it.”

Chris gripped Seth’s back, squeezing his legs tighter around him. “I want you to,” he whispered back, tilting his head back as Seth kissed and bit his way up Chris’s neck. “God, I’ve wanted that for so long.” Seth kissed him, hard, and Chris kissed back desperately, meeting his tongue with his own, moving his hips to rub their cocks together. Seth was so hard, so hard, and this was really going to happen, finally going to happen, *finally*. He broke the kiss and looked at Seth, and there was no panic there, only passion, and naked desire. Seth kept their eyes locked as he slid his hand lower, lower, lower....

The clank of dishes down the hall shook Chris awake, and he opened his eyes with a gasp. As his mind settled back into reality, he closed his eyes, trying to take his mind off his painful erection. He bit his lip, cursing his small house silently. Much too small to take care of things without his mother overhearing, and that was one trauma he could happily do without. He took some deep breaths, forcing his mind to puppies and kittens, and when that didn’t work, the time Sue Bechner had thrown up on him on the bus during the class trip to Knott’s Berry Farm in the seventh grade.

Eventually, it worked, and he calmed down enough to stand up and walk to the bathroom. He peed quickly and then splashed some water on his face, staring at himself in the mirror for a moment before picking up his toothbrush. *You’ve got to stop this*. It was fucking pathetic how much he thought about Seth, how much he dreamed about him, how much he fantasized about wrapping his legs around that lean body and pulling him closer as he thrust inside. And now that he’d seen Seth’s dick, now that he’d actually *had it in his hands*, it was only going to get worse, he knew

it.

Unless maybe it gets better. Chris stared at himself again as he brushed, letting the thought linger. It was possible. After what had happened the day before, he had to admit it was possible. Wasn't it? Maybe he would get what he wanted after all. What they both wanted. He smiled a little as he rinsed his mouth, letting it linger as he picked up a towel and patted his face dry. *Seth kissed me. He pushed me on the bed. Maybe—*

"Chris?" Mom's knuckles rapped harshly on the bathroom door, and Chris jumped. Rolling his eyes at himself, he replaced the towel and then went to the door, surprised to find his mother in her pink hospital scrubs.

"Are you going in this morning?"

"I told you I was. I swapped shifts with the new girl, remember? Her daughter is sick again."

"Right," he said absently, though he had no memory of the conversation. He wandered into the kitchen, pouring himself a cup of coffee, and his mom followed him in. She watched him as he sat down at the table, her fingers lightly drumming the back of a chair. "What?"

"Are you seeing Seth today?" He struggled not to jump at the question. His shoulders tensed.

"I don't know," he said quietly, aiming for a casual tone, avoiding her gaze. "We don't have any plans." She just stared at him, and the moment drew out too long for his comfort. Finally, he planted his coffee cup on the table and looked her in the eye. "What?" he repeated, not attempting to hide the annoyance in his voice.

She pulled out the chair and sat down, looking at him for a moment before speaking again. "Honey, if you and Seth are dating—"

Chris coughed, sputtered, and stood up from the table, turning his back to his mother. "We are *not* dating." *I don't know what the hell we're doing, but dating isn't it.* "Jesus, Mom, just 'cause I'm gay doesn't mean every guy I bring over is—"

"You haven't."

"What?"

"You haven't brought any guys over. Seth is the first person you've had in this house since last August." He kept his back to her, staring into the sink. "And I'm worried about you, Chris. You're drifting."

"Drifting." Chris turned around, crossing his arms over his chest. "Is this about college again?"

She sighed. "No, it's not about—well, yes, it is about college. And work, and friends, and love, and everything. I want you to find something, Chris. Something you're passionate about. Or *someone*," she said significantly. He looked away again. "You can't just go on this way forever. You can't—"

"Fine." He spoke shortly, staring out the window, his body still tense. "Got it."

There was a pause, a long pause. Finally, his mom got up and laid a

gentle hand on his arm. "I like Seth, honey. I always have. If you want to invite him over for dinner sometime—"

"Mom." His cheeks were warm. He looked at her, searching for words, not finding any. Finally, he dropped his gaze to the floor. "Don't you have to get to work?" he said quietly.

For a long moment, she just looked at him. Then, at last, the hand dropped away. "I'll see you tonight," she said, going to the table to pick up her purse. She walked back to him, kissed him quickly on the cheek, then rubbed the lipstick off lovingly with her thumb. "Have a good day, sweetie."

"You too," he said, and she headed out the door.

TEN a.m. is too early to feel this bored. Alex sighed, shutting off the radio as he steered the car onto Calhoun Street. He had to get out of the habit of waking up so early. It was Sunday, for fuck's sake; there was no reason in the world for him to be up at seven with nothing to do all day. The gym had filled in a few hours, but not enough. He'd done all his laundry the day before. The hedges were as trimmed as they were going to be. He could call Marty, but he wasn't in the mood to get dragged into another John talk, and anyway Marty tended to sleep 'til noon if it was at all possible. He sighed again. *You need a distraction.*

Just at that moment, he pulled up in front of his house, and saw one waiting for him in the Bennett front yard. Chris was stretched out on his stomach on the grass, propped up on his elbows, his concentration focused on a big sketchpad laid out in front of him. His T-shirt had hiked up an inch above the waistband of his shorts, and one leg was bent at a ninetydegree angle with a sandal dangling half-off his foot. His skin glowed in the sun, every muscle in his arms and legs outlined perfectly. He looked like summer and California and gorgeous young male all wrapped up in one delicious package. Alex couldn't resist.

Chris looked up as Alex closed the car door, shading his eyes with one hand to see who it was. "Hi, Alex," he said, his eyes dancing quickly up and down over Alex's body. Alex smiled. *Got to work on your subtlety, kid.*

"Hey," he said, sauntering casually toward him. "How's it going?"

"You cut your hair," Chris blurted, then looked down, his cheeks coloring slightly. "I mean, fine. How are you?"

Alex grinned. *So he has noticed me.* "Yeah, I cut it a few days ago. And I'm great, thanks. A little bored." Chris nodded, squinting up at him again. "What are you working on there?"

Chris looked down again, as if he'd forgotten the pad in front of him.

"Oh, this? It's nothing. I just do these sketches sometimes."

"Can I see it?" Chris pressed his lips together, but then nodded slowly. Sitting up, he handed the sketchpad to Alex without speaking. Alex brushed a finger over Chris's hand as he took it from him, accidentally on purpose, keeping their eyes locked. "Thanks." Chris nodded again, and Alex took his first look at the drawing. And then...

wow. It was a street scene, a crowded produce market filled with people rendered in exquisite detail. There were children playing, shoppers bartering, women laughing together. The lighting and shadow were beautiful, the lines on the faces incredibly real. It was an amazing piece of work. "Wow," Alex said, finally looking up. "This is beautiful."

Chris smiled shyly, standing up and burying his hands in his pockets.

"Thanks," he said.

"You do these all the time?"

"Um, yeah, you know. When I'm in the mood. It's kind of my hobby."

Alex handed the pad back to him, not bothering to seek out Chris's fingers this time. "Well, I'm really impressed. I never made it much past stick figures, so anybody who can do stuff like that..." Chris smiled again, and Alex smiled back. It was kind of hard not to, with a smile like that.

"You do computer stuff, right?"

"Yeah. Software engineer."

"That's the stuff that impresses me. I've never had a head for any of that stuff. I can't even figure out how to program our TiVo."

Alex laughed. "Well, I'd be happy to give you a few pointers. You want to come over?"

"When?"

"How about now? I don't have anything going on, do you?"

Chris shrugged, smiling again. "I guess not."

"Good, let's go. It's too hot to hang out outside anyway. I don't know how you people deal with all this damn sun all the time." He turned to head into his house, and Chris followed.

SO THIS is what a single guy's house looks like, Chris thought, taking in the brand-new-looking leather couch, the mail scattered all over the coffee table, the bare walls. Not even a photograph anywhere. "You've been here a while now, haven't you?" he called toward the kitchen.

"Three months, give or take," Alex said, walking back into the living room with two bottles of water. Their hands met as Alex handed the bottle to him, and there it was again. That same little spark that had ignited before. Chris forced his eyes away, uncapping the bottle and taking a quick drink. But his eyes wandered back in spite of himself. He and Seth weren't exactly married. And Alex was probably straight anyway. So what was the harm in looking?

He was gorgeous, there was no doubt about that. A square jaw, beautiful mouth. Hair and eyes a perfectly matching shade of dark chocolate, with skin that alternated between pale and sunburned but was somehow perfect either way. And his body, God. Even in a loose-fitting T-shirt, Chris could see how gorgeous it was. Toned and strong but not too bulky. Just right.

"Chris?" Chris looked up again, suddenly realizing that he'd been staring at Alex's chest and not listening to a word he was saying. There

was a grin on Alex's face, as if he knew exactly what Chris had been thinking about. *Shit*. "I said, why do you ask?"

"Oh." Wait. What were they talking about? Oh yeah. "Oh, the pictures. There's no pictures on the wall. And not much furniture, y'know, around."

"Not much of a shopper," Alex said, seating himself on the couch and gesturing for Chris to join him. Which he did. "I kind of came to California empty-handed, so I've had to start from scratch. I'm filling it in a little at a time."

"Why were you empty-handed?"

Alex frowned a little, and Chris immediately spoke again. "I'm sorry, that's none of my business. I just—"

"No, it's okay. It's just a long story. Another time, okay?" Chris nodded, relieved. They were silent for a moment, but then Alex spoke again. "So how come you're alone today? Not hanging out with your boyfriend?" Chris's head snapped up, his jaw dropping open a little. "Tall guy? Curly hair? Isn't he—"

"He's not my boyfriend." How was he having this conversation twice in one day? Were he and Seth that obvious?

"Oh, I'm sorry. I just happened to be outside yesterday when he came by, and it looked like you two were—"

"We're not." Chris was staring at his water bottle now, his heart pounding so hard he thought it might actually be audible.

"Okay. My bad." They were quiet again, and it could have gotten awkward. But then Chris saw it.

"Holy shit. *Resident Evil Six*?" He jumped off the couch, pulling the game off the shelf by the television and staring at it, stunned.

"We're doing the beta testing for it. It's not quite bug-free yet, but it's getting pretty close."

"They just came out with *Five* last month! I can't believe you have this!"

Alex laughed. "Want to play?"

"Are you kidding? Absolutely! You sure you don't mind?"

But Alex was already taking the game from him, popping open the Xbox, sliding it into place. "I think I can spare five minutes out of my day to kick your ass."

Chris laughed out loud, delighted. "We'll see about that, old man."

Alex handed the controller to him, and their fingers brushed again. They smiled together, just looking, but then the theme music on the game started up, and they turned to face the screen.

SETH kicked open the storage door, heaving the box of books onto the counter and then pushing his glasses back up his nose before they slid off his sweaty face. *Crap*. He was happy to have a summer job, and he sure as hell needed the money, but he didn't expect to have to work on a Sunday. Certainly not the day after he got back into town.

"Klein!" The voice boomed out from behind the door. *God*. Seth

rolled his eyes.

“Yes, sir?” he called.

“When you’re done with those, go take over for Karen at the cashier desk. How much longer are you going to be?”

With a sigh, Seth turned away from the stocking assignment that his boss had *just given him* and turned to call out his reply. “Not long, Mr. Mitchell. Maybe ten more minutes.” The man grunted in reply, and Seth turned his attention back to the box. First day on the job, and he already wanted to quit. *Just get through it*, he thought. *Make it to the end of the day, and you can do something else. Something fun.* His parents would be out of town until later that night, which left all kinds of possibilities. Maybe an impromptu party. Maybe a few drinks with a few friends. Or maybe he’d just call Chris.

You will not call Chris.

He frowned and hurried through the rest of his task, focusing on the menial labor and clearing his mind of anything else. When he finished, he charged up to the front, tapping Karen on the shoulder and flashing her the best smile he could manage. Which seemed to do the trick. Enough that she lingered to talk to him for five minutes, even though their breaks only lasted for fifteen. She laughed a lot, throwing her head back, exposing a very nice throat and tossing a lot of thick blonde hair.

Well, Seth thought. *Isn’t this an interesting development?*

ALEX fell back against the couch, laughing so hard he thought his stomach might split. Chris was still doing his victory dance, which at this stage involved flapping his elbows like a chicken and a surprising amount of butt-wiggling. For a shy guy, the kid sure knew how to come out of his shell.

But the laughter was apparently contagious, and soon it took Chris down too. He collapsed on the couch next to Alex, shaking with giggles, his hair still all messed up from the handstand. Alex had a sudden urge to reach over and stroke it, and that sobered him enough to get the laughter to stop. “Hoh, man,” he said, wiping a tear from his eye. “I haven’t had this much fun in ages.”

“Me neither,” Chris said, pushing his hair out of his face and grinning genuinely. “And I haven’t pulled out the chicken dance in years. Seth and I just usually high five or something after a game.”

Alex nodded, watching him. “Seth. Is that—”

“The curly haired guy. Yeah.”

“The non-boyfriend.”

Chris smiled. “Something like that.”

“Well, I can understand that. I’m not much of a believer in boyfriends either. Too much trouble, if you ask me.”

Now the grinning was gone. Chris’s eyes opened a little wider.

“Wait. Are you—you’re gay?”

Alex chuckled. “Born and bred.” The surprise was cute. “Don’t have much of a gaydar yet, huh?”

“Guess not.” They looked at each other, and the gaze lingered. And there it was again. Alex tore his eyes away, trying to resist it. Sex might have been his initial plan when he invited Chris over, but it suddenly seemed like a bad idea. They’d been having fun, and he needed a friend. And if they slept together, there wasn’t much chance of that. And anyway, Chris was too young for him. Definitely too young. “And you don’t believe in boyfriends?”

Okay. Not the question I was expecting. “Well. I mean, it’s not like it’s never happened.” *Does three years count?* “But these days, I kind of like to leave the romance stuff to the straights and just skip right to the sex.” Chris licked his lips in what Alex would bet was an unconscious move. He resisted the urge to smile. “Know what I mean?”

Chris looked away, biting his lip. *Shoot. What’d I say?* “Um, I dunno. I haven’t had that much opportunity. Costa Mesa High wasn’t exactly swimming with one-night-stand material, you know? And I’ve tried clubbing a few times, but I kind of suck at it.”

“You suck at it? What does that mean?”

“I just... I have a hard time approaching people.” He shrugged.

Alex laughed. “Christ, that part is easy. And looking like you, you can’t have to work very hard to find guys who are interested.”

Chris looked at him again, giving him that shy smile again. Alex’s mouth watered. *Stop it. Stop it.* “Well, how do you... how do you do it? I mean, what do you say?”

“Just say you’re interested. Say what you want to do to them. Fuck, it doesn’t matter. Guys are easy. It doesn’t take much.”

Now Chris’s gaze was on his feet again, and Alex cursed himself for taking this too lightly. “Okay,” he said, placing a comforting hand on Chris’s knee. “You want to hear what I say?” Chris nodded, looking up, and Alex held his gaze. And in spite of Alex’s best intentions, comforting turned into something else. He felt himself shifting into seducer mode like it was a silk jacket slipping over his shoulders. *Fuck it.* “I say I want to take you back to my place and rip your clothes off, cover your skin with my tongue. I say I’m gonna swallow your cock whole, work you to the brink of coming and then back off, suck on your balls and tease the slit of your dick with my tongue until you beg me to finish you off. Then I’m gonna finger-fuck you, real slow, getting you nice and wide and open but not letting you come, not yet. Not ’til I’m ready. And then I’m gonna bend you over and fuck you hard, fuck my cock into your tight little hole, slam in deep until you come screaming my name.” He paused for breath.

“That’s round one.”

Chris’s eyes were open very wide now, and his breathing had grown slightly uneven. Alex didn’t have to look down to know that Chris was hard. He hadn’t intended to go so far, but Chris was so gorgeous, he couldn’t help himself. He squeezed his knee gently, caressing it, dropping his index finger just slightly to stroke the inside of Chris’s leg. They still hadn’t broken eye contact.

And then the phone rang. The goddamned phone rang, and Chris jumped. He stood up, turning his back to Alex, fumbling with his pockets until he found his cell and pulled it to his ear. "Yeah, hi. Seth!" *Shit.* "Hey. Yeah." He paused. "When? You mean right now?" *Double shit. Nonboyfriend, my ass.* "Yeah, okay. I'll, uh... I'll be right over. Yeah, I'm leaving now. Okay. Okay, bye." He hung up and turned around, crossing his arms in front of his body in an awkward and unsuccessful attempt to hide one hell of a boner. "I, um... I've got to go."

Alex nodded. "Have fun," he said, leaning back with a casual grin.

Or what he hoped came off as one.

Chris smiled a little. "Thanks." And with that, he was out the door, rushing across the yard, going straight to his car. Alex watched him drive off, then shook his head, heading back to the Xbox. *Good for him*, he thought, and he meant it. He was sure he did. Why wouldn't he?

As he squatted down to take the game out of the console, Alex glanced at his watch, and suddenly froze in place. Had they really been hanging out for three hours? "Wow," he murmured. But then he shook his head again, put the game back in his rightful place, and grabbed his car keys. There were plenty of other distractions out there.

SETH stood at the window, staring out at the street. *We're just going to talk. That's all.* He swallowed. *Definitely. That's the only reason I called. We're friends. We can be friends. We're going to talk.*

Suddenly, the door flew open, and Chris rushed in, kicking it closed behind him. "Chris," he said, startled, but Chris was on him already, grabbing him close, kissing him deeply. He was already hard, and fuck, that dick pressing against his own was making Seth hard too. *Fuck.*

"Bedroom," Chris panted when they broke apart, and Seth suddenly discovered that his hands were on Chris's ass. *How did that happen?*

"Now." Seth just nodded, stumbling in that direction, and Chris followed close behind. As soon as they got in the door, Chris locked it and pushed Seth against it, kissing him again. And Seth was in charge of those hands now, squeezing the ass that he thought about *all the fucking time* and pulling him closer, grinding their dicks together. But Chris was pulling away, sinking to his knees, *sinking to his fucking knees*, and Seth just watched him, open-mouthed, gasping for breath. Chris fumbled with his belt, then his fly, and then he was shoving Seth's pants and underwear down in one hasty tug, pushing them all the way down to his ankles, and he didn't even look up before he slid Seth's dick into his mouth.

"Oh, shit," Seth breathed, his hands clenching into fists against the door. Chris's mouth was warm, and wet, and the suction was so good, and Seth couldn't tear his eyes away. He had always closed his eyes during blowjobs before, just drifted off and gave himself up to the sensation, all other thoughts drifting away. But this time, his eyes were open wide, watching Chris's lips slide over his cock, watching him bob back and forth a little, watching as his eyes suddenly opened and locked with Seth's.

"Fuck," Seth whispered, and Chris groaned and closed his eyes again. The

groan sent vibrations straight through Seth's body, and he threw his head back involuntarily, cursing again when it hit the door, finally screwing his eyes shut. Chris kept moving, kept making little sounds, and he clearly didn't know what he was doing, his teeth grazed the skin enough times to make Seth cringe, but fuck, those lips were so tight around his cock, and his tongue was moving now, *holy shit*. Chris sucked a little harder, and Seth looked down again, grabbing the back of Chris's head, thrusting deeper inside. He tried not to push too hard, but Chris just looked up at him again, his left hand clutching at Seth's ass, his right hand working open his own jeans now, and there had never been any hotter sight in the universe than Seth's dick disappearing in and out of that mouth. Seth panted harder now, fucking in a little faster, and Chris was still sucking, still watching him, *holy fuck so good so good so good*. Seth felt his balls tightening, everything tightening, and he pulled back quickly, bending over as he hastily jerked himself to the finish line. Chris reached to help him, but it was over before he got there, and he shot all over their hands, groaning loud, falling forward onto his knees, his vision filling with a field of white light.

Then Chris was under him, pulling him down to lie on top of him, wrapping his arms around Seth's body. "I got you," he said. "I got you, Seth." Seth just breathed, burying his head in Chris's shoulder, slowly recovering. When he opened his eyes, he turned his head to stare down at Chris's dick, which had somehow made it out of his jeans. It was flat against Chris's belly, a few drops of precome leaking out of it, and Seth suddenly wondered what that tasted like. He swallowed hard. *Should reciprocate*, he thought. That was the thing to do. A guy blows you, you blow him back. Right? Only he wasn't sure he could. "You don't have to," Chris said, his soft voice startling Seth. Seth couldn't look up. He just watched as Chris's hand slid to his own dick, beginning to stroke. He listened as Chris's breath grew ragged. Finally, he shoved Chris's hand out of the way and took over himself, jerking him fast. Chris started moaning again, just like he had when Seth did this for him before. The skin was growing tight under Seth's hand, and Chris's grip was growing firmer on Seth's shoulder. He knew what that meant.

"Do it," Seth whispered, wanting to see it. Wanting to watch. And Chris did it, making a loud and impossibly hot sound as he shuddered and came, the wetness exploding out in a series of uneven bursts, hitting his stomach, his chest, even a bit on his chin. Seth kept stroking all the way through it, watching that cock jump under his hand, imagining what it would feel like to have that happen in his mouth, feeling himself getting hard again already at the thought. Finally, Chris had to shove his hand away.

For a few moments, they just lay there together. But then Chris spoke, and everything started to fall apart. "That was so good," he said, speaking into Seth's hair, kissing his head softly. "God, I love when you do that to me." Seth swallowed hard. His stomach turned over. "I think

about it all the time,” Chris said, stroking his back now. *Petting* him. Like Seth was some fucking girl. “Think about *you* all the time. I have ever since last summer.” Fuck. *Fuck*. Since last summer? They were just friends. Just *friends*. This was all wrong. And Chris was still talking. “I haven’t been with anybody else.” His voice was even quieter now, like he was confessing a secret. *Shit. Shit. Shit*. “I don’t want to be with anybody else. I just want to be with you.” Seth shut his eyes, focusing on regulating his breathing. “Seth?” He didn’t answer. Maybe Chris would believe he’d fallen asleep. Eventually, it worked, because Chris stopped talking too. He just kissed Seth’s hair again and held him, finally quieting down. *Fuck*, Seth thought again as he lay there, farther from sleep than he ever had been in his life. *What now?*

CHAPTER FOUR

“NO RUNNING! Hey! In the SpongeBob swimsuit, slow down!” The little girl looked up at Chris, instantly freezing in place, both hands covering her mouth as she gave him the doe eyes kids her age were so good at. “It’s okay. You’re not in trouble. Just walk, don’t run, okay?” She nodded solemnly, padding carefully to the pool’s edge and peering into the water. With one hand pinching her nostrils shut, she jumped boldly into the deep end, legs flailing, causing as much of a splash as fifty-five pounds of plump five-and-a-half-year-old could muster. Chris smiled as she dogpaddled toward her brother, looking away toward the horizon.

It was a beautiful day. Chris loved when it got hot like this, the sun strong and bright, so that the sunscreen melted on his nose and his hair grew hot to the touch. Sitting up high on the lifeguard chair always seemed to increase the effects, as if it got him that much closer to the sun. Which was probably crazy, but he enjoyed it anyway. He stretched his arms over his head and yawned, glancing back down at the pool and lazily watching it as he allowed his mind to wander.

Seth. It was ridiculous, but that was still the first place Chris’s mind always wandered to. The way Seth grabbed him when he showed up at his house, so turned on already, and *God* Seth’s hands felt good. The dazed look in Seth’s eyes when he pulled back from the kiss, glasses askew, mouth open, his face equal parts *whatthefuck?* and *getnakednow*. And then the bedroom, oh Lord, the bedroom.... Chris blushed slightly, smiling to himself and deciding to skip that particular part of his memory rather than risk springing wood in a pair of swim trunks while sitting in plain view of the assorted happy families of Costa Mesa.

It was the after part that he was more worried about, anyway. Chris frowned slightly, his fingers twisting the cord of his whistle one way and then the other. It’s not like he meant to say all that. It just kind of slipped out. When he woke up on Seth’s floor and Seth was not lying there with him, he knew it was a mistake. When he heard Seth’s voice in the other

room, talking loudly on his phone and ignoring him, he knew it was a big mistake. When Seth ushered him out of there, claiming to have plans with friends, he figured out it might have been a *very* big mistake. And he should have said something. Should have insisted on talking about it. But when he opened his mouth, Seth had looked downright afraid of what might come out of it, so Chris had just closed it again and walked back to his car.

But before he'd even gotten home, his phone had buzzed, and there was a text message from Seth. *Glad u came over*, it said. *Again?*

Sometime? And Chris had grinned so big he practically crashed the car off the road.

Definitely, he texted back. *How about dinner 2morrow?*

Seth hadn't replied. But it was probably because he was already out with his friends. That was probably it.

Chris's watch alarm buzzed, snapping him back to reality. He placed the whistle in his mouth and blew on it hard, sounding out a long, loud signal that every kid in the pool knew all too well. "Adult swim!" he called, ignoring the groans and the whines echoing out beneath him. The alarm also meant the end of his shift, and he climbed down from his post, nodding at his replacement as he passed Chris on his way to take over the chair. He was heading toward the office, weaving through the masses of damp and whiny kids on their way out of the pool and the handful of adults walking toward it, his mind still miles away, when suddenly he ran smack into a familiar body.

"Watch it!" Alex said, laughing, grabbing Chris's arms to keep him from tumbling into the pool.

Chris was laughing too, which made it a little harder to regain his balance, but he grabbed onto Alex's shoulders and steadied himself.

"Sorry!" he said, grinning. "I've got to learn to watch where I'm going."

"I'm guessing your head was elsewhere? Maybe occupied with a certain curly haired non-boyfriend type?"

Chris looked down, feeling his cheeks start to warm again, still grinning like an idiot. When he looked up, there was something else in Alex's eyes, something different from the teasing, something that made him feel a little warmer than he already did. Suddenly, he became aware that their hands were still on each other, and he let go, reluctantly, and Alex did the same. His eyes dropped involuntarily, and fuck, Alex looked good without his shirt on. His body was even better than Chris had imagined it, his chest broad and well-defined, his waist trim, his abs visible. Miles of firm, perfect, porcelain-white skin. Definitely not a California guy.

"You need some sun," Chris murmured, glancing up into Alex's dark eyes. "Have you really been here three months?"

Alex smiled, his eyes still hinting at that little extra something.

"Three months in a cubicle gives as good a suntan in California as it does in Boston," he said.

“Right,” Chris said. They were standing very close, but Chris didn’t want to take a step back. For some reason, he found himself smiling over Alex’s accent, the way the vowels were all a little broadened, the Rs a little lightened. But not as much as they did it on TV, cartoonish and overbroad. Just a little different. He liked hearing him talk.

“And nobody walks here. When I’m not in the office, I’m sitting in the car.”

The caah. It was kind of cute. Chris smiled a little more. “So what are you doing here today?”

“Memorial Day. Got the day off. Thought I’d check out this pool of yours.”

“And what do you think?”

“Not bad, Bennett, not bad.” His eyes were glancing down over Chris’s body, and Chris didn’t miss the double meaning. He opened his mouth to respond.

“*Chris!* Are you ever getting back here?”

They both jumped at the sound, and Chris turned his head toward the office, where he was supposed to have reported five minutes ago. “Sorry,” he said to Alex, and he was. He hooked a thumb toward the office. “I’ve got to....”

“Sure, sure. Get to work. See you later.”

“Bye.” Their eyes stayed locked for a moment longer than was necessary, or maybe a half a moment. But then Chris turned and headed toward the office, feeling Alex’s eyes on him every step of the way.

ALEX tore his eyes away, stepping toward the pool and dipping a toe into it. The water felt great against his skin, and he suddenly wanted the rush of it all over his body. He took a few steps back, then took a running leap and cannonballed into it, delighting in the feel of the water, the freedom of letting go. He surfaced, shaking his head like a dog, laughing at himself, ignoring the glares of the fuddy-duddies around him who had just gotten soaked. He didn’t know what had gotten into him, but it sure felt great. He hadn’t done that since he was a kid.

When he glanced back in Chris’s direction, he saw that the stunt had caused the desired effect. *Wait. Was I doing that for effect?* Chris had stopped in his tracks and turned back toward the pool, and was laughing now, his head thrown back a little, that messy hair falling out of his face. They caught each other’s gaze, and Chris nodded to him, an *I’m impressed* look on his face, an eyebrow raised. But then his boss called out for him and he shrugged apologetically, then started walking away again. He stopped once more on the way to throw another smile over his shoulder. Alex pushed away from the wall on his back, his arms gliding through the water, his gaze lifting up toward the sky. He was smiling big now. Though he probably shouldn’t be. *Nothing wrong with a little innocent flirtation.* Right? Right. It wasn’t like anything was going to happen. Chris was clearly over the moon for this Seth kid, and Alex wasn’t about to step in the middle of that. He just liked making him laugh.

And he liked looking at him in his swimsuit. And shit, it had felt good to have his hands on that bare skin. *Stop it*, he told himself, rolling his eyes and then rolling his body over to dip under the water and begin breaststroking toward the opposite wall. The exercise felt good: the speed through the water, the coolness on his body. He swam to the end of the pool, swiveled around, planted his feet, shot off again. Like he was back in high school, back on the swim team. It felt good to sink back into the repetition, the familiar rhythm of it. He swam one lap, then two, then seven. When he finally stopped, it was because the whistle had blown again, and short noisy humans were dropping into the water all around him, and the air was filling with screeching and giggling.

As he climbed out of the pool and grabbed his towel, he became aware of a pair of eyes watching his every move. He tracked the gaze to a twenty-something redhead he'd noticed when he first came in, slim-hipped and freckle-faced, long body stretched out in a lounge chair a few yards away from Alex's. Alex held his gaze as he toweled off, his movements becoming slower, more deliberate. After a few moments, the redhead stood and walked up to him, stopping when they were inches apart. "Nice stroke," he said, smirking.

Okay. The guy's an idiot. But he's a fuckable idiot. "Nice ass," Alex replied, keeping his voice low. No need to clue all the kiddies in on what he was planning to do to this guy—in the next five minutes, if his hunch was right.

It was. "Bathroom," the guy whispered, and Alex nodded almost imperceptibly. He watched the redhead as he walked away, and actually the ass wasn't that great on closer inspection, but it was nice enough. It would certainly do the job.

Throwing his towel on the chair and grabbing the messenger bag that held such important things as wallet, keys, lube, and condoms, he walked quickly to the bathroom and locked the door behind him. It was stupid for such a big pool facility to have a one-person restroom, but convenient at the moment. "I'm Andrew," the redhead whispered, just before Alex crashed their mouths together. He kissed him deeply, pushing his tongue into Andrew's mouth, feeling one wet hand clutch at his naked back as the other worked its way into Alex's swim trunks. With a few expert jerks, Andrew had Alex fully hard, and he broke the kiss, panting.

"I'm Alex," he said, pulling Andrew's trunks down and letting them settle around his feet.

Five minutes had been a major overestimate. Within sixty seconds, he had Andrew bent over the sink and was gripping those narrow hips as he slammed in deep. Andrew put his fist in his mouth to muffle the sounds, his other hand jerking himself rapidly, a rather annoying whiny sound emerging on each thrust. When he first heard it, Alex had stopped, worrying he was hurting the guy, but Andrew just craned his head around and gave him a confused look, and Alex realized that the whines were this guy's way of moaning. *Well, whatever does it for you, bud*, he thought,

shaking his head, pumping in again.

He cleared his head, focusing on the tightness, the warmth, the sweet goodness of sex. Andrew's ass was fishbelly white and a little on the skinny side, so he closed his eyes, letting his imagination wander. And very quickly, his thoughts settled on Chris instead. At first, he thought of Chris's face, his laugh, his shy smile. But soon it was Chris's ass he was picturing, Chris's moans he was imagining, Chris's lips sighing with pleasure. It was wrong. It was so wrong, but Andrew was coming with a screechy shout and a "fuck yeah, honey, come up my ass!" and Alex seized on the image of Chris, anything to push this other guy away. With a few more quick thrusts and the smell of Chris's cocoa butter in his nose, he groaned out his own orgasm, releasing into the condom, clutching the wall to keep from falling forward onto the skinny body in front of him. He pulled out wordlessly, peeling off the condom and turning away, wrapping it in a paper towel before throwing it in the trash so some kid wouldn't stumble upon it accidentally.

When he pulled his suit back on and turned around, Andrew had his trunks back up, a stupidly happy look on his face, and he grabbed Alex and kissed him. Alex didn't push him away, didn't want to be rude, but he didn't deepen the kiss either. "Thanks, lover," Andrew said, in what he probably thought was a sexy rasp, but which just made Alex want to hand the guy a lozenge.

"See ya around," Alex said, hoping to avoid the card/number confrontation by stepping to the sink and focusing on washing his hands and face. Andrew stood for a moment, looking at him, then muttered something under his breath and headed out the bathroom door. Alex stayed where he was, staring at himself in the mirror. After a few minutes, he grabbed his bag and walked out to his car.

RING. Ring. Ring. "Hello?"

"Amy, hey, it's Seth."

"Hey, bud. A much more humane hour this time. I appreciate it."

Seth chuckled. "No problem. How was your family thing?"

"Oh, boring as crap, you know, the usual. My Uncle Louis holding forth about how Obama is destroying this country. My Aunt Sylvia ignoring him and telling me all about this guy who works in her real estate office, and how I really ought to let her fix the two of us up. Shoot me if I ever become enough of a loser to take her up on it, would you?"

"You got it."

"So, you going to tell me what all that was about last night? Why were we talking about the wonders of girl-girl kissing?" Seth was silent. He shifted the phone to his other ear, still not sure how to talk about this.

"Seth?"

"I'm here."

"And silent. Which is freaking me the fuck out. Tell me *Seth motherfucking Klein* is at a loss for words."

"When did I tell you my middle name?"

“Har. Spill it, dorkboy.”

Seth exhaled heavily, running his hand through his hair. “Nothing. It’s just... I don’t know. I’ve been doing some... thinking.”

“Always dangerous.”

“Fuck you.”

“Did that already. And if you can manage it again from three thousand miles away, hey, color me impressed, but—”

“Yeah.” He attempted a laugh, but it was a short, rough sound, with no humor in it. Amy got quiet.

“What is it?” Her voice was different now. Softer. Concerned.

“There’s a... there’s a guy. Here. Somebody I went to high school with.”

She paused. “Okay.”

“And I was asking about... I don’t know, the spectrum, whatever, ’cause... he and I... a couple times, we’ve... y’know....”

“Oh.” She paused again. “*Oh*.”

Seth covered his eyes with his hand. This was such a bad idea. “Oh. Thanks, that’s helpful.”

“Hey, man, gimme a fucking minute with this, you know?”

Now Seth paused. “You said it wasn’t a big deal.”

“It isn’t! It’s not. It’s just, I don’t know, surprising. I mean, you’re *you*.”

Lifting his hand, Seth furrowed his brow. “What does that mean?”

“I mean, you fuck everything that moves. How many girls did you screw this year?”

“Not as many as the number of guys you screwed.”

“Well, exactly. We’re two of a kind, you and I. So I guess I figured I would have known this about you by now.”

“Known *this*? What is *this*?”

“You tell me, man. I can’t answer that for you.”

Seth was quiet. She was right. Of course.

“Look, it’s still not a big deal. I mean, it doesn’t have to be. Just ’cause you and this dude are fucking now—”

“We are *not* fucking.”

“Well, whatever you’re doing. I don’t know. How do I know?”

“We’re not.”

“Okay, okay.” She paused again. “So what are you doing?”

“I am so not telling you that.”

“What? Come on! You’re not the only one who likes a little good jerkoff material.”

Seth laughed, surprised. “Really?”

“Hells yeah. You kidding? Gay men are hot.”

And with that, all of the humor disappeared. Seth gritted his teeth.

“Who said anything about being *gay*?”

“Dude, whatever, don’t bite my head off. I just mean—”

“You’ve hooked up with girls. And you laughed your ass off at me

when I called you a lesbian. What the fuck makes you think—”

“Jesus, chill the fuck out! I didn’t say—”

“Yeah, whatever. I’ve got to go.”

“Seth, give me a fucking break, I just—”

But her voice cut off midsentence. Seth had already hung up.

CHRIS couldn’t sleep.

It was late, very late. He was flat on his back, in his bed, horny as hell, all alone. Trying not to think about the three text messages he’d sent to Seth, and the zero replies. Trying to focus on something other than the image of Alex in his swim trunks, or the sounds he’d heard coming out of the men’s room when he and that red-haired guy had disappeared inside. Not that he’d been *watching* Alex, or anything like that. He just happened to be looking in his direction when he got out of the pool, the water running off his ridiculously perfect body, and okay, maybe he let his gaze linger for a *minute* when Alex was toweling himself off. But he didn’t mean to catch the exchange between him and that skinny guy, or see them both walk into the bathroom, one after the other. And he definitely didn’t walk past the restroom on *purpose* once they were inside. Twice.

Shit.

Chris shook his head, shutting and opening his eyes, staring at the ceiling. Distraction wasn’t working. His mom was sound asleep; he’d just have to trust that the walls were thick enough to muffle the sounds. He slid a hand down his body, into the waistband of his pajama pants, into his boxers, and seized his cock firmly. As he began to stroke, he closed his eyes, licking his lips and waiting for the familiar image of Seth to float before him. And it did. Seth’s strong body was over him, long and lean, moving on top of him. Seth’s lips were against his, kissing him in that desperate way he had, all tongue and wetness and need, like he couldn’t get enough. Chris brought his left hand to his mouth and sucked on a finger, covering it with his tongue, getting it nice and wet before letting it go. He used both hands to shove his pajama pants and underwear out of the way, letting them bunch around his knees, then rolled on to his side. As he brought his right hand back to his dick, he pictured Seth’s cock, hard and leaking, so firm in his hand. The image made his own cock jump, and he quickly started stroking again, bringing his left hand around behind him to press the moistened finger gently against his opening.

“Fuck me,” he whispered, teasing the hole with his finger, pushing the tip ever so gently in. It had only been a few weeks since he’d first tried this, and it still felt a little weird, but he thought of Seth’s cock again and pictured it pressing inside, and he felt himself opening to it. He pushed the finger in a little further, arching his neck as he searched for that spot, his right hand moving faster now, jerking himself harder. When the finger finally made it all the way in, he opened his mouth, panting a little, letting himself get lost in the sensation of Alex’s cock pressing deep inside.

Wait. What?

Chris’s eyes flew open. But there it was, he couldn’t deny it. He was

picturing Alex moving against him now, his gorgeous chest pressed flat against Chris's body, his lips whispering more of those sexy words right into Chris's ear. "Gonna fuck you so hard," he was saying. *So haahd.*

"Gonna make you come screaming my name."

"Oh, fuck," Chris panted, pressing his finger a little harder, bringing his right hand to his face to spit hastily into his palm and then jerking it rapidly down again, the saliva letting his hand slide a little faster, a little smoother. Alex was biting down on his neck now, his cock driving just where it needed to be, and Chris was going to lose it, was so going to lose it. "Yes... yes..." With two more flicks of his wrist, he brought himself over the edge, shooting ribbons of come up onto his stomach as he pictured Alex's face at the moment of climax, hearing that groan he'd heard emerge from that bathroom, feeling his breath hot against his own neck. *Yes. Jesus. Yes.*

When the shudders subsided, he lay still for a minute, catching his breath, staring into the darkness. *Where did that come from?*

He cleaned himself quietly with a T-shirt from the laundry basket, then rearranged his clothing and pulled the covers up to his chin. And then he lay awake for a long time, staring into the darkness.

An hour and a half later, he finally dropped off to sleep.

CHAPTER FIVE

CHRIS was humming to himself when he got into his car. "Boldness," he said under his breath as the engine roared to life. "Boldness." It was his new watchword, his new motto, taken from a self-help book that he'd stolen off his mom's shelf and ended up reading cover to cover. He'd decided that he could be the kind of guy the book said he could be, the kind of guy Alex was. He'd been hanging out with Alex a lot lately, every night this week in fact, and that was the one thing that impressed him the most about him. He was bold. Ready and willing to go after whatever he wanted, or *whoever* he wanted. So Chris could do that too.

He knew Seth wanted him back. That blowjob on Sunday had been fucking unbelievable, the way Seth had held tight to his hair, had fucked into his throat, had come so fast. The way Seth had jerked him off afterwards, watching his dick, making him come. It had been hot as hell. And sure, they hadn't been able to get together in the four days since then, but it was just because of scheduling problems, Seth's job, his friends, his parents. Tonight, for instance. They had talked about meeting up when Seth got off work, but Seth had called and said his dad was making him stay in and finish a home-improvement project instead, the bastard. He'd sounded a little weird on the phone, but that was probably because he was calling from work and had to keep it so short. And they'd decided to get together tomorrow anyway, when they both had the day off and could spend all day together. And that was very, very good.

But thinking about everything they could get up to in that kind of timeframe had been too much to take, and finally Chris had decided that he just couldn't wait that long. So he wasn't going to. He could be bold. "Boldness," he said again, eyeing himself in the rearview mirror as he sped down the interstate. "You can do this." He definitely could. He knew he looked good. He'd actually taken the time to hit the showers after work, then changed into a tight T-shirt and the jeans he'd been wearing the first time he caught Seth checking out his ass, what seemed like a very long time ago. Back then, he'd blushed and stammered, and Seth had pretended to be looking at something else, and neither of them acted on the sexual tension they both knew was there. Until later, when they were sitting on the floor in Chris's room watching a movie, and the lights were low, and somehow Seth started kissing him. And kissing him, and kissing him. And it didn't last long; Seth made up an excuse and got out of there, leaving Chris hard and confused and breathless.

This time, Chris wasn't going to let Seth run away.

He pulled into Seth's driveway, noting with pleasure that Seth's car was there but his parents' cars weren't. Perfect. But then he turned off the engine and sat in the car for a minute, not sure what to do next. Should he knock on the front door? Not much boldness in that. Maybe he should walk around back, let himself in the patio door that Seth always forgot to lock, and surprise him in his room. Naked. Chris laughed to himself, feeling his cheeks warm a little. Now *that* was bold. He looked at himself in the mirror again and swallowed hard. "You can do this," he whispered. And he opened the door and got out of the car.

Chris walked carefully around the edge of the house, focusing on his feet to keep from falling in the dark. By the time he was halfway around to the patio, he could already hear the sounds. But he couldn't figure out what they meant at first. Or maybe he didn't want to.

When he reached the glass patio door, there was no more denying it.

What he had heard were the sounds of sex. Specifically, Seth having sex.

With some random blonde girl. On his living room floor.

Chris's jaw dropped open. He stood in place for a moment, unable to tear his eyes away. The girl was on her back, moaning, her legs clinging to Seth's sides as he thrust in. And Seth was moving fast, balanced on his forearms on either side of her shoulders, his eyes shut tight. "Yeah, baby," the girl moaned, clutching at his back. "Right there, baby, yeah...."

Chris turned around and ran, blindly, tripping over uneven stones, grabbing onto a tree branch to keep from falling. He felt like he was going to puke. It was dark, so dark, and he couldn't see where he was going, couldn't see anything, couldn't see how this could have happened, what an idiot, *what a fucking idiot you are*, fumbling toward his car, smacking his shin on the car door as he yanked it open. He cursed as he fell into the seat, cursed again as he screeched out of the driveway, rubbed his shin as he rounded the corner and sped away in whatever direction would take him the furthest distance from here. Cursing the car door, the dark night,

the stupid fucking book that started all this. Cursing the blonde slut with the big boobs who was fucking *his Seth* on the living room floor. Cursing himself most of all, for thinking Seth was ever his to begin with.

ALEX slammed his hand on the alarm clock, hitting it so hard he knocked it off the bedside table. But the sound didn't stop. It just kept on buzzing, loud, insistent, and he opened his eyes and glared at the clock for a moment before his sleep-addled brain figured out that the sound was coming from someplace else. He sat up. The doorbell. Someone was ringing his doorbell. He looked at the clock again. Someone was ringing his doorbell at three o'clock in the fucking morning. On a Thursday. No, make that very early on a Friday morning. *What the fuck is going on?* Eventually, he managed to make it out of bed and pull a T-shirt on, tying the drawstring on his pajama pants as he stumbled toward the door. "Yeah, yeah, okay," he mumbled as whoever it was leaned on the buzzer again. "Heard you the first fucking time."

He yanked open the front door, already in a foul mood, ready to give this idiot a piece of his mind. But before he could say anything, Chris was already talking. "I'm sorry," he said, his words slurring slightly. "I'm sorry, so sorry, can I come in? Shit, it's late, you probably have somebody here, I'm sorry, I just didn't know where else to—"

"Chris." Alex was suddenly much more awake. He slid an arm around Chris's waist before thinking about it, helping him inside, a little worried the kid would fall over if he didn't. "I got you. C'mere. Going towards the couch, okay?"

"Okay. Okay. Okay." He was tilting severely, his breath reeking of alcohol. When Alex eased him onto the couch and brushed against his leg, he whimpered and cringed.

"What is it? Are you hurt?"

Chris's head was back, his eyes closed. "Whacked my shin," he said.

"It's fine."

"I'll get you some ice."

But Chris grabbed the edge of his shirt, opening his eyes, looking sorrowfully at him. "No, don't. It's fine. Fine."

Alex sat down gingerly next to him, not sure what to do. "Okay," he said. "Do you—"

"He was fucking her." Chris's eyes were closed again. "He was *fucking* her."

Okay. A few more pieces of the puzzle. "Who was fucking who?"

Chris made a choked sound, like a wounded animal. "Seth. Shit. Seth."

"Seth was fucking a girl?" Chris nodded. "And you saw?" Another nod. "Shit." Chris made that sound again, covering his face with both hands now. "Shit, Chris, I'm sorry, that was a stupid thing to say, I just—"

"I was gonna be bold. Boldness is the key to the... to the unlocking of the doors of... wait, I had it... before...."

"Chris." Alex put his hand on Chris's leg. "You're not making

sense.”

“Gonna be *bold*,” Chris said again, his voice cracking. Alex pulled him into a hug. Chris fell into it, his face burying itself in Alex’s shoulder, his arms wrapping weakly around Alex’s body. After a while, Alex became aware that his shoulder was damp.

“I’ve got you,” he said, stroking a hand gently over Chris’s hair.

“I’ve got you.”

Gradually, Chris’s shudders subsided, and his breathing grew more even. Alex laid him down on the couch and pulled a blanket over him. He was already asleep.

THE first thing Chris became aware of when sleep faded away was the smell of coffee. He opened his eyes, blinked a few times, and realized he was not in his bed. He was... on a couch? A leather couch? Alex’s couch. *Shit.*

The events of the night before came back in a rush, and Chris suddenly sat up. Which was a bad idea. Some kind of large animal kicked him from inside his skull, possibly a relative of whatever had curled up and died in his mouth, and he clutched his head, groaning.

“Hey,” Alex said, walking in from the kitchen in his work clothes.

Even in his foggy condition, Chris couldn’t help but notice how good the guy looked in a tie. “How you feeling?”

“Um, not great,” he said, clearing his throat.

“Figured as much.” Alex sat down with him, and Chris noticed for the first time that he was carrying a glass of water and a bottle of aspirin.

“These should help.”

“Thanks.” Chris swallowed down the pills and drank down half the glass of water, and it did help. A little. Alex was still watching him when he set the glass back down on the coffee table. “Look, I’m really sorry.”

“For what?”

“For, y’know, showing up here in the middle of the night and dumping all over you.”

“Forget about it. It was no problem.”

“Right. I’m sure I was loads of fun.”

“Hey, if I caught *my* boyfriend—”

“He’s not my boyfriend.” The words were immediate, sharp, and harsh. Alex sat back a little. Chris took a breath. “Sorry. Just... I don’t know what the hell he is.”

Alex paused. “Okay.”

They were quiet for a moment. But then Alex’s watch beeped, and Chris looked up. “What time is it?”

“Nine. I wasn’t sure whether to wake you.”

“Shit.” He stood up quickly, then swayed for a moment, grabbing the back of the couch, suddenly remembering why doing things quickly wasn’t such a good idea. “I better get home. My mom—”

“Yeah, sure.” Alex stood up too, and they looked at each other. And there was so much Chris wanted to say. But he didn’t know how.

“Thanks,” he finally said. “I mean, thank you. A lot.” Alex nodded, and without thinking, Chris pulled him into a hug. Alex embraced him back, his arms so warm and strong that Chris didn’t want to let go. But, eventually, he did.

They walked to the door together, still quiet. Finally, Chris smiled at him, touched his face, and then turned and walked out the door.

IT WAS almost noon when one hundred seventy pounds of boisterous Boston attitude plopped itself unexpectedly on Alex’s desk. Alex looked up. “Marty, what are you doing here?”

“It is your lucky day, my friend. You are taking me out to lunch.”

“Can’t. I got in late, so I’m working through my lunch hour.”

“Late? You? You’re kidding.” Alex just shrugged at him with a half smile and turned back to his screen, but Marty grabbed his face and turned him back around. “Honey, you look like shit. What were you up to last night?”

“Nothing. Helping out a friend.”

“Is ‘helping out’ the euphemism we’re using now?”

“Shut up.” He tried ignoring, but Marty just stayed where he was, perched on the desk, staring. Finally, Alex gave up. “What?” he asked with an exasperated sigh.

“I don’t know yet. You didn’t get laid. You wouldn’t be this tense if you did. But... you *wanted* to. Right?”

“What is this, dial-a-psychic-queer?”

“Please. I know you.” He paused. “Holy shit. Did Alex D’Amico get turned *down*?”

“Marty, seriously, I’m not in the mood.” Marty kept staring. “And you’re wrong, anyway. I didn’t get turned down. I didn’t make a move.”

“Why not?”

“Because... Jesus, why am I talking about this with you?”

“Because you know I love you. And I’m not leaving until I get the dirt.”

Alex exhaled again. “Fine.” He turned to face Marty, who grabbed a chair and sank into it, all ears. “There’s this kid who lives next door to me. Well, not kid. I don’t know. Guy. He’s nineteen.”

“Cute?”

Alex’s mouth was dry. “You could say that.”

“A hottie. Got it. Go on.”

“So, we’ve kind of become friends lately. And last night he caught his boyfriend—or, I don’t know, the guy he’s been fucking, he doesn’t like the word boyfriend—”

“Sounds like someone I know.”

“Shut up. Anyway, he caught the guy fucking some girl. And he got shitfaced and showed up at my door, and I gave him a place to crash. That’s all.”

Marty was staring intensely now. “That’s not all. You want to fuck him.”

“Marty, Jesus....”

“What? Tell me it’s not true.”

Alex looked away. That was so not the point.

“So why didn’t you?”

“Why didn’t I? What am I, the neighborhood monster? Preying on drunk, vulnerable teenagers?”

“Please. Nineteen is not fifteen. You’re only twenty-six. That’s not so much of an age difference. You’re telling me you’re not open to it?”

Alex stood up, shuffling some papers. “No.” He wasn’t looking at Marty now.

“Why not?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“What are you, five? Because!”

Marty’s voice was maddeningly calm. “Because why?”

“Because it wouldn’t just be sex, okay? Chris is... he’s....”

Different. Funny. Beautiful. On my mind all the fucking time. “He’s nineteen. And he’s my next-door neighbor. That’s not exactly the best setup for a one-night stand.”

Marty’s hand was on his arm. Which was surprising, because Alex didn’t even remember hearing him get up. When he spoke again, his voice was quiet. “So who says that’s all he has to be?” Alex didn’t answer. So Marty kept talking. “It’s been six months, Alex. The Brian Kinney routine is cute, but it’s not you. It never was.”

“Marty—” He threw the papers down and crossed his arms, still looking away. “Damn it.”

“I’ve known you for too long, babe. So John hurt you. So you move on.” He paused. “And don’t kill me, but it looks to me like it’s happening whether you want it to or not.”

Alex closed his eyes. *That’s what I’m afraid of*, he thought.

WHEN the doorbell rang that night, Alex wasn’t surprised. He wasn’t surprised to see Chris on his doorstep, wasn’t surprised when he stepped aside wordlessly and let Chris walk in. He wasn’t even surprised when their lips met, tentatively, softly. And when he thought about it later, he couldn’t even remember who kissed who. They just came together, both sure, both expecting it. And it was perfectly right.

Alex drew Chris in a little closer, opening his mouth, feeling Chris meet his tongue with his own. Chris was making little sounds now, little whispered moans, pressing tight, kissing him deeply. Quickly, sweet and tender was becoming something else, as the kiss became stronger, hands gripping tighter, cocks growing harder. Soon, Alex had Chris pressed against a support beam by the door, grinding into him, relishing the feel of Chris’s hands in his hair even as Alex’s hands were traveling a little lower.

“Ahh,” Chris gasped, breaking the kiss, as Alex’s hand found its way to the bulge in Chris’s jeans and squeezed. Alex backed off a little and gazed at Chris, his blue eyes dark with lust, his lips swollen and wet,

parted, panting. Alex moved his hand away, and Chris whimpered, leaning his forehead in to touch Alex's. "Please," he whispered.

Jesus.

"I don't want to push you into this," Alex said, holding on to control with both hands. "Are you really su—"

But Chris was kissing him again, grabbing the back of his neck, thrusting his hips forward to grind their dicks together. Alex groaned. "I'm sure," Chris said when the kiss broke. "*Please.*"

Alex covered his mouth in a deep kiss again, grinding Chris back against the beam. And then he suddenly pulled off, grabbing Chris's hand and pulling him hurriedly down the hall to his bedroom.

CHRIS fell onto the bed backward, pulling Alex on top of him, kissing him again. Alex's lips were stronger than Seth's, surer, more confident. As Chris slid his hands all over Alex's back, he could feel the contours of every muscle, the wonderful weight on his body. Alex was as good a kisser as he looked, and Chris was quickly becoming addicted. He almost whined when Alex broke the kiss again, but now Alex was pulling Chris's shirt up over his head, tossing it to the floor, and Chris quickly sat up and attacked Alex's buttons. His hands were clumsy, far too many obstacles between him and naked, and he practically choked Alex in his effort to whip off the tie. They laughed together, and Alex kissed him again, smiling, and Chris didn't feel like such an idiot. Alex kept his eyes on Chris's as he slipped the tie off, and they pulled the unbuttoned shirt off together. And it didn't seem so funny anymore.

Alex cupped Chris's cheek in one hand and kissed him more perfectly than Chris had ever been kissed. He kept the hand there as he leaned Chris slowly back down onto the bed, not breaking the kiss, lying down on top of him, and Chris was so excited he could barely breathe. And then Alex was kissing his neck, slowly, taking his time, working his way downward, until Chris was sure he'd come in his pants before Alex even reached his shoulders. But somehow Alex knew just how to do it, how to bite down just hard enough to drive him crazy but back off before it was too much, how to stroke his thigh gently against Chris's aching crotch to give him some relief but stop before he went over the edge. He fastened his mouth to Chris's nipple, and Chris leaned his head back and moaned, bringing both hands into Alex's short dark hair, resisting the urge to just shove that head lower and see what that slow suction felt like when applied to his cock. But just when he thought he couldn't take one more second, Alex pulled off, flicking the nipple one last time with the tip of his tongue, grinning devilishly up at Chris. He brought both hands to Chris's hips and pressed them back down onto the mattress, and fuck, Chris hadn't even realized he'd thrust up off it. "Not yet," he murmured, and he kissed Chris's chest again. *Jesus.*

And now Alex was kissing lower. Lower. Lower. The hands were unbuttoning his jeans now, unzipping the fly, pushing everything down and off until Chris was lying naked on Alex's bed, harder than he'd ever

been in his life. Alex's own pants and underwear had hit the floor, too, and he had pulled a condom and a bottle of lube from a bedside drawer. And this was really happening. Finally. *Finally*.

Alex resettled between Chris's legs and quickly swallowed the head of his cock without warning, giving it one tight suck before pulling off. Chris gasped and bucked his hips involuntarily, panting out a "please," but Alex pushed his hips down again and fixed him with that delicious grin.

"Don't want you to come until I'm inside you," he said, his voice low and authoritative and, *Jesus*, the sexiest fucking thing Chris had ever heard. He nodded, mouth open, beyond the ability to form words, and watched as Alex snapped open the bottle and covered his fingers in glassy liquid. And then one finger was pushing inside, angled just right, so much better than when Chris did this for himself, pushing right *there*, and Chris groaned loud, clenching his fists to try to fight the orgasm that was so close to the surface. But a second finger was pushing in now, and that was new, and bigger, and he winced a little, willing himself to relax.

And then everything stopped. Chris's eyes flew open, and Alex was staring at him now, his jaw open a little, a new look on his face. "Chris, have you... have you never done this before?" Chris swallowed and shook his head, still panting, desperate for Alex to push those fingers forward again. "Jesus," Alex whispered, and now the fingers were pulling *back*. Which was *not* happening.

Chris grabbed at Alex's wrist, stopping his movement, trying to clear his head enough to speak. "Please," he said.

"Chris—I can't, I—"

"Alex." He grabbed the back of Alex's neck, hauling him up until they were face to face, keeping his other hand exactly where it was so those fingers didn't slip out. "I want this. I want you. Please." He kissed him, hard, pushing his tongue deeply into Alex's mouth, and heard Alex moan a little in response. So he pulled the hand in a little further, sinking the fingertips into just the right spot, breaking the kiss and staring as deeply and lustfully into Alex's eyes as he knew how. "Fuck me," he whispered.

That seemed to do the trick. Alex held his gaze and pushed the fingers in again, and again, and again. And then a third finger joined them, stretching him a little more, and it hurt again and he clutched at Alex's back, biting down on his shoulder, and Alex held him, and kissed him, and whispered tender words into his ear. And then somehow the condom was in Alex's mouth, and he was tearing it open with his teeth and sliding it onto his cock one-handed, never stopping the slow, steady press of his fingers inside. Until he did.

He pulled the fingers out in one gentle move and slicked the lube left on them onto his cock, then lifted Chris's hips with one hand and pushed a pillow underneath him. Chris wrapped his legs around Alex's waist as he positioned the tip of his dick at Chris's entrance, leaning in to kiss him once more. And there was still a question in his eyes, but Chris stopped it

before it came out in words. “Yes,” he said. “Now.”

Alex pushed forward, and Chris’s eyes shut tight. And then everything disappeared except this feeling, this thickness, this hard presence inside his body that was stretching him, hurting him, filling him up. Alex pushed all the way in and then stopped, breathing heavy, kissing Chris’s neck, and Chris worked to relax every muscle that he could. His hard-on had flagged somewhat, the pain hard to ignore, but Alex kissed him again, softly, perfectly, and began a gentle rock inside. A rock that pushed right *there*. And Chris’s dick got interested in the proceedings again. “God,” he whispered, and Alex rocked a little harder, pulling out a little more on each stroke, thrusting against that spot.

Chris closed his eyes again, lost to everything but this feeling, this pressure on that perfect spot, harder now, faster. This strong body moving on top of him, inside of him, panting against his skin. Hands were on his legs now, his hips, his ass, pulling him further onto that dick, caressing every inch of his body. Lips grazed his neck, a tongue flickering against his Adam’s apple, teeth on his shoulder. He was rocking his hips now to meet each thrust, the pain having receded far into the background, this unbelievable feeling obscuring everything else. And now a hand was sliding onto his cock, pumping in time with the rhythm inside him, and he felt the pressure in his balls, building from somewhere deep in his belly, and he knew what was about to happen. “Oh God,” he cried out, squeezing his legs around his lover’s waist, his eyes shut tight. “Oh God... oh God... oh God Seth!”

Everything shot out of him, every thought he ever had, everything lost in a haze of bliss. He felt Alex’s body go tense and then pulse out his own orgasm, and they collapsed together. Chris lay with his arms and legs tangled with Alex’s, head swimming, gradually coming down. Around the time Alex reached down to hold onto the condom and gently pulled out, he realized what he’d said.

“Did I just say...”

“Yeah.” Alex rolled off him, tossing the condom in the trash and then landing on his back next to him, not touching him, staring at the ceiling. *Shit*.

Chris rolled onto his side gingerly. His ass was pretty tender. But every other part of his body felt awfully good. “Sorry,” he said, tracing a finger down Alex’s beautiful chest.

“No big deal.” But his muscles were tense, and he still wasn’t meeting Chris’s gaze.

“Oh, come on,” Chris said, sliding a little closer, tracing up to Alex’s head now, turning it to face him. “I didn’t mean it. It just came out.” He smiled at him, trying to draw him back.

“I said it was no big deal.” He still wasn’t smiling. So Chris climbed on top of him, straddling his hips, lowering down until their faces were inches apart.

“Really,” he said, smirking. The corners of Alex’s mouth twitched a

little, and his hands found their way to Chris's hips. This was progress. And the feel of those hands on his skin had his dick standing up and taking notice all over again. "Tell you what," he said softly, kissing Alex's face, then his neck, then his ear. "Fuck me again and I promise I won't say anybody's name but yours." He lifted up a little, and Alex was really smiling now. "You got it," he said, and he kissed him. Chris was as good as his word.

CHAPTER SIX

IT WAS almost eleven when Chris woke up the next morning in his own bed. He rubbed his eyes slowly, yawning, shifting in bed to stretch and wincing a little as he rolled over onto his back. His ass was a little sore; not too bad, just tender. Enough to cause memories of the night before to come rushing back, and Chris couldn't help but grin.

The second time had been even better than the first. Straddling Alex, riding him, feeling those hands on his hips, then his ass, then his dick. The way Alex sat up suddenly toward the end, kissing him hotly, thrusting upwards a little faster, somehow managing to keep hitting that spot *every fucking time* despite the change in position. The look on Alex's face right before Chris came, intense, hot, powerful, close to the edge himself and yet somehow completely in control. And then the coming, oh God, the coming, the waves of ecstasy shuddering through Chris's whole body, every nerve ending alive and singing with joy, and the way Alex bit down on his shoulder and Chris could feel his dick pulsing inside him as Alex let go. The way they fell forward onto the bed, spent, Alex's arms still around him, his cock still buried inside, and how Chris almost protested when Alex finally pulled out. He didn't, though, because that would be weird. But he kissed him again, a long, lingering kiss, and Chris had wanted to stay right there kissing this beautiful man for hours, or possibly days. But eventually, Alex had broken the kiss and rolled onto his back, looking content and exhausted and so fucking gorgeous Chris wanted to jump him all over again. He wasn't sure what the etiquette was in these situations, though, so he murmured something about it being late, and he guessed he ought to go home, secretly hoping Alex would ask him to stay. But he didn't. He just nodded, and then lay there naked with his hands behind his head and watched Chris get dressed. But he grabbed Chris when he turned to go, kissing him again, and when they parted they were both smiling. And Chris felt a tingle rolling all the way down to his toes. Chris stretched again, his smile broadening, finally sitting up and walking toward the shower. Before he left his room, though, a buzzing caught his attention, and he picked up his discarded jeans and checked the phone. Seth. Chris stared at the phone for a moment and then set it down again, not answering it. When he headed toward the bathroom again, his

grin was gone.

SETH hung up, frustrated. It wasn't like Chris not to answer his cell. But he'd called three times, first at eleven, then at two, and now here it was almost five-thirty and he still wasn't answering. So much for spending the day together.

He kicked his bed, frustrated. Not that it was a big deal or anything.

Seth had plenty of other things he could do on a day off. But he hadn't done any of them, he'd just hung around the house all day waiting for Chris to call him back. Which was just rude. You don't do that to a friend. You don't make plans and then disappear. *What the fuck?*

Suddenly, his phone rang, and Seth grabbed it, more eagerly than he would have liked to. But the number wasn't Chris's. It took a moment for him to place it, but then he realized it was Karen, Karen of the thick blonde hair and the sweet little giggle and the surprising fetish for sex in places where parents might walk in on them. It certainly hadn't been Seth's idea to get down and dirty on the living room rug, but every time he'd tried to pull her down the hall to his bedroom, she'd just giggled again and pulled off another piece of clothing, and finally Seth had given up trying to dissuade her.

The sex had been good. Pretty good. Not bad. It was sex, after all.

She had a really nice body, and her skin smelled good, and she kept telling him how sexy he was and how hot he was making her, and that was nice, definitely nice. It didn't really matter that her kisses were kind of sloppy, too wet, not like Chris's. Not that Chris was the point. He was *not* thinking about Chris while he was fucking her. Well, not until right at the end there, but that was just for a minute. Maybe two.

Seth sat down in a rush, exhaling. The phone had stopped ringing, thank goodness. He hoped Karen wouldn't turn out to be one of those girls who thought one night of pizza and sex meant they were headed for some happily ever after bullshit. He hadn't lied to her. Well, not much. He might have pretended to be a *little* more interested than he actually was, but that was what you had to do with girls sometimes. You had to play the little game, be charming, pretend to be interested in their stories. Not that she'd really had that much to say. But it hadn't taken much convincing to get her back to his house, and she was the one who wanted to screw on the fucking living room floor, and it's not like he was going to say no to *that*. He just hoped it wasn't going to get messy now. The whole "better off as friends" speech was sure going to make things awkward at the bookstore for a while.

Shit. He stood up, pacing across the room, then coming back to stare at his phone again. Why wasn't Chris calling him back? He picked up the cell, considering calling him again, but that was pathetic. "Fuck it," he muttered, shoving the phone in his pocket along with his keys and heading for the door.

He told himself he was just going for a drive, but he wasn't too surprised when he found the car quickly pointing itself in the direction of

Chris's neighborhood. When he pulled up to the house and saw both Chris's car and his mom's in the driveway, he parked and sat for a moment, not sure how to take this. Was Chris purposely avoiding him? He considered starting the engine again and driving away, but he didn't. He just got out of the car, walked to the door, and rang the bell.

Chris was smiling when he opened the door, but the smile vanished when he saw Seth. *What, were you expecting someone else?* Seth waited for him to say something, but he didn't. He just stood there, looking at him.

"Hey," Seth said finally, when it became clear that Chris wasn't going to speak. "What happened, man? I've been trying to call you all—"

Chris stepped out onto the porch and closed the door behind him.

When he spoke, his voice was low and even. "What are you doing here?"

Seth took a step back. "What do you mean? We said we were gonna hang out tod—"

"*What*," Chris said, gritting his teeth, "are you *doing* here?" Seth just stared. Chris stared back. "I don't want you here," he said at last. "Go away."

He turned to head back in the house, but Seth grabbed his arm.

"Chris, what the—"

Chris shook his hand off violently, turning back around. "I saw you with her!" he yelled.

Seth grew very still. "You saw me with who?"

Chris laughed, crossing his arms over his chest. "I didn't catch her name. The one you were fucking. Does that narrow it down? I saw you fucking some random girl on your fucking living room floor. Is that enough detail for you?"

Seth's stomach tightened into a knot. He clenched his jaw. "What are you doing, spying on me?"

"I came over to see you. To surprise you. I thought maybe I could help with your *home improvement project*. You know, the one your *dad* gave you? Didn't look like you made much progress on the house, though. I guess you were otherwise occupied."

That was too much. Seth folded his arms, mirroring Chris, his eyebrows furrowed. "So what if I was? Yeah, I got laid last night. I have to tell you about every girl I fuck now? What are you, my mother?"

"No, I'm your—"

"You're my *what*?" He was yelling now, his face hot. This was all wrong. All wrong. "You're my *friend*. Quit acting like I fucking cheated on you. What the hell did you think was going on here?"

"What the hell did *you* think was going on?" Chris was yelling too.

Seth had never seen him like this. "You jerk off all your friends, or is it just—"

"Shut up!" Seth's hands clenched into fists. His ears were burning.

He forced his voice to quiet down. "Shut up. I'm not like you. We're not in love. I'm not your boyfriend. I don't owe you any explanations."

"I never said you were. I have *never* said that. But we're not friends, either. I don't know who the fuck you think you're kidding."

"You don't know *anything*." Seth's hands squeezed tighter now.

"Quit acting like a little bitch."

Chris's face changed, and he got quiet. And that was almost worse.

"Well," he said finally. "It's nice to meet you."

"What?"

"I don't think I ever really knew you. I do now." He stopped, and they just stared at each other for a moment. "Get out."

Shit. Seth stared for a moment, just breathing. "Chris." His voice broke on the name. He cleared his throat, looked at his feet, looked up again. But Chris was looking past him now, to the house next door. Seth followed his gaze and saw for the first time that the neighbor had just gotten home, and was standing by the car, his hand still on the door, watching them. Seth looked back at Chris, who was staring at the guy in a way that was making Seth somehow uneasy. But then Chris shifted his gaze back to Seth, and the eyes got cold again.

"I mean it. Leave."

Seth opened his mouth, but there wasn't anything to say. He couldn't think of anything. Finally, he closed his mouth and walked back to the car, sitting down heavily in the seat, looking back at Chris. Chris was still staring at the neighbor, and the guy was staring back. As he watched, the neighbor began to smile a little bit, and then Chris did too. The uneasy feeling in Seth's gut got a bit worse. The neighbor tilted his head back toward his house, an invitation. And Chris nodded, then held up a finger, as if to say he'd be over in just a minute. The guy nodded back, and they grinned at each other for another moment before turning away and going in to their separate houses.

Fine, Seth thought, turning his key in the ignition and shifting the car into gear. *Do what you want. I don't give a shit.* He stepped on the gas and roared off down the street, trying his best to believe it was true.

ALEX had barely put his stuff down and grabbed a water bottle out of the fridge when the knocking on his door started. *Damn, you don't waste much time*, he thought, grinning. He opened the door and Chris walked in, smiling, a glint in his eye that traveled directly to Alex's cock. "I thought you'd never get home," he murmured, closing the door behind him and leaning back against it. That shy smile was going to drive Alex out of his mind.

Alex took a swig of his water, his eyes not leaving Chris's as he did.

"You okay?" he asked. "With Seth, I mean? It looked like—"

"I'm fine." Chris stepped forward, settling his hands on Alex's waist and leaning in for a kiss, but Alex turned his head away, dodging it. Chris frowned a little. "It's fine, okay? Really. I just want to—"

"Get back at him?" *Shit. What are you doing?* Chris's hands dropped back to his sides. "Look, if that's what this is, fine, just let me know, okay? I don't—"

“That’s not what this is.” Chris’s voice was quiet. He walked away, into the living room, sitting down on the couch. Alex watched him. “Seth’s an asshole, okay?” He paused, staring at his feet. “I’m starting to figure that out.”

Alex took another sip of his water, then walked slowly to the couch and sat down next to Chris. He didn’t speak.

“I thought I knew him. I didn’t. Whatever I thought was going on with us... wasn’t.” He paused again. “And that sucks.” He paused again, then looked up. “But none of that is why I’m here.”

Alex watched him carefully. “So why are you here?”

Chris held his gaze, looking at him intensely. “I had a really good time last night,” he said. “I’ve been... I’ve been thinking about it all day. Thinking about *you* all day.” His hand was on Alex’s thigh, and Alex felt his dick respond. He took a deep breath. *Cool it. Cool.* But now Chris was leaning in, kissing the side of his neck, one hand gentle on the other side of his throat while the other hand inched slowly up to where his pants were growing uncomfortably tight. “I know you don’t believe in boyfriends,” he murmured, between kisses. Alex swallowed hard. “But I was hoping you believed in repeat performances. Because, God.” He was kissing his face now. “I really loved it when you fucked me.” “Jesus.”

The kisses had made it to Alex’s lips now, but there Chris stopped, hovering half an inch away from Alex’s mouth, waiting. “I really want you to do that again.”

Raising a hand to the back of Chris’s neck, Alex brought their foreheads in to touch, watching Chris’s eyes dance down to his mouth and then up again. He tried to catalog every emotion he was seeing on this beautiful face: nervousness. Shyness. Excitement. Desire. Definitely desire. Making a quick decision, he pulled Chris a little closer and kissed him strongly. Chris let out a little squeak as their lips met, then a moan as their mouths opened and their tongues found each other. And God, kissing Chris was something Alex could do all day. He felt Chris melt into his arms, kissing him back, letting Alex pull him in closer with one hand on his back and the other on the back of his neck. He was hard now, they both were, and Chris’s hands were pulling his shirt out of his pants, sliding up onto bare skin. Alex leaned forward, laying Chris down on his back on the couch, covering his body with his own.

Chris’s hands moved quickly to Alex’s belt, but Alex batted them away. He kept up the slow, deep kiss, exploring Chris’s mouth with his tongue, sliding his fingers under the hem of Chris’s T-shirt and squeezing his strong sides. Pulling back just slightly, he slid the shirt all the way up and off, then peeled off his own polo shirt and tossed it to the floor.

“No tie today?” Chris murmured, tracing his hands down Alex’s bare chest.

“Got to love casual Fridays.” Alex grinned, and Chris grinned back. He leaned his head up for a kiss, but Alex ducked it, fastening on to his

neck instead. He sucked a slow mark there, licking and biting the tender flesh, and Chris tilted his head back, his breathing coming faster, squeezing the flesh of Alex's bare back with both hands. When he pulled off, Alex kissed the bruise he'd left on Chris's beautiful neck, flicking it with his tongue before kissing his way back up again.

When their lips met, they were both smiling. Alex let his hands explore Chris's skin as they kissed, sucking Chris's bottom lip into his mouth, releasing it, delving in with his tongue again. Chris was making the most delicious sounds, and his mouth tasted so good, his lips strong and soft and wonderful. Alex suddenly wondered what those lips would feel like on his dick, and he felt himself get even harder at the thought. But first things first. He moved his kisses to Chris's face, hands working on unbuttoning his fly as he bit down on a soft earlobe. Chris groaned under him, clutching him tight, thrusting his hips upward. And Alex just had to have a little fun. He drew back, leaving the jeans on but unbuttoned, and traced a finger down the outline of Chris's dick, which pulsed under his touch. "Oh, fuck," Chris moaned, thrusting again. Alex lowered his head back down to his ear.

"Gonna suck you off," he whispered, finger still moving slowly, tracing ever so lightly. Chris was panting now, his grip on Alex tight.

"Gonna take you down my throat, suck you hard, let you fuck my mouth. Then I'm gonna pull off right when you come, right when you shoot all over yourself, so I can lick up every drop." Without warning, he grabbed Chris's cock through his pants and squeezed it hard, and Chris threw his head back and shouted loud as he came instantly. Alex grinned as he felt the fabric get wet under his hand, stroking him gently until Chris stopped convulsing, covering his neck with soft kisses.

"OH MY God," Chris said, covering his face with his hands. *Jesus. He must think I'm such a loser.* "I'm... God. I'm so sorry." He moved the hands slightly apart, peeking down at Alex, who had moved his kisses to Chris's chest now and was looking up at him, a grin on his face, as he teased a nipple with his tongue. "That was really embarrassing," he mumbled.

Alex raised up so their heads were level again, kissing his mouth softly. "Flattering," he corrected.

"Um... yeah." He was blushing. "I really have been thinking about you all day." Alex kissed him again, not as softly this time, and Chris eagerly responded. He moved his hands to Alex's belt, but Alex stopped them. Chris looked up again, puzzled. "What? Let me take care of you."

"Hmm... not yet." He reached down and tugged on Chris's jeans, pulling them and the underwear off in one smooth move. Chris was still half-hard, his dick wet with come, and he watched Alex lick his lips as he stared at it, and that was just too much. He skipped the belt entirely and slid his hand directly over Alex's crotch, stroking him gently through his pants. "Mmm," he grunted, leaning into it, apparently forgetting whatever his objection had been for the moment.

“At least let me take your pants off,” Chris whispered, one hand moving to the belt buckle again while the other kept stroking. “I want to see your cock.”

Alex exhaled shortly, his eyes dark, and he nodded, and that was all Chris needed. He sat up a little, unfastening the belt and quickly shoving pants and underwear down off his hips. Alex peeled them off the rest of the way, getting rid of his socks and shoes, too, and Chris wanted to drop to his knees and swallow this man whole. But he didn’t get the chance, because Alex tackled him as soon as he was naked, kissing him hard, sliding their bodies together, and Chris wrapped his arms around him and kissed him back. The kiss was desperate now, passionate, and how was it possible that he was this hard again already? He reached for Alex’s cock, but Alex was already pulling away, kissing quickly down Chris’s body, licking his belly when he got there, fucking *licking* him. And then he lingered over Chris’s crotch, eyes closed, inhaling deeply, *smelling* him, and Chris practically fucking lost it all over again. And now that tongue was on his dick, *Jesus*, licking up one side, then the other, lapping up every drop of come, and Chris couldn’t tear his eyes away. The tongue kept teasing, darting around the head, flicking here and there, then laying flat on the underside of his cock and dragging all the way up, slow and heavy and fucking unbelievable.

“Guh,” Chris said, the closest thing to a word that he could manage, since the words *please suck my cock please please please* didn’t seem to be coming out. And now that mouth was moving lower, and, *Jesus*, Alex was stuffing Chris’s balls into his mouth, sucking on them, and Chris cried out loud. And just when it was too much, just when he thought he couldn’t take one more fucking second, Alex lifted up and plunged his lips over Chris’s dick, sucking it all the way to the back of his throat, and there had never been anything like this feeling. “Gannnhhh!” Chris gasped, his hands involuntarily grabbing at Alex’s head, sliding through hair that was tragically too short to tug. Alex made a sound, a low, rumbling, approving sound that shot straight through Chris’s body, and he kept right on sucking, bobbing his head up and down, and how could he be taking him so deep? Alex’s lips brushed Chris’s balls on every downstroke, the entire length of his cock enveloped in wet warm delicious suction, and Chris closed his eyes, because if he watched that for one more second he was sure to lose it. And he wanted this to last. As long as it possibly could. And now there were two fingers pressed alongside his dick, getting covered in saliva when Alex moved his mouth onto it, and Chris didn’t understand why. But then the hand was sneaking under him, a finger slipping just slightly inside, and Chris found his words again. “Yes yes yes please fuck fuck fuck,” he panted, and the two fingers pushed in, sliding directly to that spot and pressing hard just as Alex took him all the way into his throat again, and that was it. Chris yelled something unintelligible and came hard, his hips lifting off the couch, barely aware that Alex was still sucking, still swallowing him, nursing every drop out of him until

Chris collapsed back down into a heaving, quivering mess.

At some point, Chris regained his senses enough to realize that Alex was balanced on one elbow over him, his free hand stroking his own cock. And that was *so* not happening. He rolled Alex under him, lifting up to make room on the couch and then moving back to straddle his thighs, sitting back on his heels. Alex was panting heavily now, his whole body tense, and he whimpered when Chris pushed his hands away, but he let it happen. Little droplets of precome were already leaking out the tip, and Chris slid his mouth over it, sucking the bitter liquid out. Someday, he'd have to learn Alex's patience, his ability to tease and draw it out and take it so slow that he could drive a man out of his fucking mind. But right now, all he wanted was to feel Alex let go, to taste the come as it shot into his mouth, to be the one who made controlled Alex lose all control.

And it seemed to be working. He moved his mouth as low as he could, sucking in more of Alex's cock, wrapping a hand around the base because there was no way he could deepthroat the way Alex did, and gagging was not sexy. He wasn't sure what to do with his tongue, but he tried moving it like in a kiss, and Alex groaned, so Chris kept going. He bobbed his head a little, imitating what Alex had done, using his hand to stroke him while he continued to suck, trying his best to keep his teeth covered, hoping he was making it one-tenth as good for Alex as Alex had made it for him. "God," Alex grunted, clutching the couch. "Coming soon, Chris... coming oh fuck right *now*," and it was happening, Chris's mouth was filling with fluid, more than he could handle. He swallowed what he could, then backed off, continuing to work Alex with his hand, watching his face as he rode out the waves of pleasure. He stayed there, kneeling, when the shudders finally passed, watching Alex breathe, watching as he slowly opened his eyes. He smiled at Chris, moving a thumb to the side of his mouth and wiping something away. Chris looked down at it and saw it was a drop of runaway come, and without thinking, he sucked the thumb into his mouth, licking it clean. Alex's eyes darkened again and he pulled Chris down into a wet kiss, his tongue exploring Chris's mouth, sharing their flavors.

It was delicious and perfect and the kiss continued long after the tastes had faded. They curled together on the couch, the kisses growing slower and softer, sweeter and gentler, until they stopped kissing and just lay together, breathing each other in.

CHAPTER SEVEN

ALEX ran his hands gently through Chris's hair, watching the way the blond strands slipped through his fingers. It was soft, much softer than his own hair ever was, even when it had been long enough to do this. "Hmm," Chris sighed, cuddling in a little closer, his cheek against Alex's chest, his hand gentle on Alex's waist. "That's nice."

Alex smiled, cupping Chris's head and leaning forward slightly. He was millimeters away from kissing Chris on the top of the head, *kissing him on the top of the fucking head*, when he stopped himself. *What the hell are you doing?* Abruptly, he pulled back, then sat up, forcing himself to put distance between himself and the gorgeous nineteen-year-old who he was *not* going to fall for. Still, he couldn't help but smile a little when Chris let out a tiny complaining sound at being displaced.

"Where are you going?" The question was sleepy, pouty, teasing.

Chris rolled onto his back, looking up at him, smiling, and Alex dug his nails into his palm to keep himself from tracing that mouth with his fingers. And then with other things.

"Hungry," he said, standing up and grabbing his boxer briefs from under the coffee table, where they'd landed. "Haven't had dinner yet. Have you?" He glanced back and found Chris had raised himself up on an elbow, blatantly ogling him with a big grin on his face. Alex grinned back, and allowed his eyes to soak in the image of Chris's perfect body stretched out naked on his couch.

"There's something else I'd like to do more than eat," Chris said, waggling an eyebrow in a ludicrous attempt at seduction. Alex laughed.

"Hey!" Chris said, throwing a couch cushion at him.

"You need to work on your material," Alex said, still laughing as he pulled on his pants. *Not that you need any.* "I'll teach you some someday."

"Fine," Chris said, sighing dramatically and sitting up. "Dinner. If you insist. But maybe afterwards...." He let the sentence trail off, a question at the end of it, a hopeful look on his face, and Alex wanted to throw him back on the couch and follow through on it. But he turned away.

"Let's eat," he said. With another sigh, Chris rose up off the couch and began pulling on his own clothes. Alex glanced back at him once more at the threshold, checking out that glorious ass one more time before stepping into the kitchen.

He exhaled as he opened the refrigerator, then frowned as he examined its contents. *Right.* He'd been meaning to go grocery shopping after work for the last few days, but kept forgetting. Pickings were rather slim.

"So what are we eating?" Chris's quiet voice was right behind him, his hands sliding around Alex's waist and clasping tight against Alex's stomach. God, that felt good. "Hmm," Chris said, peering over Alex's shoulder to look inside the fridge. "What *are* we eating?"

Alex chuckled. "How about an omelet? We have eggs, we have... um... hmm. How about scrambled eggs?"

Chris kissed his neck, and Alex could feel his smile. "Sounds perfect."

"Good. Sit." He pulled reluctantly out of Chris's arms and squatted to pull the eggs and milk from the fridge, then kicked the door closed as he turned around. When he did, he saw that Chris had obediently seated

himself at the kitchen table, leaning back in the chair, shirtless and grinning. He opened his mouth to ask about the lack of clothing, then thought better of it and just turned away. He wasn't crazy. "So. You a free man tonight?"

"Yeah. I told my mom I was going out with friends and wasn't sure when I'd be back." Alex heard the silent request to stay over, but he focused on cracking the eggs into the bowl in front of him. "What about you? Do you, um... have any plans?"

Alex shook his head, stirring the milk into the eggs and then turning on the burner. "Nope. I was going to make it a quiet evening in tonight." *In the hopes that I'd be hooking up with you.* He shook his head again as he poured the eggs into the pan. *Get off this subject.* As the eggs heated, he opened up a cabinet, searching for more food. "You like tortilla chips with your eggs?"

"Who doesn't?"

"Good." He brought the bag down and set it on the table, catching Chris's eye as he did, and the sparkle in it. Unable to help himself, he placed a firm hand on the back of Chris's neck and leaned down for a kiss, slipping his tongue in, tasting him. When it broke, he stayed where he was, foreheads touching, eyes closed. "I'm glad you're here," he said quietly.

"Me too." Chris's hand was on his neck now, his fingers warm on his skin. Alex pulled back just enough to gaze at him, and lingered for a moment longer. When he slipped away and walked back to the eggs, the smile stayed.

DINNER was surprisingly good. Alex unearthed an old jar of salsa from the back of the fridge, and they made makeshift breakfast burritos, or breakfast nachos, perhaps. Without the cheese.

"Delicious," Chris declared, and he meant it. The truth was, he just wanted to stick around at Alex's house as long as the guy would let him, and the eggs were as good an excuse as any. The appetizer activities had been awfully fun, and he was looking forward to what was coming next. But somehow, they started talking while they ate, and he stopped thinking about just the sex.

"There is *no way* *Final Fantasy* is more challenging than *Ninja Gaiden*." Alex was shaking his head, laughing. "You are out of your mind, California boy."

"I am not!" Chris was grinning from ear to ear. "It took me weeks to get past Seymour Flux in *Final Fantasy X*, and then I only lucked into it because I happened to press the right combination of buttons by accident."

"That's sad for you. But for those of us who are not gaming challenged...."

"Shut up!" He was outright laughing now. "Do I have to remind you who beat whose ass the very first time he played *Resident Evil Six*?"

"Ha. Who's to say I didn't let you win just to get into your pants?"

Chris grinned at him. "You didn't need the game." Alex laughed

again, standing up and picking up their empty plates to carry them to the sink. Chris popped another chip into his mouth, munching on it thoughtfully as he watched him. “How did you know you wanted to do that as your career? I mean, programming?”

Alex turned around, leaning against the sink as he dried his hands with a dishtowel. “I got lucky,” he said, shrugging. “I only ever really had one hobby, and it turned out to be something you could do for a living. Job stuff is something I’ve never really stressed over.”

“Yeah, you are lucky.” The laughter had faded now. Chris traced a pattern on the wood grain of the table. “I wish I had something like that. I have no idea what I’m supposed to do with my life.”

Alex furrowed his brow, sitting back down again and leaning back in his chair. “Is that something that’s been bugging you?”

“Bugging my mom.” He paused. “And, yeah, I guess, bugging me too. I just kind of thought I’d have figured it out by now.”

“Is that why you’re not in college?”

He nodded, his gaze still focused on the table. “I was never much of a student. I mean, not that I flunked out or anything, but my grades were just never really that spectacular. And the idea of going to college like everybody else, sitting in classes that bored me like everybody else, working toward a career that I didn’t really care about... it just didn’t seem like the right thing for me. But I thought I’d have come up with an alternate plan by this point.” He shrugged. “The truth is, I’m not particularly passionate about anything, or particularly gifted at anything, so...”

“Bullshit.” Chris looked up, surprised. Alex was staring at him very intensely. “I saw that drawing you did. The one you were working on out in the front yard the other day, remember? It blew me away.”

“Oh, that. Well, great. So I can set up a little card table on Venice Beach and do portraits for five bucks apiece.”

“Hey,” Alex said, grabbing his hand. “It’s something you’re good at, and it’s something you love. I may know shit about art, but I know you’re better than that.”

Chris opened his mouth to respond, but then closed it again. He squeezed Alex’s hand instead, just staring at those dark eyes. “Thank you,” he finally said.

Alex smiled, and God, he was gorgeous when he did that. Chris smiled back, unable to help himself. And Alex kept hold of his hand, reaching forward with the other one to cup Chris’s face and bring it toward his own. Their lips met halfway over the table, soft at first, gentle. But they broke apart, hovering close, and suddenly that heat that flowed between them sparked up again, and they lunged forward a second time. This kiss was strong, hard, all tongue and teeth and wanting, and when they broke apart they were both breathing heavy.

“So about that getting into my pants,” Chris panted, still clinging to Alex’s neck.

Alex nodded, cocking his head toward the bedroom. "Race you," he said, and Chris grinned and hurried in that direction. Alex was close behind.

CHRIS dove onto the bed headfirst, and Alex happily climbed on top of him. "Got you where I want you now," he murmured, holding Chris's hands against the bed. Chris made an inarticulate sound, so Alex ducked his head and sucked a nipple into his mouth, grinning at Chris's instant moan. "Have I ever told you how much I like it that you walk around halfnaked all the time?" he growled, the words partially muffled by the kisses he was planting on Chris's chest.

Chris lifted his head. "Really?" His breathing was getting more and more uneven. Alex let go of his hands and kissed his mouth again, feeling the newly-freed hands slide onto his back and cursing himself for having put his own shirt back on.

"Definitely." Those hands were making quick work of his shirt now, pulling it over his head, throwing it to the floor, and Alex kissed him again, kissed him deeply, plunging his tongue in and savoring the flavor. And now Chris was rolling them over, pressing their chests together, kissing him back. *Fuck yeah.*

"Liked the second way we did it last night," Chris said when the kiss broke, yanking open Alex's fly. "Liked straddling you, riding you."

"Fuck yeah." This time, he said the words out loud. He grabbed Chris and kissed him again, tongues battling each other now, pants and underwear rapidly being tugged off and thrown away. Unfortunately, he had to break the kiss in order to grab the lube and condoms out of the bedside drawer, but he did it as quickly as he could and then took possession of Chris's mouth again. They were naked now, writhing together, legs tangling as they pushed their cocks against each other. Alex grabbed at Chris's ass, squeezing it, and grabbed both their cocks with his other hand, beginning to jerk them off together.

"Oh, fuck," Chris moaned, his fingers digging into Alex's shoulder. He bucked his hips, fucking into Alex's fist, and Alex squeezed that beautiful ass again. Quickly, Chris dissolved into incoherence, clutching Alex's shoulders with both hands now, his face hanging over Alex's, his eyes shut tight. Alex pulled his hand off Chris's ass and brought it to his face, sliding a finger along Chris's lower lip, and the blue eyes flew open as he instantly sucked three fingers into his mouth.

"Holy shit," Alex whispered, transfixed by possibly the hottest sight he'd ever seen as Chris stared at him intensely, covering his fingers with saliva, sucking them hard. Suddenly, Alex wanted to pull his hand out of there and slide his cock in instead, but he restrained himself. He slipped the fingers out and kissed him, hard, keeping up the slow jerking of both cocks as the wet fingers found their way around Chris's body again. Chris moaned into his mouth as the first finger pushed in, working its way into that tightness, curling slightly to find his prostate and then pressing firmly against it, causing another delicious moan.

“Yes,” Chris panted, breaking the kiss, his head falling down onto Alex’s shoulder as he pushed another finger in. Alex went slow, easing him into it, very aware that Chris was still new at this and probably sore from yesterday. But Chris was bucking his hips backward now, taking the fingers deep, biting into Alex’s shoulder as he started an in-and-out rhythm. “Fuck, yes.”

The third finger was a little tougher, the opening so unbelievably tight, but Chris kept moving, kept pressing, until he lifted his head and kissed Alex again, wetly, desperately, making the most unbelievable sounds. Alex let go of their cocks, and Chris whined in protest, grabbing his hand and bringing it back. “Condom,” Alex managed, but Chris kept Alex’s hand where it was and grabbed the condom himself, taking two tries to open it but then quickly sliding it over Alex’s cock and pouring a healthy dose of lube on top. Chris used both hands to slick the lube over the latex, in the process getting gloppy liquid on his own dick, both their stomachs, and a bit on the bedspread, but whatever, fuck it, it was time. Alex slipped his fingers out and pulled back, scooting into a sitting position with his back against the headboard, and Chris protested again. But Alex just grabbed him by the waist and turned him around, pulling him in so that his back was pressed against Alex’s chest. “Trust me,” he muttered into Chris’s ear, lifting his hips and helping him to guide the tip of Alex’s dick to his hole. Chris quickly got the idea and positioned himself perfectly, easing down a bit at a time, the ridiculous amount of lube making for a very smooth but rather silly sounding entry.

But it didn’t seem funny. Chris was all the way down now, kneeling astride Alex with his cock buried deep inside, and he was just sitting there, panting. Alex wanted to move, wanted to fuck up into that tightness so badly, so badly it was hard to think about anything else. But he didn’t. He leaned forward slightly, pressing his chest to Chris’s back, sliding an arm around Chris’s chest to hold him tight while his other hand found Chris’s dick and began to stroke again. Chris moaned, leaning his head back onto Alex’s shoulder, and Alex kissed his neck. “That’s it,” he whispered.

“Relax, Chris, I got you, that’s it.” He thrust upward slightly, and Chris gasped, gripping Alex’s bicep. “So tight, God, so good, Chris, fuck, so deep.” Alex kept moving, and Chris moved with him, shifting his hips back and forth a little, rocking them together. *Fuck, so good.* Alex moved a little faster, and Chris responded. His moans were getting louder now.

“Keep talking,” Chris panted. They had picked up a rhythm now, their hips moving in time, their torsos still pressed close together, skin to skin. Alex kept up a steady stroking motion on Chris’s dick, twisting his wrist now, sliding his hand over the head and back down again, over and over, as his own cock pushed deep into the warm tightness of Chris’s ass. “Feels so good,” he said, barely aware of what he was saying anymore. But Chris wanted talking, so he was talking. “Uhh, so good, Chris, love being inside you, love fucking you, God, yesss....” Chris had picked up the pace and was riding him hard now, smacking his ass back

against Alex's groin, the tightness milking every inch of his cock. He dropped his head forward onto Chris's shoulder, mouth open wide, trying to push back the orgasm that was fighting its way to the surface. Chris was reaching an arm behind them now, clutching at Alex's back, pulling them tighter, closer, as he bucked his hips fast and Alex struggled to match him thrust for thrust. He jerked Chris faster, clutched him tighter, moving his hand to pinch a nipple between his index and middle fingers. *Don't come yet. Don't come yet.*

"Oh, God," Chris groaned, his hips still moving furiously. "Oh, fuck, Alex, fuck, your cock, God...."

Alex squinted his eyes shut. *Red Sox. Red Sox. Josh Beckett. Hideki Okajima. Tim Wakefield. Fuck fuck fuck fuck fuck.* Chris's hands gripped him tighter. His words trailed off into open-mouthed grunts, which got louder, and more intense, and higher-pitched, and then suddenly, without warning, he cried out loud and shot streams of come onto the bedspread and Alex's still-moving hand. Alex opened his eyes, groaned loud and let go, exploding deep into that tightness, holding him close, his mouth still open against Chris's skin.

They stayed there, shaking, trembling, for minutes, or hours, or days. But then they fell forward, Alex reaching out to brace their fall, pulling out and tossing the condom weakly in the direction of the trashcan before pulling Chris into his arms, where he needed to be. "God, that was so good," Chris whispered, still breathing heavy.

Alex kissed him, and held him, and petted his back, his hair, his arms. But he didn't respond.

He was afraid of what he might say.

SETH stared at the phone. He'd been staring at it for over ten minutes, lying on his back on his quiet hillside spot, trying to force himself to dial a number. Any number. He couldn't just lie here alone any longer. He hated being alone.

But he couldn't figure out who to call. He couldn't just call one of the guys and go grab a beer. There was no way he'd be able to just kick back and act like everything was fine without somebody seeing that something was up, and no way was he going to tell one of them about it. And he couldn't call Chris, not that he wanted to, not after the little hissy fit Chris had thrown over Seth hooking up with Karen, and what the hell was his problem anyway? But even if he did call, Chris would just hang up on him. Or maybe he'd be so busy getting his ass plowed by that neighbor guy that he wouldn't pick up the phone. Seth had seen the way they looked at each other. He wasn't an idiot. And fuck him for that, anyway. Not that he cared. But where did Chris get off getting so pissed at Seth for fucking Karen, when he was hooking up with somebody else too? "Shit." He threw the phone down next to him, gritting his teeth and looking up at the sky again. This was so stupid. Everything was so fucked up, and this was supposed to be his day off, and he'd been driving around alone like a loser, no idea what to do with himself. After spending the

whole day at home like a loser, waiting for the phone to ring. Chris hadn't even *apologized* for that. He left him hanging like a fucking idiot, and he hadn't even said he was sorry. Seth sat up and grabbed the phone again, staring at it, mad all over again. But he didn't punch in Chris's number. After a minute, he exhaled, and pressed in another one instead. There was only one person he could really think to call.

It took Amy three rings to pick up. Which was bullshit, because she practically had that thing superglued to the side of her face. She was avoiding him too. "What do you want?" she said when she answered, her voice cold.

"Well hello to you too," Seth said, an edge to his voice.

"Seth, if you're just calling to be an asshole, I'm going to hang up the phone. I got enough of that on our last call." Seth was quiet, staring at his feet. "Which was four fucking days ago, Seth. You hung up on me four days ago, when I was only trying to help, and you haven't called me since. It's the first time we've gone more than two days without talking since—"

"I'm sorry." Seth was still staring at his feet. Amy didn't say anything. He closed his eyes. "Shit. I'm sorry. Okay? Ames?"

There was another long pause. But then, finally, she sighed. "You're an asshole." Seth smiled. Only Amy could say that sentence *affectionately*.

"I know."

"So what's going on? You sound like shit warmed over."

"Thanks."

"No problem."

"It's... I don't know. Things are fucked up."

"You fucked up."

"Did I say that?"

"Yes."

He exhaled, frustrated. "God. Do you even need me for this conversation?"

"Tell me what happened."

Seth lay down on the grass again, staring up at the sky. "Nothing. I don't know. Everything. I hooked up with some girl last night."

"So?"

"So, nothing. Exactly. It didn't mean anything."

"So what's the problem?"

"Um, Chris... that's the guy, y'know, that I—"

"The guy you're not fucking."

He laughed, a little. "Yeah. He kind of... saw it."

"He *saw* it? What did you do, fuck her in public?"

"No, I—"

"Fuck it, whatever, doesn't matter. Okay. So he saw."

"Yeah. And he got pretty mad about it."

"Why?" She sounded genuinely confused. "Wait. Are you and this guy... are you *exclusive*?"

"No! God. Not even close. We're not even... we're just friends."

Friends who have messed around a few times. That's it."

Amy paused for a long time before she spoke. "Does he know that?" she said at last. Seth opened his mouth, closed it again, closed his eyes. Finally, Amy spoke again. "Look, what exactly have you said to this guy?"

"Nothing! Nothing."

"What has he said to you?"

"He said... I don't know. He said something once about how he hadn't been with anyone else. That he only wanted to be with me. But that was bullshit, because he is with somebody else. There's this guy who lives next door to him—"

"What do you care?" Her words were immediate, quick, interrupting him.

"What?"

"What do you care? You said you're just friends messing around. So why do you care who else he fucks?"

He paused. "I don't."

"Bullshit."

"Amy—"

"Seth, I don't know what the hell you think is going on here, but you're not just messing around with this guy. He's with somebody else, and you sound like somebody stole your fucking teddy bear."

"Fuck you."

"Ignoring that. You want my advice?"

"No."

"Right. Here it is: get over yourself. Fuck labels. You want to be with Chris. So be with Chris. Quit worrying about whether that makes you gay or bi or queer or just *you* and fucking be with the person you want to be with. That's my advice."

Seth put his hand to his forehead, rubbing his temple. "It's not that simple."

"Why not?"

"Because he doesn't want to be with me."

"What, you know that based on one fight? Bull-to-the-fucking-shit, my friend. He's with somebody else. So what? Win him back."

"Win him back?"

"You're *Seth Klein*, motherfucker. I've seen you turn on the charm and get the hottest hottie at a sorority party, even when she came to the fucking thing with her fiancé. You don't get turned down. Win him back." Seth smiled a little. He was already breathing a little easier. "Thanks, Ames."

"You're welcome. Now shut up and let me sleep."

"Okay. 'Night."

"'Night, Seth."

Seth stayed on his back for a long time after he hung up the phone, staring into the sky. She was right. He could do this. He knew Chris

wanted him, knew it was never just about sex. And whatever he had going on with that dork next door, it couldn't be too much of an obstacle. "*Seth Klein*, motherfucker," he murmured, and grinned. Amy was right. It was only a matter of time.

CHAPTER EIGHT

THE next morning, Chris woke up gradually, a smile on his face, Alex's scent in his nose. He lay on his back for a moment, soaking in the feeling of waking up in someone else's bed, the weight of another body next to him. He felt worldly, and cool, and mostly relieved to have finally reached this point in his life. Turning his head, he gazed at Alex's sleeping form, his body curled away from Chris, his back naked and strong. It was peaceful just watching his shoulders rise and fall gently with the motion of his breath, and Chris smiled a little more.

Alex. What a surprise he was. Who would have thought someone as sexy as he was, as confident, as toes-curling in bed, would also be so tender, so gentle, so kind? They had fallen asleep curled up together, naked, kissing, Alex's hands caressing his body, holding him like a lover. A lover in the old sense of the word, one who loves, not just one who fucks. Alex sighed in his sleep and rolled over, landing on his back with his head turned toward Chris. Chris watched his face carefully, but the eyes stayed closed. He was still asleep. Chris bit his lip, wishing he were older, a little more practiced at this. He didn't really understand everything he was feeling these days, but he knew he liked Alex. Like, a lot. He seemed to be laughing with Alex more than he ever had with Seth, felt more comfortable with him than he ever had with Seth, felt like he'd known him a lot longer than he actually had. And he'd never felt that way with Seth, which was weird, given the fact that he'd been in love with the guy. Maybe. He hated him now. Or something. He knew he didn't like thinking about Seth anymore, and tried not to. And he knew that he tried not to think about how Alex didn't believe in relationships, how this was never going to be anything more than sex for him. Alex still probably thought of him as a kid, a plaything, a fun diversion. And that was okay. Maybe that was all Chris wanted too. He could handle that. He definitely could.

Slowly, very slowly, Chris allowed himself to trace the lines of Alex's face with his eyes. The square jaw, pale skin, dark eyelashes, rough morning stubble. He let his eyes wander lower—the prominent Adam's apple, strong shoulders, mouthwatering chest. He felt a stirring in his cock, and it perked up even further when his eyes swept over flat abs and dark treasure trail to where the sheet was tented over Alex's crotch. The man had some serious morning wood.

Chris swallowed, glanced up at Alex's face, and then decided there was nothing wrong with taking a little peek. Very gently, he picked up the

sheet and pushed it a little lower, keeping his gaze focused on the thick cock that lay before him, hard, beautiful, just begging for attention. His mouth was watering. He licked his lips.

Quietly, he slid his hand down to his own rapidly hardening dick and squeezed it, watching Alex's cock as he did. He began to stroke himself slowly, gently, imagining his tongue licking up Alex's shaft, picturing that thickness sinking into his ass. God, it was a beautiful cock. He licked his lips again, hand moving a little faster now. Could he do it? Was he bold enough to just lean over and take that hardness into his mouth, wake Alex up with a blowjob? Why not? He could. Alex would be surprised at his audacity, would groan in that sexy way he had, would slide his hands into Chris's hair and mutter filthy little encouragements until Chris made him come in his mouth. He bit his lip, still staring, still jerking off, gathering the nerve.

"Hey there." Chris jerked his eyes upward, startled. Alex's voice was rough with sleep, but he was smiling, his eyes moving down to Chris's dick and then back up to his eyes.

"Um... hi," Chris said, his hand faltering, suddenly embarrassed. But Alex just reached over and took over for him, rolling on top of him, kissing him deeply. He tasted like morning breath and stale air and musk and male, and it was absolutely delicious. Chris whimpered into Alex's mouth and kissed him back.

"Now, this," Alex murmured, shifting his kisses to Chris's neck, his hand still moving in slow, leisurely strokes over Chris's cock, "*this* is the way to wake up." Chris smiled, his head falling back as he gave himself over to the sensations caused by Alex's hand, mouth, lips, teeth. Alex was nibbling along his collarbone now, the stubble brushing roughly against his skin, that hand still moving slowly, so slowly.

"Mmm," he moaned, as Alex continued his ministrations. The lips traced lower, then back up again, tongue swirling around a nipple, dipping into his belly button, then kissing his way up to his other shoulder. Chris wanted to grab that head and bring it a lot lower, but he knew Alex intended to drive him out of his mind first. Which wasn't exactly a problem.

"God, you taste good," Alex muttered, biting down on an earlobe.

Chris moaned again, bucking his hips in spite of himself. But Alex stayed where he was, his breath hot against Chris's ear. "Want to fucking *devour* you."

"Hmmkay," Chris whimpered, and Alex chuckled, kissing his mouth briefly before making his way lower again. And now he was going much lower, much much lower. He pressed Chris's dick to his stomach and began tonguing his balls, gentle little cat licks followed by sucking some of the flesh into his mouth. Chris groaned in agony, his cock pulsing under Alex's unmoving grip, closing his eyes tight and grabbing his own hair. His knees were bent, his feet flat on the mattress near Alex's head, and Alex moved his free hand to one of Chris's ankles as he continued to

cover Chris's balls with lazy drags of his tongue. Chris concentrated on breathing as the mouth kept moving, licking, sucking, covering every inch of the sensitive skin. "Fuck, that feels good," he whispered.

And then, suddenly, the licking stopped. "Give me your hands,"

Alex growled, and Chris instantly complied, opening his eyes and staring down at this masterful man who had him utterly under his spell. He had no idea what he was expecting, but he was surprised when Alex placed both of Chris's hands under his own thighs and then pushed the legs upwards, so that Chris was hugging his knees to his chest, legs bent and splayed, utterly exposed. He was even more surprised when Alex lowered his head again, gripping Chris's hips with both hands, kissing his way down to Chris's opening. And he practically jumped off the bed when Alex reached his destination, his tongue pressing flat against Chris's hole, then flicking at it once, twice, three times before delving deep inside.

"Gaaaahh!" Chris said, or something equally articulate. Alex just grinned up at him and kept at it, the tongue pushing in again, warm and wet and firm and wiggling in all the right places. Chris threw his head back, gasping at the unexpected pleasure, the nerve endings firing gleefully as he worked to keep himself from shoving his ass further into Alex's face. His cock was aching, leaking, and he desperately wanted to touch it, but he knew better than to take his hands away from where he'd been told to leave them, knew that Alex would get him off, would make it good, make it amazing. And it was already so good, so fucking good, that tongue plunging in again and again, a finger sliding in with it now, pressing hard against his prostate, now *two* fingers *oh my fucking God*, and the tongue again alone and *oh fuck* fingers *oh God*, and Chris was babbling now, his eyes shut tight, his hands clinging to the backs of his own knees so tight it was starting to get painful, but he couldn't ease up, he just couldn't, not with the amazing sensations shooting from his ass to his cock and straight through his body.

And suddenly everything stopped again. He opened his eyes and watched, panting, as Alex tore into a condom, slid it on and slicked up in record time, and then he was throwing Chris's legs over his shoulders and pressing in deep, and *oh God, so good, so good, so good*. Chris moaned, loud, and reached for his dick, but Alex grabbed both his hands quickly and slammed them to the mattress by his head. "No," he said, bending him practically in half as he thrust deep inside, and Chris practically came on the spot from the authority in his voice. "You don't need that." Chris squeezed tight to his hands, moaning pitifully, rutting his hips against Alex's cock. And thankfully Alex seemed to be done with the slow-and-torturous portion of the proceedings, as he was now fucking into him fast and hard, slamming in to that perfect spot on every stroke, *every fucking stroke*, and Chris just moaned and held on for dear life. The pressure built up, stronger and sweeter and faster and better until everything finally exploded, every bit of him bursting through and shooting out his dick, and he came, and came, and came.

Somewhere far away, he heard Alex groan out his name and felt him thrust in one more time, and then he collapsed on top of him, and everything else disappeared. They lay together, Alex a sweaty, limp blanket covering his body, Chris a rubbery tangle of limbs, everything still tingling. He couldn't remember a time in his life when he'd ever felt this good.

EVENTUALLY, Alex summoned the strength to lift up and ease out of Chris, rolling onto his back next to him, his breathing not quite back to normal yet. He didn't expect Chris to instantly roll onto his side and curl into his body, but he was quite happy that he did. Alex's arms instinctively moved to surround him, squeezing him gently in, and Chris petted Alex's chest and made a noise that sounded something like a purr. God, he was in trouble.

"You okay?" Alex asked, stroking Chris's arm.

Chris chortled, not lifting his head. "Better than okay."

"Sorry, I—was a little rough there. I didn't mean to—"

"Alex." Chris raised up on his elbows, fixing Alex with a scolding stare. "Don't you dare apologize for giving me the orgasm of my fucking life."

Alex laughed, squeezing him again. "Why, Christopher Bennett," he began, but Chris cut him off.

"Christian."

"What?"

"It's Christian. Not Christopher."

"Really?" Chris rolled onto his side, propping his face on one hand, and Alex did too, mirroring him. His free hand was still tracing Chris's skin. He couldn't seem to stop touching this man. "Why Christian? Your mom doesn't seem the religious type."

"She's not." Chris looked down a little. "It's not—never mind."

"What?" Alex poked him, teasingly, and Chris laughed.

"That tickles. It's nothing. It's just... embarrassing."

Alex rolled them over again, ending up on top of Chris, pinning him down, delighting in Chris's gleeful smile. "Tell me," he murmured, kissing his face.

Chris sighed. "Okay. Well, my mom was kind of young when she had me, you know? And she really... she really liked movies. Teen movies. Like *Heathers*... and *Gleaming the Cube*...."

Alex raised his head. "No."

"Yup."

He laughed. "You were *not* named after Christian Slater."

Chris was blushing now. He shrugged. "It could have been worse. If I was a girl, I was gonna be Winona."

Alex laughed big now, a belly laugh, and Chris laughed with him, and they somehow got all tangled up again. And it was better than perfect. He was happy.

When the rumblings of their stomachs got too loud to ignore, they

stumbled out of bed, and Alex found an unopened toothbrush for Chris to use. They laughed together as they brushed, as they shaved, as they climbed into the shower. And as the water poured down, Alex couldn't help but draw Chris close, kiss his wet lips, press him against the wall. Chris groaned into his mouth, and Alex sank to his knees without hesitating, sliding Chris's dick into his mouth, bobbing his head as he sucked. He couldn't tease him anymore, couldn't draw it out like that again. He just wanted Chris undone and moaning, spilling into his mouth, down his throat, and within a few short minutes he got his wish. Chris crumpled down over him, and Alex was grateful this old house had a full tub instead of just a shower stall, because there was enough room to lie down under the water, stretch back and watch as Chris settled between his legs and sucked every thought he'd ever had out of him. And watch he did.

By the time they made it out of the shower, their fingers had pruned, the water had turned from hot to lukewarm, and Alex's stomach was loudly protesting the delay of breakfast. And he wouldn't have wanted it any other way.

It took a little longer to get dressed than it normally would, but kissing has a way of slowing things down. Alex handed Chris his pants, and then kissed him. And then helped to button them, and then kissed him. And then pulled him in by his ass, squeezing with both hands, kissing him deeper as Chris happily wrapped his arms around Alex's neck and kissed him back. They stayed that way, lips moving together, tongues touching gently, and then a little less gently. Alex massaged that perfect ass, and Chris moaned softly and broke the kiss. "We have to stop," he whispered, pushing half-heartedly at Alex's bare shoulders.

"I know," Alex said, and he kissed him again. But eventually, he stopped. And he laughed when he caught Chris pouting as he pulled away. Alex led Chris into the kitchen and sat him down in the chair, squeezing his shoulder as he turned to the cupboard. "I know you have to get to work. But you have a few minutes for breakfast, don't you?"

"I suppose. Do you actually have anything edible?"

"Har har." He planted a large box of Cheerios on the table, followed by bowls and spoons. "Got you covered. Um... I think I may be out of milk, though."

"I like 'em dry anyway."

That was a lie, but it was sweet, and Alex grinned at him. He held back from starting the kissing all over again, however. Much more of that and Chris would never get to work. Not that that was necessarily a bad thing.

"So what are you doing today?" Chris asked, pouring a heap of Cheerios into his bowl. "Besides buying groceries, I mean?"

"Well, that. And then, I don't know. I might call my friend Marty, see what he's doing."

"Is that a 'friend' friend or...."

Alex chuckled. "Just a friend. Hasn't been anything else in a looong time."

"How long?"

"God. We broke up... five years ago? Something like that."

Chris tilted his head, looking at him a little oddly. "Broke up? So does that mean you were..."

"Boyfriends? Yeah, once upon a time. For about five minutes. We didn't work out as a couple, but we've been friends ever since. Family, really. It sucked when he moved out here, but when J—well, when I ended up moving out here, too, we fell right back into it, and it's been great having him around again." The odd look hadn't changed. "What?"

"Nothing." He looked down at his cereal. "It's just... I don't know. I thought you didn't believe in boyfriends."

"Oh." Alex paused, staring across the kitchen to a blank wall. "Well, that's... more of a recent development." He looked back, and Chris was looking at him now. Alex held his gaze. He opened his mouth, not sure what to say next. Could he tell Chris about John? About the three months he'd spent on friends' couches because he couldn't bear going back there? About the pay cut he took to take the job in California, about how desperate he was to get away from John and Boston and everything associated with it? He closed his mouth again, looking away.

"Sorry," Chris said softly. "I didn't mean to pry."

Alex looked back into those blue eyes and suddenly wanted to tell him everything. But he stood up instead, turning his back to Chris and pulling a couple of water bottles out of the fridge. "You want ice?" he asked, careful to keep his voice even.

"Actually, I better go." Alex turned around, wondering if he'd ruined something, but Chris really was looking at his watch. He shoveled two quick spoonfuls of cereal into his mouth as he stood up, and Alex laughed when a few O's spilled out of his mouth and landed on the table.

"Whngt?" Chris asked, indignant, grinning, and Alex laughed again. He waited for Chris to swallow, then placed both hands on his cheeks and kissed his lips. The kiss lingered, sweet, tender, slightly Cheerio-flavored, and when they pulled back, they were both smiling.

"Have a good day," Alex said.

"You too," Chris replied. He stayed where he was for a moment longer, then grabbed a handful of Cheerios out of the bowl and headed out the door munching. Alex watched him every step of the way.

CHRIS was still smiling when he pushed open his front door with his shoulder, wiping his now-empty hand on his shirt and swallowing the last of the cereal in his mouth. His lips were tingling from that kiss, his whole body relaxed and energized all at the same time, and he couldn't keep from grinning.

Until, that is, he saw his mother.

"Chris," she said, the word an exhalation, hanging up the phone that was in her hand. "It's eleven o'clock in the morning. Where the hell have

you been?”

Chris’s smile dissolved as he turned away, dropping his keys on the table by the door. “I told you I was going out,” he said, still facing away.

“Yes, you did. At six o’clock last night, you told me you were going out. That was seventeen hours ago, Chris. *Where the hell have you been?*”

“God, Mom, calm down. I’m not a little kid. Since when do I have a curfew?”

“Goddamn it, Chris, look at me!” She slapped her hand on the kitchen table, and Chris jumped. He turned around. So much for his perfect morning. “This is not about a curfew. This is about human decency. This is about acting responsibly. This is about you knowing that I’m not going to know where you are, knowing that I’m worrying about you, and choosing not to call and just let me know that you’re alive.”

“I’m alive.” She glared, and Chris looked down at his feet. “Okay, I’m sorry, okay? I should have called.”

She was quiet for a moment. “Where were you?” she said at last.

“I was... I was with someone.”

Another pause. “Not with Seth. I heard you two fighting last—”

“Not with Seth.” She paused again. “Look, Mom, I’ve really got to get going, I’m gonna be late for wor—”

“Are you seeing someone else?” He looked up at her. She looked so sad. “Honey, please. Let me in. I just want to know what’s happening with you.”

Shit. Okay. He could talk about this. Could he talk about this? With her? He took a deep breath. “I’m... yeah. I guess I am. I mean, I don’t know if it’s... if he’s....” He swallowed. “I don’t know.”

“Honey, if you ever want to talk—”

Suddenly, Chris’s watch alarm beeped, and he jumped. “Shit. Sorry, sorry, Mom, didn’t mean to curse, it’s just, I’m gonna be late, I’ve got to go.”

She nodded, resigned. “Go,” she said.

Chris hesitated, then hurried to his room and grabbed his pool bag.

On his way back through, he stopped by the kitchen and kissed her cheek.

“Love you,” he said, as he rushed toward the front door.

“Love you too,” she said, just before the door closed behind him.

SETH stood by the car, smoothing his palms down the front of his jeans.

He was *not* nervous. There was no reason to be. He was in his lucky Tshirt, the shirt that he knew made him look hot and funny *and* cool, and which no girl had turned down yet. He had had to come to Chris’s turf, which wouldn’t have been his preference, but Chris still wasn’t answering his calls, so he didn’t have much choice. Still, he knew he could do this.

Seth Klein, motherfucker. Sliding one hand casually into his pocket, he pushed the gate open with the other and walked out to the pool.

The lifeguard chair was occupied by some skinny guy with a ponytail, so he turned around, scanning the area for Chris’s blond head.

All he saw were families, hairy men with fat wives and tons of kids

everywhere, no lifeguards, no Chris. But then he remembered the office, and he walked back that way. And there he was.

Seth walked to the half door, leaning over the counter, watching.

Chris had his back to him, sorting through papers in a filing cabinet, and he decided to wait it out. Eventually, Chris turned around, and he almost dropped his papers. Seth grinned. *Advantage Klein.*

“What the fuck are you doing here?” Chris asked, his voice low, setting the papers down on the shelf next to him. Seth’s grin faded some.

“I just want to talk. Can we? Can we just talk?”

“I’m working.” He stood still, his face unreadable behind those damned sunglasses.

“I—I know. Can’t you take a break? Just for a minute?”

Chris folded his arms in front of his chest, not stepping forward, just staring at him. “What do you want?”

Seth exhaled. “Damn it, Chris...” Suddenly, the pile of papers began to topple over, and Chris turned quickly to catch it. When he did, Seth’s eyes zeroed in on the mark on his neck. “Is that a hickey?” The words came out quickly, before he could stop them, and much higherpitched than he would have liked. *Shit. This is not going well.*

The sunglasses didn’t do much to hide the glare as Chris turned back to face him. “So what if it is?”

“I knew it. It’s that neighbor guy, right? The one with the shitty old Pontiac?”

Chris was clenching his jaw now. “What the hell do you care?”

“Chris,” he began, but Chris just turned away. “*Damn it!*” he yelled, pounding his fist on the counter, and Chris jumped. “Shit. I’m sorry. I know. I have no right to—it’s just—fuck, Chris, this isn’t going how I planned it.”

“How disappointing for you.”

“Chris—”

“Seth, for fuck’s sake, what do you want from me? We were friends, we fooled around, I wanted more, you did too. Or I thought you did. You knew *I* did. But you went and fucked some girl anyway, lied to me to get me out of your hair for the night and then picked up some chick and fucked her, when I was throwing myself at you, fucking *throwing* myself at you to get you to f—” He stopped short, looking away, biting his lip again. “Fuck it,” he whispered. “It doesn’t matter now. Go fuck whoever you want to fuck.”

“I want to fuck you.” The words were barely louder than a whisper.

But Chris heard. They stared at each other for a moment. And then the whistle blew.

“I have to work now,” Chris said, pushing open the half door and heading toward the chair. Seth grabbed his arm, and Chris froze.

“Chris, please,” he said.

“Go home, Seth,” he said, and he tugged his arm away.

Seth stared at him for a minute, watching him walk away, nod at

ponytail guy, climb up to the chair. As he stood watching, something occurred to him. "He didn't say no," he whispered. As he turned to walk back to his car, he began to smile.

CHAPTER NINE

ALEX buzzed around his small house with a grin on his face, humming one old eighties song after another under his breath. It wasn't until he started stripping the bed that he realized what the tunes all had in common; they were all from *Pump Up the Volume*, one of his favorite old movies and yet another Christian Slater classic. He stopped what he was doing to laugh out loud, rolling his eyes at himself before bending to gather up the sheets and toss them into the hamper. Alex usually hated doing laundry, but when the cause was repeated and enthusiastic sex with a guest he hoped to entice back into his bed in five or six hours' time, he could learn to like it.

He was still chuckling when the phone rang, but he grabbed it anyway, glancing quickly at the incoming number before slapping it to his ear. "Hey, Marty." He grinned.

"Well! He's alive!"

"What?"

"You never showed up last night. What happened to you?"

Alex furrowed his brow, tucking the phone between his ear and his shoulder as he lugged the laundry basket to the washer. "What are you talking about? I told you I was staying in."

"Yeah, but you always say that, and then you always show up. So much cruising, so little time."

"Yeah, well. I meant it this time." He was still smiling as he opened the lid of the washing machine and tossed the contents of the basket inside. Marty paused.

"You little shit," he said at last. "You did it."

"Did what?" Alex said, all innocence.

"Your neighbor boy! The nineteen-year-old! You slept with him, didn't you?"

The grin hadn't gone away. "I don't know what you're talking about."

"You *did*! Ha, I knew it! Oh man, I knew I was right about that kid."

"He's not a kid."

"Certainly not anymore."

"Fuck you."

"No thanks. So tell me everything. Details, my boy, details."

Alex shifted the phone to his other ear. "What do you want to know?"

"Everything! Moans, groans, flexibility, receptiveness to new ideas."

Alex paused, frowning a little.

“Alex?”

“I don’t...” He ran his hand through his hair. “Shit.”

“HA! Ha ha ha!” He wasn’t laughing, just shouting the syllables triumphantly. Alex rolled his eyes.

“Are you having some sort of attack? Do you need a moment alone?”

“I *told* you. I *knew* the love-’em-and-leave-’em thing wouldn’t last forever.”

“Marty, what the fuck are you—”

“This wasn’t just sex. It wasn’t another one-night stand. It’s more than that. You feel something for this kid. If you didn’t, you’d be more than willing to spill.”

“He’s not a k—”

“Kid, guy, man, whatever. You’ve already broken the never-twicewith-the-same-guy rule, haven’t you?”

“You know, you can be seriously annoying sometimes.”

“Quit trying to change the subject. How many times has it been so far?”

Alex crossed his arms in front of his chest, the phone tucked securely under his ear. “Two. Big deal. Thursday night, and then last night. Well, maybe three. Does this morning count as a separate time?”

“He *slept over*?”

Alex pulled the phone away from his ear slightly, wincing. “Jesus, Marty, I’d like to be able to hear tomorrow.”

“Sorry. Sorry. Just, wow. Alex has a boyfriend!”

“Hey, I didn’t say—”

“Oh, whatever, you know it’ll happen. *I* know it’ll happen, at least, and I’m never wrong.”

“Marty—”

“Okay, enough of that. So I was calling to see if you wanted to come out with us tonight, but I’m guessing you and whatshisname have plans? What is his name, anyway?”

“It’s Chris. And...” And the truth was, they hadn’t made any plans.

Yet. But Alex was pretty sure that if he was home when Chris got off work, Chris would find his way across the street. And he wasn’t about to give *that* up. “And I’ll pass on tonight, thanks.”

“Yup. Have fun on your date.”

“It’s not a—”

“Okay, call me later! Bye.”

“Bye.”

He hung up the phone, staring down at the washer, a little smile still playing across his face. Turning around slowly, he saw the half-empty box of Cheerios still sitting on the kitchen table and remembered what was next on his list. “Groceries,” he muttered, heading toward the door. Maybe he’d cook Chris a real dinner tonight. Not that that would make it a date. Okay, maybe it would. Maybe.

And maybe that wouldn't be so bad.

SETH pressed his foot to the clutch, easing the car into fifth gear with a practiced hand on the gearshift as he rested his other wrist on the top of the steering wheel. He loved driving, always had. And he loved his car, a 1972 cherry-red Mustang convertible with a V-8 and whitewalls and the coolest racing stripe he'd ever seen. It was the one thing he missed more than anything when he flew off to Maine, so far away from home, much too far to drive. Much as it embarrassed him to admit it, he had actually considered coming to visit at Christmas just so he could drive his car. But then his parents were fighting again, and a bunch of his college friends were taking a ski trip to Quebec over the semester break, so he went with the fun and figured the rest could wait.

But now he was back, back to avoiding his parents and driving his car and tackling this Chris situation like it was another problem set from one of his marketing classes. There had to be a logical solution. A way to talk his way back in, identify the obstacles and eliminate them, find a way to bring Chris to his side. He just hadn't quite figured out how to do it yet. Seth exhaled as he turned onto a side street, caressing the gearshift again as he slowed down. He was just driving, no particular destination in mind, just enjoying the rumble of the engine and the smoothness of the ride and the smell of sun-baked leather seats. But suddenly, he realized that he had been driving with a purpose after all, without even realizing it. He was pulling up in front of Chris's house, staring at his front door. "What are you doing here?" he muttered, surprising himself when he said the words out loud. Chris was still at work. And even if he had been home, he'd made it clear that he didn't want to see Seth right now, and Seth needed to be careful not to oversell this. He was sitting in the car, still staring at the house, turning the problem over in his mind, when suddenly a flash of movement caught his eye and he turned his head to see the jackass neighbor walking out of the house next door. Grinning to himself like a fucking idiot. And his lips were moving. Was he *singing*? Seth pressed his lips into a thin line, his eyes narrowing, watching as Dorkball climbed into his piece-of-shit Pontiac and pulled out of the driveway. Without even thinking about what he was doing, Seth shifted into gear and quietly followed.

ALEX zipped into the parking spot, the last chords of "Talk Hard" fading from his mind as he turned off the engine and stepped out of the car. He was so caught up in his thoughts that he'd made it halfway across the grocery store parking lot before he saw who was waiting for him at the front door.

It had only been a week since the last time Alex had seen him, and given everything he'd heard about the kid in that span of time, it seemed like less than that. Curly. Seth. Staring him down, his arms crossed over his chest, jaw jutting out, a face so full of attitude and ludicrous badassery that Alex might have found it comical if the guy hadn't hurt Chris the way he had. But there was nothing funny about that.

Alex didn't break his stride when he saw him. He just walked up to the kid, eyes calm, and stopped in front of him. "Hello, Seth," he said. Seth's eyes widened a little. "You know my name," he said. The voice was gruff, as if he was trying to be tough. Alex restrained himself from rolling his eyes.

"What do you want?"

"What—you—"

Alex stared at him, still calm. "You followed me here. What do you want?"

"How do you know I—"

"Seth."

"Quit calling me that. You don't know me."

"I know enough."

Seth gritted his teeth. "You don't know *shit*," he hissed.

Alex sighed. "Well, this was fun. But if we're done with the Costa Mesa High School production of *West Side Story*, I'm going to—"

"Shut up." Alex had moved to walk in the door, but Seth grabbed his arm. Alex shook it free immediately.

"Don't you ever do that again," he said, his voice low, his don'tfuck-with-me eyes in full effect.

"Who do you think you're kidding?" Seth was sneering now. But he didn't make a move for Alex's arm again. He stared for a moment before he spoke again. "You should leave Chris alone."

"Are you kidding me with this?"

"No." Seth was attempting his own version of the don't-fuck-withme-eyes, and Alex was tempted to punch him in the face just to teach him a lesson about being a copycat. But he held back.

"Chris is a big boy. He makes his own choices."

"But you are fucking him, aren't you?"

"That's none of your goddamned business, *Seth*." The kid's nostrils flared, the name obviously riling him, which had been the point of using it again. *But what does he want me to call him, Mr. Klein?* "You want answers, I suggest you talk to Chris. And if he won't talk to you, I suggest you go fuck yourself." The nostrils flared again, and Alex watched as the hands tightened into fists. Alex took a step forward. *Try it.*

Seth was seething now. "You're pathetic, you know that? You're hard up for dick, so you just grab the one next door. Never mind that he's half your age." *What does he think I am, forty?* "Never mind that you hardly even know him. Never mind that he's just using you to get back at me. He doesn't give a shit about you, don't you know that? He's been fucking pining for me since last summer. He told me so. And now, he's pissed at me, so he's letting you fuck him just to make me jealous." He paused. "You don't think he actually wants *you*, do you?"

Alex stood his ground. He would not flinch for this pissant rich kid, no matter how right he suspected he might be. "This little play has stopped being fun for me. I'm going to go into the store now, and you're going to

get the fuck out of my face.”

“Fucking *pathetic*.”

“Goodbye, Seth.” He turned to walk away, and Seth moved to grab his arm again. But Alex fixed him with his best Dirty Harry stare, and the hand stayed where it was. With no more words, Alex walked into the store. He tried to brush off the confrontation as he shook a grocery cart loose from the lineup and pushed it toward the dairy aisle, and he was more or less successful. But the humming was done for the day.

IT WAS the longest dinner Chris had ever been through. If it had been up to him, he would have gone straight to Alex’s house as soon as he left the pool, but his mom called him in the car and told him she was making her special ratatouille, and he knew he couldn’t get out of that. And then Alex had been mowing his lawn when Chris got home, shirtless, sweaty, and Chris wanted to lick the beads of sweat right off his skin. And from the way Alex was looking back at him, Chris had a feeling Alex would have been happy to return the favor. But then his mom came out with her oven mitts still on, and all Chris could manage was an *I’m sorry* face, and a whispered “Later?” Alex nodded, and Chris grinned, and they lingered for as long as they could before Chris had to turn and follow his Mom inside. And now, two hours later, they had finally finished eating, and Chris had done the dishes, just like he’d been asked. He had showered and changed and kissed his mom’s cheek, and he was finally standing on Alex’s porch, finally knocking on the door, finally stepping inside. Alex was there to greet him, looking so good, God, better than it should be permissible to look in a white T-shirt and jeans. But his arms were bare and strong, and his eyes were dark and sexy, and the jeans hung low on his hips in a mouthwatering sort of way. As the door closed behind them, Alex opened his mouth to speak, but Chris just grabbed him by the belt buckle, pulling him off balance and much, much closer to Chris. Alex laughed a little, surprised, but Chris crushed their mouths together, bringing his other hand to the back of Alex’s head to hold him close. Alex kissed back, quickly taking control, pressing Chris’s back flat against the door, and now there was no part of his body that wasn’t touching Chris’s. Alex kissed him harder, pressing against him, reaching one hand under to grab at his ass, and Chris moaned into the kiss, so hard already, fuck, so hard *all the time* for this man. The tongue delved deeper, a little low approving grumble coming from Alex’s throat as they devoured each other, not an inch of air between them, still pressed hard against the door. Alex’s hand moved to Chris’s fly, somehow managing to unbutton and unzip while keeping up the slow, sweet grind of hips against hips, hard against hard. Chris’s jeans fell to his ankles, and Alex’s hand dipped into his boxers, seizing him firmly, and Chris finally broke the kiss, gasping. “Fuck,” he panted. Alex’s mouth was fastened to his neck, sucking a hickey into the flesh to match the one on the other side, and his left hand snaked up under Chris’s shirt as the right began a steady stroke on Chris’s dick. “Mnngh,” Chris managed, clutching desperately at Alex’s

back. Alex's left hand palmed his skin, groping his stomach, pinching his nipple, and Chris moaned again.

Chris tugged at Alex's shirt, and Alex removed his hands just long enough to allow Chris to pull it over his head. Then Alex was grabbing at Chris's shirt, stripping him quickly, and they came together to kiss again, wrapping their arms around each other's naked torsos, mouths and lips and tongues dancing passionately. They somehow fell to their knees, still kissing, and then Chris was pushing Alex onto his back on the floor, lying on top of him, and Alex's hands were everywhere, *everywhere*. Chris fumbled with Alex's belt buckle, his hands somehow larger than usual, clumsier, but he finally got it open and pushed the jeans and underwear off his hips. Alex had tossed Chris's boxers across the room by now, and they rolled over together, Chris using his feet to push Alex's remaining clothing down off his legs as the kiss continued, strong, hot, neverending. Hopefully.

But it was Alex who broke the kiss this time, looking down at their cocks, breathing heavy. He wrapped a strong hand around both and stroked them together, and Chris groaned loud, and Alex kissed him again. But then he stopped, hovering over him, moving his hand so slow. "What do you want?" he asked, his voice rough and low and so fucking sexy Chris almost lost it right there.

Chris clutched Alex's arms, swallowed, and fought to maintain control. "Want you," he said, when he could manage words. "In me." Alex made a delicious little sound and kissed him again, kissed him hard, squeezing their dicks together. But then the hand disappeared, moving to Chris's waist, rolling him onto his stomach. And now both hands were on Chris's hips, tugging back gently, and Chris quickly got the idea and rose up on his elbows and knees. The hands gripped firmly, holding him in place, and then warm wetness was covering his crack and Chris dropped his head forward, biting his own forearm as his entire body reacted to Alex's tongue. The tongue that was all the way inside him now, then pulling out just as quickly. He lapped over the opening and then pushed in again, and Chris bit down harder. "Ahhhhnnngh," he groaned, but two wet fingers were swirling inside now, and Alex was kissing him all over, biting the flesh, driving those fingers forward. "Please," Chris begged, craning his head around. "Alex... not gonna make it..."

Alex flashed a grin at him, his eyes dark with excitement, but then his gaze shifted away, and Chris saw he was staring at his pants, which had landed near Chris's head. Chris grabbed them and pulled a condom out of his pocket, tearing into it with trembling hands as he reluctantly pulled away from Alex's fingers and turned around. Alex's cock was so hard it was pressed flat against his stomach, and a few drops of precome were already leaking out, drops that Chris absolutely needed to have in his mouth. So when Alex reached for the condom, he pushed the hands away wordlessly and sank his head over the shaft, swirling his tongue around the crown, sucking the bitter drops down. "Nghfuck," Alex said, or

something along those lines, and Chris placed a hand on his waist, feeling every muscle tense from the effort to hold back. He wanted more, wanted to suck him dry, but he wanted Alex inside him even more than that. So he looked up, locking eyes with Alex as he slowly pulled his mouth upwards, dragging the tight seal of his lips all the way up the shaft until it finally popped free, and Alex made that noise again. Without breaking eye contact, Chris covered his palm in saliva, then brought the ring of latex to the tip of Alex's cock and rolled it down, slicking his palm over it as he went. When it was all the way on, Alex grabbed him and pulled him up into his arms, kissing him hungrily as they kneeled together on the floor. Chris closed his eyes and melted into it, pressing closer, feeling Alex's hand squeezing his ass, rubbing their cocks together again.

And just when it became almost too much to take, Alex changed everything again. Suddenly, those firm hands were spinning him around again, one on his hip, one between his shoulder blades, bending him down until his cheek hit the carpet, and Chris thought his heart might actually pound right out of his chest from the excitement. The hand left his back as quickly as it had landed there, and then that thick hardness was pressing inside, filling him up, and Chris closed his eyes as his mouth fell open. When he was all the way in, Alex leaned forward, pressing his chest against Chris's back, reaching a hand around to hold tight to Chris's cock. But he didn't move.

"Alex," Chris whimpered, trying to push his hips back, to get that good rhythm going. But Alex's hand stayed tight on his hip, holding him in place. He bit down on a sensitive spot behind Chris's ear, and Chris whimpered again.

"You want this?" Alex asked, his voice uneven. He pushed forward just slightly, not enough, not enough. Chris squinted his eyes tight, not sure if he could take much more teasing.

"Yes," he panted. "Please."

"Tell me." He was moving so slowly, so very slowly. Chris grasped at the carpet, licking his lips.

"Want it," he said, having trouble with challenging tasks like sentence construction. "Ngh. Alex... please... God, Alex, fuck... want it, *please...*"

And suddenly, there was no more teasing. Chris was being fucked, one powerful thrust after another, the hand on his dick moving fast to match the rhythm inside him. Chris opened his mouth wider, moaning, clutching at the carpet with both hands. After a few seconds, he became aware that Alex was talking to him, whispering hot words directly into his ear.

"Fuck, so good, so hot, God, that's it, move for me, fuck back against me, let me hear you moan." Chris did, he moaned, loud, his hips moving of their own accord now, the sound of flesh slapping against flesh loud in the room. "Ah, yeah, that's good, fuck, Chris, you want it like that, you like it like that, don't you?"

“Fuck, yes,” Chris gasped, his head swimming, his world spiraling into a tight focus on the hand moving rapidly on his dick, the perfect pounding deep inside him.

“Say it. Talk to me.” Alex’s words were closer to grunts now, his breathing ragged, his rhythm not missing a beat.

“I like it... guh... like that. Oh, fuck. Alex... fuck me, God, so hard...”

“Yeah,” Alex panted, his fingers tight on Chris’s hip. “You want to come? Want to come for me?” Chris nodded, helplessly, his forehead against the carpet, his hips still driving backward as Alex’s cock slammed into that perfect spot again and again and again. “Do it. Do it. Come now. Fuck, now, Chris, right now...” And if there were any more words after that, Chris didn’t hear them, as every drop of energy in his body tensed up and surged out his dick, waves of pleasure pulsing through him as he shouted something incoherent, his ecstasy so complete he almost didn’t feel Alex thrust deep and groan into his shoulder as he toppled over the brink with him.

Some time later, Chris opened his eyes to discover he was flat on his stomach, Alex’s body draped heavily over him, his cock still buried inside. He smiled and turned his head, and Alex lifted up slightly and moved to pull out. But Chris reached behind him, grabbing at Alex’s lower back, keeping him where he was. “Wait,” he said, his breathing still heavy. “Can you... can you just stay there for a minute?”

Alex kissed his shoulder, then moved a hand to his hip to roll them both carefully onto their sides, spooning behind him, his cock staying where it was. “How’s that?” he whispered, sliding an arm around Chris’s waist.

“Perfect,” Chris breathed, covering the arm with his own and snuggling in. And it was.

LATER, when they’d cleaned up and kissed some more and found their way to the bedroom, Alex held Chris in his arms, kissing his lips, tracing every inch of naked skin with his fingertips. Chris purred at the touch, breaking the kiss to smile at his lover, and Alex pushed a few errant strands of blond hair out of his face and smiled back. He couldn’t help himself. He never could when Chris was around.

This was a dangerous line of thought, so he forced himself to look away, dropping his head back on the pillow. “So how was work?” he said, his hand landing on Chris’s sheet-covered hip. Chris laid his head on Alex’s chest and sighed.

“Oh, fine,” he said. “Not... well, fine.” His fingers were tracing a pattern idly around Alex’s nipple. “How was your day? Anything exciting happen?”

“Actually, something kind of did. I just didn’t have a chance to bring it up before now.”

Chris lifted his head. “Why?” he asked teasingly. “Was something distracting you?” He pinched the nipple to punctuate the sentence, and

Alex swatted his hand.

“Shmuck.” Chris laughed, and Alex covered his hand with his own, gazing at him seriously. “Seth came to see me.”

The amusement faded quickly from Chris’s eyes. “Seth? My Seth? I mean... well, you know what I mean.”

“Yeah.” Alex cleared his throat a little, choosing to ignore the unfortunate pronoun for the time being. “He ambushed me at the grocery store. I think he followed me there.”

Chris’s eyes were as big as saucers now. “You’re kidding.”

“Nope.”

“Well, what... what did he say? What did he want?”

“He told me to stay away from you.”

If possible, Chris’s eyes got even bigger. “You’re *kidding* me.” Alex shook his head. “He.... Are you sure? I mean, are you sure that’s what he—”

“Oh, I’m sure. He was pretty clear about it. Practically challenged me to a duel in the fucking Vons parking lot. It was getting a little ridiculous, so I just blew him off and went inside.”

Chris just stared at him. “Huh.” Now Chris was staring past him, not talking, and Alex didn’t know what that meant. So he said nothing, and eventually Chris just lowered his head back down to Alex’s chest, his eyes still open, his body tense.

They lay quietly together, bodies still connected. But something had shifted. And for the first time in a long time, Alex didn’t know what to say.

CHAPTER TEN

THREE days later, Alex still hadn’t figured it out. As he drove home from work on a Tuesday evening, his thoughts were filled with Chris, as they seemed to be pretty much all the time these days. And they hadn’t really talked about Seth, hadn’t even mentioned him since that weird conversation. Not that that had been a problem. They never seemed to have much trouble finding other things to do.

Alex smiled a little as he turned the wheel, reflecting on all the antics they’d gotten up to in the last few days. Chris had come over every night, always with that gleam in his eye, always beautiful and shy and completely fucking irresistible. Not that Alex was exactly trying to resist. He’d fucked Chris in every position he knew, standing up, sitting down, bending over, on his back with his legs wrapped tight around Alex’s waist. And every time he looked at Chris, he just wanted to do it again. It was like some kind of addiction, intense and hot and *God*, the best sex Alex had ever had. Chris was a quick learner, and he sure seemed to love what Alex wanted to teach him.

And it wasn't just about the sex, either. Sometimes, afterwards, they'd lie in bed together for hours, kissing, talking. Chris made him smile, made him laugh. They talked about everything—life, work, school. Well, almost everything. A few topics seemed to still be off limits. Like Seth. And John. And a definition of exactly what they were doing. Alex couldn't kid himself that it was just sex anymore, but he had no idea what it was instead. A couple of times, he'd gotten way too close to saying something he knew he'd regret later, like *Seth doesn't deserve you*. Or *be with me instead*. Or *stay here, stay right here, don't go back to your mom's tonight, don't go back ever*. But there was nothing to be gained by saying any of that, and way the hell too much to be lost. So he kept his mouth shut. When the urge to talk hit, he'd just kiss Chris instead, and that would usually lead to another round of hot-steamy-Jesus-never-been-sogood sex, and there was definitely nothing wrong with *that*.

A familiar tinny ring shook him out of his thoughts, and he glanced down at his phone, smiling when he saw Chris's name pop up on the screen. Pulling the phone free from his belt with a quick tug, he pressed the green button and slid it to his ear. "Hey," he said, hearing his smile as much as feeling it. "Why aren't you at work?"

"Got off early. I thought about heading over to your house, but wasn't sure if you'd be home yet, so—"

"No, I'm still in the car." It was ridiculous that it made him this happy that he was Chris's first call when he had a few free hours, so he shook his head and refocused. "Why'd you get off early?"

"The pool needed emergency cleaning. It involved a kid and a very unfortunate intestinal problem. You don't want to know the details."

"I believe you," Alex said, laughing. "So, you want to hook up? I'll be home in—"

"How about we meet up somewhere out in the world? It's a really beautiful day."

Alex paused for a moment. They'd never actually spent time together anywhere other than his place, and his chest was tightening a little at the thought.

"Come on, you were the one complaining about never seeing the sunlight."

It was easiest to slip back into sex mode, so that's what he did.

"Can't help it that there are such fun things to do indoors," he said, dropping his voice an octave because he knew it drove Chris crazy. It worked. "Um." The voice was unsteady, and Alex smiled a little bigger as Chris cleared his throat. "Well, that's... uh, true...."

Alex laughed again. Somehow, nothing else gave him quite the same thrill that he got from disorienting Chris this way. He felt his chest loosening already. "The world, huh?" Something was telling him it was a bad idea to give in to this, but it actually did sound like fun. *Fuck it*. "You know the batting cages on Magnolia?"

"I can find 'em." The voice was all happy again, and Alex had to

force the stupid grin off his own face. *Ridiculous.*

"Meet you there in twenty."

"Kay. See you soon."

"Good. Bye."

"Bye."

Alex tossed the phone onto the seat next to him, sighing as he ran a hand through his hair. Out of the corner of his eye, he caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror and discovered he was grinning like an idiot again. Or maybe he'd never really stopped. He rolled his eyes at himself, but as he drove on, the smile stayed.

SETH'S feet hurt. He'd been standing all day, first at the cashier's station and then shelving books, and it had taken more than an hour to reorganize the travel section the way his boss had decided it needed to be done. Not that there was anything wrong with the way it had been already, but whatever. Mr. Mitchell was the man, and Seth was his fucking lackey, and this job sucked the big one and maybe he should just quit. Which was the line of thought he'd been going through over and over pretty much every day lately. He was bored, and frustrated, and Chris still wasn't returning his calls. And the stupid argument with that dickwad neighbor hadn't gone right at all—he'd just looked at Seth like he was some annoying insect, practically laughing at him with that stupid Boston accent, like Seth had no reason to be pissed at all when the guy was obviously fucking Chris, *obviously* fucking him, *dammit dammit dammit*. And now Seth was back at work, at his stupid fucking job with his stupid fucking boss, and his day had fucking *sucked*. And his goddamned feet hurt.

"I'm leaving." The voice was cold, short, and Seth knew who it was before he looked up. But he looked up anyway, and there she was, giving him that icy stare that she always used on him now, her arms folded across her chest.

"What?"

"I'm *leaving*," Karen said, drawing out the word as if he was an idiot. "You're locking up alone tonight. Mr. Mitchell said to tell you." She turned away, tossing all that blonde hair over her shoulder as she did. Like Seth was just going to let her walk out like that. She'd been cold to him ever since their little romp on the living room floor, or at least since the day after, when Seth told her he just wanted to be friends. Which he could understand, but fuck, there was a limit.

"Hey," he said, running after her, grabbing her arm.

"Let *go* of me," she hissed, yanking her arm free.

"It takes twice as long to lock up alone. You can't just walk out because you're pissed at me."

Her eyes narrowed. "I happen to have a date. Not everything's about you, Seth." They glared at each other for a moment before she continued. "Mr. Mitchell already told me I could leave early. Like I said. So back the hell off."

Seth opened his mouth to respond, but what was the point? Mr.

Mitchell hated him, and Karen knew how to work him, and did he really want to spend the next hour alone with Karen anyway? He closed his mouth, and looked away.

“That’s what I thought,” Karen said smugly, and she bounced toward the door. When it closed behind her, Seth kicked a stepladder in frustration, a little too hard, knocking it directly into a huge pile of books he’d just stacked.

“Fuck!” he yelled as half an hour of work toppled to the floor. It was going to be a long night.

AS IT turned out, the batting cages were really easy to find. Chris puzzled over it as he turned into the parking lot, wondering how he’d managed to miss them in the nineteen years he’d lived in this town. But then he saw Alex waiting for him, and he decided that baseball alone had simply never held enough of an attraction. Alex was leaning against his own car, arms crossed over his chest, looking impossibly good in a pair of dark dress pants paired with a T-shirt with *Costa Mesa Batting* emblazoned across the front in bright purple letters. “Nice shirt,” Chris said, grinning, as he climbed out of his car.

“Thought you’d like it. It’s a new look for me.”

The shirt was so new it still had creases along the sleeves and chest from where it had been folded. Chris smoothed one down, running a hand over a strong bicep and biting his lip to restrain himself from just tearing the shirt off altogether. When he glanced up, there was heat in those dark eyes, but then Alex turned around, pulling away from it, so Chris did too.

“Took the liberty,” Alex was saying, picking up a couple of bats from where they’d been resting on the pavement. “Hope you don’t mind.”

“Oh, sure!” Right. Batting. Alex pressed the bat into his hand and Chris studied it, chewing on his lip again. Sure, he could do this. When Alex noticed, he laughed out loud.

“Come on, I’ll show you,” he said, heading toward the cages already.

Chris let out an indignant sound as he hurried to follow. “What makes you think I need showing?”

The look Alex shot over his shoulder as he opened the door to the cages was a killer. “Wild guess,” he said, holding the door open for him.

“After you, Yastrzemski.”

Yas-who? Chris wondered. He decided to keep that thought to himself.

Alex had already bought the tokens, so he positioned Chris at the chalk outline plate and then slipped one into the coin slot, setting the machine at “slow pitch.” Chris’s pride demanded that he object to this, but the sight of the balls shooting out at rather death-defying speeds in the cages on either side of him changed his mind. So he just shut up and lifted his bat, staring down the pitching machine, searching his memory for any pointers from gym class that might help to keep him from looking like a total idiot.

Swimming had given him a fair amount of upper body strength, so at

least he had that on his side. As the first ball shot out toward him, he swung the bat around with a vengeance, concentrating on hitting the ball as hard as he possibly could. Unfortunately, he missed completely and spun himself all the way around, losing his helmet and very nearly the bat in the process.

To his credit, Alex didn't laugh very hard at all. "Nice effort," he called. "Just keep your eye on the ball."

"I was," Chris complained. He got his helmet back on and stood up, getting back into position just in time for his next swing, going for eightypercent strength this time. He still missed, but not quite as spectacularly.

Progress.

"Try spreading your hands out a little on the bat." The voice was kind, not condescending. "And keep your back elbow up."

"Okay." When the third ball came shooting out, Chris actually connected. It glanced off his bat and smacked up into the netting above him, but he had made contact, which was the point. He felt a little like jumping up and down. "I did it!"

"See? Knew you'd be a natural." Chris turned back to grin at him, and the fourth ball whizzed past him and slammed into the backstop.

"Does help to keep swinging, though."

Chris rolled his eyes and took position again, and Alex's gentle instructions continued. "Elbow up. Keep your swing level. That's it. That's it! Now try to get power from your hips instead of your arms. You want to twist into it, get it from your gut." That one, Chris couldn't quite seem to manage. So after a few more pitches, Alex just stepped into the cage with him.

Chris glanced nervously at the "One batter at a time" sign, then back at Alex. "Are we gonna get in trouble?"

"Mah middle name," Alex drawled, and Chris couldn't help but grin as those two strong arms wrapped around him from behind. And then Alex was pressing up against him, guiding his hands, so close that Chris could feel against his own back the rumble of Alex's chest as he spoke. And Chris kind of forgot about the game. Another ball whizzed past them as Alex explained his leg placement, gently moving the bat as he twisted their hips. Chris closed his eyes a little without thinking about it, just soaking in Alex's heat as he pressed against him from shin to neck and spoke into his ear in that ridiculously sexy voice.

And then he was stepping back, stepping away, and Chris just turned his head back to look at him, lowering the bat. Another ball crashed into the backstop, and Chris jumped a little, smiling sheepishly as Alex laughed at him. He lifted his bat again, but the red light over the pitch machine had gone out.

"Afraid that was it," Alex said, his hand warm on Chris's hip. "Want to try another token?"

Chris lowered his bat again, eyeing this beautiful man. There were some other things he wanted to try instead, but he didn't want to be a

quitter, either. "Sure," he said. Alex dropped in another coin, and Chris turned around, facing the red light, keeping his elbow up. A ball shot out, and he swiveled to meet it, trying to transfer weight from his back leg forward like he was pretty sure Alex had been trying to get him to do. It worked. To his own great shock, the bat slammed directly into the ball, launching it into the air in a broad arc, sending satisfying reverberations through Chris's arms as it did. He nearly dropped the bat in his surprise.

"Hey, there you go!" Alex was outside the cage again, but he sounded downright impressed. Chris beamed proudly, and when the next ball shot out, he did it again.

"It's not so hard," he said, marveling at it.

"Knew you could do it. You obviously have the strength, body like yours."

Chris swallowed and missed the next one. But he recovered and managed to hit the one after that.

"How come you never learned to do this?"

"Um, I don't know." *Smack*. He was really feeling it in his arms now. "I guess I've never really been a baseball guy. I never hung out with the jocks, and Mom hates sports, so—" *Smack*. "So I guess nobody ever got around to showing me."

"And your dad, what—" Chris turned his head, surprised. But Alex had already clamped his mouth shut. "Sorry. That's none of my business." "No, it's okay." A ball shot into the backstop, and Chris turned to face them again. "He was my mom's high school boyfriend. He left for college and never came back. It's not a big deal." He let the next ball go by without trying for it. Some of the fun had gone out of it, somehow.

"Sorry, I—my arms are kind of tired."

The red light had gone out again. And Alex was in front of him, rubbing his biceps gently with both hands. "My turn, then," he said, his voice quiet.

Chris looked at him, trying to read his face. He couldn't, really, and he wasn't quite sure what to say. So he just opened his mouth and let the truth fall out. "That feels good." Alex smiled, and Chris smiled too. And then Alex moved forward just an inch more, touching their lips softly, snaking in just a hint of tongue. Chris hummed happily and returned it, lifting a hand to pull Alex a little closer, but Alex was pulling away before he got the chance. Chris was outside the little cage before he even realized Alex was guiding him out of it, and then the metal door clanged shut, and Chris slipped his fingers into the iron and watched as Alex got himself set. It was a beautiful thing to watch. The new T-shirt was thin, and Alex's muscles stood out strongly underneath it, rippling and flexing with each powerful swing. Alex had set the machine at the highest speed, and he was hitting every single one, crashing them into the netting at the far end of the enclosure with such strength that Chris was a little surprised they didn't tear a hole. After the fourth one, Chris realized Alex was even

playing with it, intentionally sending the balls in slightly different directions each time just to challenge himself.

"You're good," he said.

Alex smacked into another one with a satisfying *crack* before he replied. "Don't sound so surprised." He was smiling, though. Chris knew him well enough by now to be able to hear it without seeing his face.

"I'm not." He lowered his head a little, resting his chin on the back of his hand as he curled his fingers around the metal weave. "I'm just—wow." A particularly big one hit the "home run zone" chalked into the netting. "I mean, you're *really* good."

"You grow up in Boston, it's—*unngh!*—kind of hard to avoid it."

The sounds Alex was making were not totally unlike his sex sounds.

It would be wildly inappropriate to pop wood in a batting cage, though, so Chris did his best to ignore them. "What, like little league?"

With a mighty whack, Alex finished off the last of his balls and turned, pulling out a fresh token from his pocket and rolling it in his fingers as he contemplated Chris. "Yeah, that too. But in my neighborhood, there was pretty much always a game going as long as the sun was shining." He tossed the coin in the air, then caught it easily.

"We'd take over a park—twenty, thirty kids at once—and just mark off the bases with a stick, or somebody's shirt, or whatever was handy."

"Sounds like fun."

"It was. Yeah." He hesitated another moment, then dropped the coin into the slot and took position again, wagging his bat in the air.

"Everybody knew each other. Felt like a small town sometimes. We knew whose—*nngh!*—whose mother would let us come over for sandwiches after the game, and who had an annoying kid sister who always wanted to play."

Chris smiled. "No girls allowed, huh?"

"Hell no. *Hnngh!* Never had much use for 'em."

"So you never...."

He took a quieter swing, letting the question hang there. After a second crack of the bat, he answered. "Dated a couple in high school. Never really worked. And me and Danny Ciccone had been fooling around in his parents' basement since the seventh grade, so, y'know. *Nngh.* Wasn't much of a mystery."

The balls stopped, and he turned, something new on his face. Chris just watched him, waiting. He tried not to speak. Didn't want to ruin it.

"Sorry," Alex said suddenly, following it with a short laugh. "Don't know when this turned into the life and times of Alex D'Amico. I must be boring the hell out of you."

"No." He didn't bother to joke around. He just opened the gate and stepped in, walking slowly to Alex and taking his hand. Alex jumped a little when he did, looking down as Chris rubbed it gently with his thumb.

"Was Danny as good as you?" Alex gave him a look, and now Chris did laugh. "At baseball! God."

The smile spread slowly, perfectly. "Taught me everything I know." God, he was beautiful. Chris leaned in and kissed him, one hand firm on the back of Alex's neck as they moved their lips together. Distantly, he heard the bat clatter to the ground as Alex's arms found their way around him, holding him close. "Well," Chris said when the kiss finally broke, a little out of breath now. "Lucky me."

Alex just grinned and kissed him again, harder this time, and Chris's body apparently didn't care about inappropriate, wildly or no. The hands were still on his back when Chris came up for air, licking his lips, breathing a little heavy. "Can we get out of here?"

The grin turned up a few degrees. "You read my mind." Alex's body had started to get inappropriate too, and Chris was very, very glad.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

THEY'D hardly made it into Alex's house before they were on each other, kissing, groping, stumbling toward the bedroom. As they fell onto the bed together, Alex ground into his lover, rubbing their erections together through the fabric that separated them. He had Chris on his back, and he kept him there as he moved his kisses to Chris's ear. "You look really good in this shirt," he murmured, running his hands down Chris's chest. "Take it off," Chris whispered, and Alex quickly complied. Chris's hands were already attacking Alex's buttons, and he'd gotten much better at this part, much more adept at slipping buttons through holes and pulling a tie off his neck without choking him. They came together to kiss again when they were shirtless, hands busy on each other's belts now, and Alex's hips kept pushing forward, grinding them together, making Chris moan. In no time at all, they were naked, and Chris surprised him, rolling Alex onto his back, teasingly trapping Alex's wrists above his head. Chris grinned triumphantly at him, looking as if he had sort of surprised himself with the move. But his eyes were still dark with lust, and he was still breathing hard, and something about the strength of those arms pinning him down suddenly made Alex crave something that he hadn't craved in a very long time.

He licked his lips. "Want to try something new?" he asked, his voice still low, and Chris licked his lips too, nodding. Alex shook one arm free and grabbed the tube of lube off the bedside table, handing it to Chris. Chris looked at it and then at him, confused, so Alex brought Chris's hand down beneath him, making it clear with his eyes what he was asking. Chris's jaw dropped open, and Alex knew the message had gotten through.

Bottoming had always been just an occasional thing for Alex, a once-in-a-while indulgence. Most of the time, he much preferred being in control, sliding inside a tight ass, making a beautiful man dissolve into

moans with some confidence and a very hard cock. But every once in a while, he got an urge for this, that filled-up feeling, that pressure that builds and builds until it explodes through your dick and all through your body. He wanted it now, wanted Chris inside him, wanted to watch his face as he experienced the unbelievable feeling of being inside someone, thrusting deep, making them come.

Chris was staring at him, his mouth still open. "You mean... you want..." His voice was hoarse, his cock so hard, and Alex grabbed him with his free hand and pulled him down into a deep kiss. Chris returned it intensely, and the position of his body got a bit awkward as he used both hands to snap open the bottle and cover his fingers in lube. Alex bent his legs, his feet flat on the bed, Chris lying between them, the kiss still hot and perfect. And then there was a wet finger at his hole, but not pushing inside. Just stopping there. Alex broke the kiss.

"I just..." Chris whispered. "I don't... I don't know how..." Alex nodded, bringing one hand down to seize Chris's. Keeping the other hand tight on the back of Chris's neck, he slowly eased Chris's finger inside, guiding his hand, angling it just right until... yes. Alex closed his eyes, his mouth opening.

"Fuck," Chris whispered, and Alex opened his eyes to see Chris gazing intensely at him, as if Alex was the sexiest thing he'd ever seen. That look was a little too much for Alex, a little too intimate, so he just kissed him briefly and then pushed at Chris's hand, starting a slow in-and-out rhythm. Chris quickly got the idea and took over, pushing a little harder, and Alex dropped his head back onto the pillow. Fuck, that felt good.

"Mmm," he grunted, moving his hips. The finger kept up its rhythm, pressing that perfect spot over and over again, and Alex closed his eyes, losing himself in it.

"Fuck, Alex." Chris was kissing his face now, his neck. Alex tilted his head back, his hands moving to Chris's hips. "So tight.... God, so hot..."

"Another," Alex muttered, and he felt Chris nodding against his skin. A second finger pushed in, a little too fast, and Alex had to grab at Chris's hand, slowing him. "Just... easy," he said, his eyes still closed. He licked his lips, bringing the fingers slowly a little deeper, adjusting the angle.

"Right... *there*," he said, finding his spot, and Chris nodded again. Alex took his hand away as Chris took over the rhythm again, and *fuck, yeah, God, right there*. He moved his hips a little faster, urging Chris on, and Chris took the hint and pushed in harder. His lips were everywhere now, all over Alex's skin, those fingers still driving into that perfect spot, and Alex was clutching Chris very tight now, so tight there might be bruises later. But Chris didn't seem to be complaining. A third finger tickled the opening now, questioning, asking for permission, and Alex nodded, his eyes still screwed shut. When it eased in, he screwed them a little tighter, pressing his lips together into a thin line, curling his toes as he tried to

relax into this, to push past the pain. And it worked, eventually. The fingers were pressing in just right now, just where they needed to be, and *fuck* that was so good.

Chris was panting over him, making the most delicious sounds, as if his fingers were enjoying this as much as Alex's ass was. Alex opened his eyes, and the passion on that face just did him in. He kissed Chris, hotly, and broke it only long enough to grab a condom and tear it open with his teeth. Chris froze, just watching as Alex slid the condom onto Chris's dick and then coated it with lube. When he was done, Chris pulled out his fingers and positioned himself over Alex, and suddenly Alex wasn't sure which of them was more nervous. He brought his legs up along Chris's sides, reaching down to help guide Chris's dick to his hole. But before he pressed in, Alex spoke again. "Just, um..." he said, and he cleared his throat. "Just go slow, okay? It's, uh... it's been a while." Chris nodded frantically, and he leaned down to kiss Alex one more time. Without breaking the kiss, Alex eased the tip of Chris's cock into him, and Chris groaned as he pushed forward.

Big. God. Alex broke the kiss, burying his face in Chris's shoulder, his hands on Chris's hips as that cock slowly filled him up. "Hngh," he grunted, every muscle in his body tight. This hurt more than he remembered. But he wanted, no, he *needed* that cock all the way inside now, and he kept tugging on Chris's hips, biting down on the flesh of Chris's shoulder as he continued to push in. Finally, finally, he felt the head against his prostate, felt Chris's balls against his ass, and he concentrated on relaxing, breathing hard.

"Oh my God," Chris croaked, his body tense over him. "Alex, can I... please, I really want to..."

"Yeah," Alex managed, and Chris began to move. And the sounds got even better, so good and so hot that they made the pain start to fade away. Well, that and the hard cock pushing against his prostate, making him see stars.

"Oh, fuck... so tight, Jesus, Alex, oh my God, it's, oh fuck..."

Alex slid his hand to Chris's ass, squeezing it, pushing him a little deeper. "Yeah," he said again. Chris was moving a little faster now, the perfect pressure building, so good, God, so good. "'S good," he muttered. That ass tightened under his hand, and Alex couldn't help but give it a little smack.

"Ah!" Chris shouted, throwing his head back, fucking in harder now.

Hmm, Alex thought, with the part of his brain still capable of rational thought. *Liked that, did we?* He smacked that beautiful ass again, and Chris moaned loud. The rhythm was getting faster, and Alex was rocking his hips with Chris, meeting every thrust. They were both beyond words now, just grunting and panting and rocking into each other, and Alex grabbed his own dick, beginning to jerk himself off. Chris saw what he was doing, and made a strangled groan. "Oh, fuck... Alex... ahh..." And suddenly the rhythm was stuttering, and Chris's body went tense, thrusting

deep as he groaned loud, eyes closed, cock pulsing.

Fuck, Alex thought, jerking himself a little faster. *So close... so close...* Slowly, Chris opened his eyes, his face apologetic, embarrassed, and he opened his mouth to speak, but then closed it again. He was still hard enough to thrust, so he did, and Alex clutched at him, gasping at the unexpected pressure. It had to be uncomfortable for Chris now, but he thrust in again, and again, and again, and then suddenly Alex was coming with a shout, gripping Chris tight, covering both their chests with streams of come.

When the shudders passed, they disentangled themselves, and Chris curled into Alex's arms. They kissed again, softly, and there was so much playing across Chris's face—gratitude, embarrassment, and things Alex couldn't identify, or maybe chose not to. They kissed and kissed, because it was easier than speaking. Because the kisses said everything they wanted to say.

SETH finally settled into bed four hours later than he should have, frustrated and exhausted and yet nowhere close to sleep. He thought about calling Amy, but it was even later there, and he'd whined to her enough about this anyway. He was sick of complaining, sick of being alone, sick of feeling crappy all the time. He'd been a shit to Chris, and to Karen, and he hadn't been able to charm his way out of any of it, and that was sort of new for him. And he couldn't figure out what his next move was where Chris was concerned, and that was definitely new. Sometimes, he thought maybe he should give up on Chris entirely.

Only he couldn't.

He turned his head, staring at the illuminated numbers on the alarm clock by his bed: 12:15. Chris was probably in bed with that idiot neighbor right now, his ass sore from being pounded all night. The thought made Seth's stomach turn, so he shook his head, closing his eyes. "Think about something else," he muttered. But nothing came to mind. He was tense all over, and he needed—something. Well, he knew what he needed, but he wasn't doing that again. "You're not doing that again," he said out loud, bringing the heels of his hands to his eyes. It was too pathetic. But his dick was already hardening in spite of himself, and he moved his hands away, looking up at the ceiling. *Okay*, he thought. *But this is the last time*. He chose not to think about how many times he'd had *that* thought before.

Slowly, Seth closed his eyes again, beginning to slide his hand downward. And now Chris was with him, lying next to him, naked.

"Seth," Chris whispered, pulling Seth on top of him, and Seth kissed him hard. And Chris moaned for him, kissing him back, sliding his hand into Seth's pajama pants. The kiss broke, and Chris gazed at him, his lips wet, his eyes full of desire. "Want you so bad," Chris said, his hand beginning to stroke, and Seth kissed him again.

And suddenly Seth was naked, and Chris was on his stomach, his perfect ass just waiting for Seth's dick. "Seth," Chris moaned, reaching back for him. "Please..." And now Seth was inside him, deep inside,

pistoning his hips, slamming in hard, and Chris was moaning for more. “Yesss,” he moaned, reaching back to clutch at Seth’s ass. “Want you... oh, yes, Seth, fuck me....”

And just like that, it was over. Seth opened his eyes, gasping, still flat on his back, his pajama pants shoved down just below his hips, his fist wet with come. He lay like that for a few moments, just breathing, waiting for his heart to slow down. And then he grabbed some tissues from the nightstand, wiping himself off, pulling up his pajama pants and turning onto his side. He closed his eyes again, the dirty feeling settling over him like it always did. But at least now he’d be able to sleep.

IT WAS late when Chris woke up, or actually, very very early. Three a.m., according to his watch, which he hadn’t gotten around to taking off before the latest round of insanely amazing sex with Alex. He glanced over at Alex’s sleeping form, so peaceful, so beautiful, yards of perfect pale skin offering itself up like a buffet for Chris’s enjoyment. But he wasn’t going to wake him up at this ridiculous hour, not when Alex had to get up in a few hours for work, especially given that he surely needed the rest after the workout they’d had. Chris smiled as he remembered it, letting his eyes linger on the angles and curves before him. Alex had sure shocked him by letting him top, and God, that tightness had been unbelievable, something Chris would definitely have to try again sometime in the future. But there was still nothing better than Alex’s cock deep inside, and he’d had two enthusiastic rounds of that before they finally dropped off to sleep.

Chris’s dick was beginning to respond as he thought about it, and lying in bed with this masterful man was turning into an exercise in frustration. So he quietly slipped out of the covers and crept out of the room, walking into the kitchen naked to find something to drink. He filled a glass with water and stood at the sink, looking out the window, enjoying the quiet. There was something he’d always liked about being awake in the middle of the night, everything still and dark, like he was getting a glimpse of a secret world.

And it gave him time to think.

Chris’s mom knew about Alex now. He supposed it was inevitable, given the number of nights he was spending away from home and the fact that he and Alex could never seem to keep their hands off each other, inside or out. So she’d figured it out on her own, and Chris hadn’t denied it. But they hadn’t had a real talk about it yet, because Chris wasn’t sure what to say. He didn’t really know what was happening between them, didn’t really know what to call this. He just knew he liked Alex a lot, knew he liked spending his time here, knew he thought about him when they weren’t together. He’d even been sketching him sometimes when he wasn’t around, and that was sort of weird, because he hadn’t ever drawn portraits of anyone he knew before.

But it was all so precarious. His mom had told Chris to invite Alex over for dinner sometime, but he hadn’t mentioned that to Alex yet. How could he? Alex didn’t believe in boyfriends, so he sure wouldn’t believe in

potpies with Mom. And it was all too good—the sex, the laughing, the talking, the sex. He didn't want to ruin it. He was so afraid he would.

“Oh, to be a glass of water.” Chris could hear the grin in Alex's voice before he turned around, and he lowered the glass from his mouth, turning to face him with a grin of his own. Alex was leaning against the doorframe, arms crossed, stark naked. At the sight, Chris's grin got a little bigger.

“You're naked,” Chris said, blushing at himself. *Duh.*

Alex looked down, then back up again, feigning surprise for a moment before breaking into a smile. “So I am,” he said, sauntering toward Chris with a confidence that went directly to Chris's dick. He took the glass from Chris, put it in the sink, and then placed his hands on the counter on either side of Chris's hips, leaning in close. “And so are you,” he said, growling the words into Chris's ear. *Jesus.* Chris swallowed, aware that he was half-hard already. Alex was biting his earlobe now, licking the skin behind it, nibbling on his neck. Without even thinking about it, Chris brought his hands to Alex's lower back, pressing him in closer, lifting his chin.

“Don't you... oh, fuck, that feels good. Don't you, uh... need to be up in the morning?”

“It is the morning,” Alex said, his mouth still doing delicious things to Chris's neck. His hands had left the counter now, one gently resting on the back of Chris's head, one sliding down to cup his ass.

“I mean... ahh...” The hand squeezed his ass now, causing their cocks to slide together, and Chris lost his train of thought. Which was just fine, because Alex's mouth was on his now, those lips strong, warm, demanding, and Chris melted into him, opening his mouth, meeting Alex's tongue with his own. Alex began rocking his hips as the kiss went on, rubbing their cocks together, his hand strong on Chris's ass, and Chris kissed him harder, pushing his tongue farther, rocking his own hips in a matching rhythm. And then both of Alex's hands were on his ass, and he was being lifted off the floor, his entire weight in Alex's strong hands. Instinctively, Chris wrapped his legs around Alex's waist, and the kiss went on, deeper, wetter, stronger. Alex turned around and took a few steps forward, setting Chris down on the island in the middle of the kitchen. The surface was granite, and it was cold, but Chris didn't mind at all.

“We've never done it in the kitchen before,” Alex said, finally breaking the kiss. Chris held him tight, his legs still wrapped around Alex, humping his hips forward to try to get that sweet rub again.

“There's always a first time,” he replied, breathless, and Alex kissed him again. The kiss was a quick one, though, because Alex was kissing down his neck again, unwrapping Chris's arms from his shoulders and laying him down flat on his back on the island, leaning over him the whole way. The edge of the island came to just below Chris's shoulders, and he gripped it with both hands when Alex seized a nipple between his teeth and tugged. “Fuck,” he whispered, watching that sinful mouth at work as a

tongue darted out to swirl around the nipple, sucking it up into wetness and then clamping down with his teeth again. Every unexpected bite sent a jolt of electricity through Chris's body, and he brought a hand to his other nipple to tweak it as Alex continued his ministrations. Which was good, because Alex was apparently eager to move on to the next stage. He gave the other nipple a brief suck and then mouthed his way lower, dipping his tongue into Chris's belly button before dragging it quickly down his lower belly.

By the time Alex dropped to his knees, Chris was panting, his cock fully hard and aching for attention. Alex lifted Chris's legs over his shoulders and then grabbed his hips, tugging him strongly forward, and Chris grabbed the edge of the island again and held on for dear life. He knew what was coming, but the first tight suck still hit him like a freight train, sending shudders through his body, and he dropped his head back when Alex slid his mouth all the way down. "Oh, God," he moaned, his head hanging upside down now, the rush of blood somehow only adding to the intensity of pleasure surging to his dick. Alex was sucking hard, swirling his tongue around the shaft as he moved back and forth on it, and God it was so good, so good, so good. Two wet fingers teased his opening now, and Chris pushed back against them, desperate to feel them inside. Alex took the hint and drove them deep, and Chris shouted out his approval. He pushed back against them, fucking himself on Alex's hand, and it was so good, too good. "Wait, Alex, stop," he gasped. Alex instantly pulled off, and Chris craned his head up, trying to catch his breath. "Gonna come. Don't want... want you to fuck me. Alex—" But apparently he'd said the magic words, because no more words were necessary. Alex scrambled to his feet and tore open a condom, and Chris decided not to ask whether he'd carried that in from the bedroom or kept a stash in the kitchen for fucking emergencies like this one. Whatever, it was on, and Alex was coating it with saliva, and now he was lifting Chris's ankles over his shoulders again, grabbing Chris's ass in both hands and pressing inside. And Chris dropped his head back again, whiteknuckling the edge of the island, moaning loud as Alex moved inside him.

"Fuck, that's good," Alex grunted, and Chris couldn't answer in words, wanted to, but there were no words other than *yes yes yes yes THAT THAT THAT THAT*. The angle was perfect, hitting his prostate every time, and Chris just moaned, feeling wanton and sexy and *awfully* good. "Yeah," Alex said, fucking him harder now, his hand sliding to Chris's dick and jerking him fast. "Moan for me, just like that, yeah, fuck, so good, baby..." Chris's eyes flew open at the word, but there was no time to react, no time to say anything coherent, because his back was arching off the granite and he was coming hard, the world graying out for a minute as Alex let loose inside him with a sudden cry and then slumped over him, chest heaving, his weight like a blanket covering Chris's skin. After a while, the shudders of ecstasy faded, and the countertop

started to get uncomfortable, and Chris's neck started to hurt. But he didn't want to move. He hugged Alex to him, slowly lifting his head. "Did you call me—" he began, but then he stopped, licking his lips. "You called me 'baby'," he said.

Alex seemed to stop breathing for a moment. Then he lifted up, looking away from Chris, and pulled out a little less gently than he usually did. *Ow*, Chris thought, but he kept the grimace to himself. "Sorry," Alex was saying, turning away from him. "Didn't mean to."

"No, I don't—you don't have to apologize. I—"

"It just came out. Won't happen again." He was already walking out of the room, heading back down the hall toward the bedroom. Chris propped himself up on his elbows, watching him leave. *What just happened?* But before he could get his mind around it, Alex was back, dressed in sweatpants now, pulling a T-shirt over his head.

"Alex—"

"Look, can we not make a big thing out of this? It happened, I apologized, let's let that be the end of it, okay?"

"But you don't have to—"

"You going to lie there all night? I mean, don't get me wrong, I appreciate the visual, but isn't the granite getting a little cold?" Except he apparently didn't appreciate the visual, because his back was to Chris. He was doing dishes, concentrating on the sink, which was odd, because he hated to do dishes. Why the urge was suddenly striking him in the middle of the night was not entirely clear to Chris. But not entirely unclear, either. Slowly, Chris sat up, then hopped down off the island and stood still, not sure what to do. Alex was still looking away, and Chris was starting to feel very, very naked. So he walked back to the bedroom, wiping himself off with the towel they kept by the bed and then slowly getting dressed.

"Oh, good," Alex said from the doorway when he returned, just as Chris was finishing pulling his shirt over his head. "I was gonna suggest—I mean, maybe it would be better if you went home. I've got an early day tomorrow, and, y'know, I've got to be up in a few hours anyway..."

"Oh," Chris said. "Okay." They stared at each other for a moment, and then Chris moved toward the door. But before he reached it, he stopped, turning around. "Um, this is—this may not be the right time, but..." Alex was staring at him, not speaking. There was no warmth in his eyes. Something had changed, only Chris couldn't figure out what. He cleared his throat and kept speaking. "My mom wanted me to ask you if—if you want to come over for dinner sometime. I mean, you don't have to, it's—"

"Do I want to have *dinner* with your *mom*?"

Chris swallowed. The question "Do I want to have a threesome with my grandparents" might be asked in a similar tone.

"No. No, Chris, I don't want to have dinner with your mom. I thought I made it clear right from the beginning that this wasn't some boy meets boy, boys fall in love, boys move in and buy two cats and a

houseplant sort of situation we've got going on here. I don't do boyfriends. I don't do dates. And I certainly don't do fucking dinner with Mom. You want orgasms, call me. You want the rest of that bullshit, call—call somebody else."

Chris's throat was getting tight. He felt like he might puke. He opened his mouth, wanting to say so much, but no words came out. The boldness strategy hadn't worked so well the last time, and now he didn't know what to say.

Finally, he looked down at the floor, took a moment to breathe, and then turned and walked to the door. Alex stayed where he was as he walked out of it, and didn't say a thing as the door closed behind him. But halfway across the yard, Chris looked back, and he could see Alex through the living room window. He was sitting down on that worn leather sofa, his body tense. And his head in his hands.

CHAPTER TWELVE

SETH squeezed the steering wheel, staring at Chris's front door through the driver's side window. *This is a bad idea*. He knew Chris was home, knew he got off work at six on Wednesdays. Not that he'd memorized Chris's work schedule or anything. But maybe he had. He'd had another bad day at the store, another day of coldness and glares and feeling like a fuck-up, and he couldn't handle the idea of going home alone again. Chris had to talk to him. Had to. *Had to*.

Only Seth couldn't seem to get out of the car.

He picked up his cell phone, punched in Chris's number. It rang four times, then went to voice mail. He hung up and did it again. And again. And again. "You have to talk to me," he whispered, still staring at the house.

"What do you want?" Chris's voice was sudden, annoyed. Seth was so surprised by it that for a moment, he didn't say anything at all. "Seth? What is this, a game? You finally get me to pick up and you—"

"I'm here," he said, the words coming out in a rush. He fumbled for the car door, stood up, closed it again. "I'm here."

"What do you want?" he said again.

"I want to talk. Please. Chris. I just—"

"I'm not interested." And the phone went dead.

A hot flash of anger surged in Seth's stomach. Without words, he charged up to Chris's front door and banged on it, hard. "Chris! Chris, come on! I know you're—"

The door opened swiftly. "What are you doing?" He was looking at Seth like he was out of his mind. Which maybe he was.

"Listen to me. Listen to me. You have to listen to me."

"I don't have to do anything." He was glaring at Seth now, angry. He crossed his arms. "Why the hell should I listen to what you have to say?"

Seth swallowed a lump in his throat. He just looked at Chris, searching for words. This was an unfamiliar feeling, not having the words. Seth always had the words. But none were coming to him now. Chris muttered something under his breath and went to close the door again, but Seth stopped it with his hand. "I'm an idiot," he shouted. Chris stopped, watching him. "I'm an idiot, and an asshole, and I fucked up, big time. And I'm sorry." His voice broke. He was looking at his feet now. "I'm... shit, Chris. I'm so sorry."

He was quiet for a moment, and then looked up slowly. Chris still had his hand on the door, but his face had changed some. There was still anger there, but also something... something else. Seth didn't know what it was. But he kept talking. "I knew you wanted me." He watched Chris's jaw twitch. "You were right. I knew what I was doing. I pushed you away and fucked that girl even though... even though you and I had something else going on. Okay? You were right. We weren't just friends. We never were." He paused, breathing. Chris didn't move. "And the girl—it was all wrong," he said. "All wrong. I didn't even want her. I just—"

"What did you want?" Chris's voice was quiet, his face still unreadable.

Seth swallowed again. "You," he said simply. They stared at each other. After a moment, Chris turned and walked inside, leaving the door open. Seth followed him in.

"I don't know what you want me to say," Chris said, facing away from Seth. "I don't know what you want from me."

"I just want you. I... I want you all the time. I think about you. I dream about you. I fucking... I jack off imagining you're in my bed."

Chris exhaled, bringing a hand to his forehead. He kept his back to Seth. This was better than the yelling, though, so Seth surged on ahead.

"When I think about you and that other guy..."

And now Chris turned around. "Alex."

"Is that his name?" Chris nodded. Seth took a deep breath. "Are you—are you fucking him?"

"Yes." His arms were still crossed, watching Seth with an even stare.

As if daring him to say something about it, daring him to argue.

"Look..." Seth closed his eyes, then slid his fingers under his glasses, rubbing. "Shit."

"Don't you *dare* tell me you have a problem with—"

"I'm not." *Shit. Shit. Shit.* He pulled his hands away, but kept his eyes closed. "You have every right to... I mean, obviously I have no right to..." His voice trailed off, and he couldn't do this anymore. He opened his eyes in a rush, staring at Chris as intensely as he knew how. "Fuck, yes, okay? God. Yes. I have a problem with it. I can't handle the idea of you with anybody else. I just want you to be with me." Chris was staring at him now, startled, his mouth open a little. And suddenly, Seth knew he was much, much too far away.

He crossed the room in two steps and had Chris's back against the

wall in an instant, pressing into him. "Seth," Chris gasped, pushing at his shoulders. But not pushing very hard.

"I want you," he said, fastening his mouth to Chris's neck, kissing, inhaling his aroma. "God, I want you so bad. I want to strip you naked and pound you into the mattress, spend days with you in bed, put my mouth on every inch of your body."

Chris's body was stiff, but his breathing was fast. "Seth, stop," he whispered, but Seth could feel him growing hard against his leg.

"I know you still want me," he panted, mouthing the other side of Chris's neck now. "Please, Chris...." He moved his hands to Chris's belt, but Chris covered them quickly and strongly with his own.

"Stop it," he said, his voice a little stronger now.

Seth stopped, pulling back slightly so he could look Chris in the eyes. Eyes that had gotten darker, his breathing heavier. The lust was unmistakable, but he was still saying no. "Is it him?" Chris looked away. *Shit*. "Are you guys... in like... a relationship?" He felt a wave of nausea at the thought, but not one strong enough to diminish his hard-on.

Chris bit his lip, eyes still focused elsewhere. Finally, he turned his head back, blue eyes locking with Seth's again. "No," he said. There was something else going on in his face, but Seth couldn't figure it out. And he was too distracted by the gorgeous body so close to him to try. He leaned forward and touched his mouth to Chris's, a gentle kiss, bracing himself to be pushed away again. But the push never came.

"Please," Seth whispered, and he kissed him again. Chris didn't return the kiss, but he didn't try to stop it. And those hands weren't pushing at him anymore, just resting on his hips. When Seth kissed him a third time, he felt Chris responding, his lips parting, just slightly. Seth was so hard he could barely breathe. "Please," he said again, bringing a hand up to hold the back of Chris's head, covering his face with kisses now.

"Please let me. Please let me make you feel good. Let me make you come." Chris made a sound from the back of his throat, his hands clutching at Seth's hips now, and when Seth found his mouth again, Chris kissed him back. They devoured each other's mouths, lips and tongues and teeth moving passionately, hands gripping tight. Seth pulled off Chris's shirt in an instant, grabbing him close again, kissing him hard. He brought his hands to Chris's belt again, and this time Chris didn't try to stop him. He had the buckle open fast and the zipper down even faster, and he broke the kiss to watch as he shoved pants and underwear down off those beautiful hips. And then there it was, Chris's cock. Big and thick and fully hard, arching toward his belly, already leaking for him. Seth's mouth watered. He knew what he wanted, and there was no way in hell he was stopping now.

Chris gasped when Seth fell to his knees, but Seth was barely aware of that. Chris's dick filled his senses, the only thing he could see, smell, feel. He wrapped his hand around the base, watching in amazement as another drop of precome eased from the tip. Without thinking about it, he

leaned forward and pressed his tongue against the slit, catching the drop before it fell, licking it into his mouth. Bitter and warm and perfect. *Holy shit, are you really going to do this?* The thought came quickly, but he was already moving his hand over Chris's dick, slowly jacking him, licking his lips, drinking in every delicious moan, and he knew the answer. *Bet your ass I am.*

Seth opened his mouth and slid Chris's dick into it, feeling himself grow impossibly harder as the dick hit the back of his throat. He pulled back a little, trying not to gag himself, still squeezing the base, beginning to suck. And Chris was groaning now, his hands on Seth's head, fingers tangling in his hair, and Seth sucked harder. "Oh, fuck," Chris moaned. Seth replaced his right hand with his left, using his right to fumble open his fly now, because his jeans had grown so tight they were painful. And just as he got his dick out, Chris started moving. He was pushing his hips forward, just a little at a time, but fuck, God, so hot, so hot. *He's fucking my mouth. Holy shit. Holy shit.* Seth began pumping his own dick, hovering near the edge already, *Jesus, so fucking hot. So fucking hot.*

"Seth... gonna... oh, my God, gonna come right *now*," and it was happening, that cock was pulsing in his mouth, and streams of hot liquid were shooting into his throat, and he pulled back, the last shot hitting him on the cheek, oh *God*, and then there was nothing but the coming, crying out loud and covering his fist, dripping onto his jeans, emptying every drop of strength within him.

When the shudders finally passed, Seth slumped sideways, landing heavily on his ass. He wiped his cheek with the back of his hand and looked up, but Chris wasn't looking at him. His head was back against the wall, his eyes closed, as his breathing slowly calmed down. And Seth stayed still, watching him.

Yet again, he didn't know what to say.

ALEX changed the channel again, and again, and again. Finally, he shut the TV off and threw the remote on the couch next to him, exhaling in a frustrated sigh. This was pointless. He hated watching TV. He was only doing it to kill time until Chris came over, but it was becoming more and more clear that he just wasn't coming tonight. And it was all Alex's fault. He stood up, loosening his tie, walking into the kitchen. He opened the fridge, but nothing looked appealing, so he closed it again. As he turned around, the island caught his eye, and he leaned back against the fridge, pressing his lips together. *Damn it. Damn it damn it damn it.* Everything had been going so well.

As soon as Chris left, Alex knew he'd made a mistake. Chris had just been trying to invite him to dinner, trying to be nice. He didn't know how much it freaked Alex out when that word slipped out of his mouth. He didn't know about John, and the breakup, and the fallout after. He didn't deserve to be yelled at, belittled, reminded that Alex didn't want him for anything more than a casual fuck.

Especially because it wasn't true.

Alex looked to the clock on the wall over the stove and cursed under his breath. Chris would definitely have been here by now if he was coming. He was always here by now. "He's not coming," Alex muttered under his breath. *Because you fucked it up. Because he's pissed at you.* He let his head fall back against the fridge, closing his eyes. *Or maybe he just thinks you don't want him around.*

His eyes still closed, Alex clenched his jaw. He did want him here. He wanted to run after him as soon as he'd left, sooner actually, as soon as he'd seen that look in his eyes. That look that said he was hurt, maybe a lot. Alex wanted to grab him before he walked out the door, hold him close and kiss him, beg forgiveness and take it all back. Kiss him until the hurt went away, and that beautiful smile took its place. But he didn't. He couldn't. He breathed again. Well, maybe he could.

Alex walked to the living room window, staring out at Chris's house, thinking. What could he say? He could apologize, at least. Try to explain. He wasn't sure if he could really tell Chris everything, but maybe it would be enough to get them back to where they had been. Maybe he could—
Oh.

As Alex watched, Chris's door opened, and Seth came out of it. *Seth.* Alex froze. He was talking to someone, Chris, probably, though Alex couldn't see. But he could see that Seth was still tucking his shirt back into his pants, and he could see him lean in for a kiss. And when he turned to go, the view improved. Now Alex could see Chris standing in the doorway. Shirtless. Watching Seth go.

Alex took a step backward, and then another, and then another. Suddenly, it seemed impossible to get far enough away.

CHRIS focused on his hands, scrubbing the dishes carefully, letting the water wash over his fingers. The repetitive action helped, somehow. Helped him focus, or defocus, maybe. It was a lot easier than talking, or figuring out what the hell was going on in his head. Suddenly, he became aware that he had stopped washing and was just staring at the flow of water from the spout. With a sigh, he turned off the faucet and grabbed a dishtowel, drying his hands. It was just as well that his mom had the night shift tonight, because she'd be able to read his face in a second and know that something was wrong. And he really didn't want to talk. Or maybe he did.

He sighed again, hanging the dishtowel back up and drumming his fingers on the counter. He still didn't really know what had happened with Seth. It was all so fast, so unexpected. If he'd been asked a day before it happened—hell, an hour before it happened—he would have sworn that he'd never let Seth into his home in a million years, much less into his pants. He hated the guy. Or he thought he did.

But apparently a year of longing for someone wasn't so easy to turn off. And Seth was there, really there, his lips against Chris's, that firm body pressing against his own, finally saying all the things that Chris had dreamed about for so long. And before he knew what was happening....

Quit it, he thought, frowning. You're not a kid. You let it happen. Don't hide behind that. And the during was good, so very good. But he regretted it almost as soon as it was over, felt a wave of guilt wash over him, the image of Alex in his mind. Only that didn't make sense either. You can't exactly cheat on someone who wants nothing more from you than sex.

So why are you feeling this way?

Chris stared at his feet for a moment and then turned for the door, making a quick decision. He checked his watch as he crossed the lawn. It was late, almost eleven, but not too late to go over. He hoped. And they could talk, maybe. About what happened today, about what had happened the day before. He could tell Alex how sorry he was, and how he just wanted things to go back to the way they were.

He knocked on the door and waited, running a nervous hand through his hair. There was no response at first, and he began to wonder if Alex had gone to bed. But just as he was turning to go, the door opened, and there he was.

"Chris," he said. "I didn't expect to see you tonight."

"I... yeah." Alex's eyes were cold, and Chris began to wonder if he'd made a mistake. "I just..." His voice trailed off, but Alex didn't speak. Chris bit his lip. "Can I come in? I kind of want to—"

"Sorry, no." The words were short, clipped. "Not tonight."

"Oh." Chris just looked at him, wondering what to do. What to say.

"Look, Alex—"

"Hey, are you coming back?" The voice was male, loud, shouting out from Alex's living room. Chris suddenly understood, and his heart sunk a few inches.

"Um." He stumbled backward, nearly tripping over himself. "Sorry. I guess you—I guess you're busy."

"For the next few hours, at least," Alex said. The words sounded like a tease, but he wasn't laughing. Chris looked away.

"Sorry." His voice was hoarse, his throat tightening again. *Shit. You did it. You fucked everything up.*

"Hey, no problem. Another night, okay?" Alex's voice was dead, flat.

"Sure," Chris said, unable to look up. But the door was already closed.

ALEX stood quietly, his hand still on the doorknob, listening to Chris leave. His heart was pounding like an idiot, but he didn't say anything. He couldn't say anything. What was there to say?

"Hey," Marty said, ambling out from the living room, still holding his bottle of beer. "Didn't you hear me? I said, are you—" He stopped short, and Alex realized he still hadn't taken his hand off the doorknob. He dropped it, turning to Marty, trying to smile. Not succeeding. "What's wrong?"

"Nothing." He pushed past Marty, grabbing his seat on the couch

again, looking away. “Okay, so where were we? You were telling me about the new guy at your office, and how you—”

“Oh, stop it, would you?” Marty was sitting next to him, grabbing his chin, making him look up. “You haven’t been here all night. You never call and ask me to come over, and you certainly never want to hear this much about my new crushes. So why don’t you just tell me what the hell is going on?”

“Nothing is going on.” He pulled out of Marty’s grasp, grabbing his own beer off the coffee table. “Sue me for wanting to hang out with a friend tonight. I didn’t realize that would be such a problem for you.” Marty grabbed his chin again. “And don’t think you’re going to get out of this by acting like an asshole. I’m not going to storm out of here and leave you to stew in your own shit.”

Alex chuckled a little. “Nice image.”

“Thought you’d like that.” He let go of Alex’s face, gently, but he kept up his careful gaze. “So. Why don’t you quit being a prick and tell me who was at the door?” Alex pressed his lips together, not answering. “Chris,” Marty said. Alex nodded. “Okay. And you didn’t let him in?” Alex shook his head. “Hon, this will go a lot faster if you use actual words.”

Alex exhaled, standing up. “Fuck.”

“There you go. Not the most expressive of choices, I guess, but—”

“All right. All right.” He went to the window, standing with his back to Marty. Somehow, he sensed this would be easier if he didn’t have to look anyone in the eye. “He fucked somebody else. His old boyfriend. Well, not boyfriend, I mean....”

“When?”

“Earlier tonight. Like half an hour before I called you.”

Marty paused. “Okay.”

“And it’s not... I mean, he can fuck whoever he wants to fuck. It’s not like we’re married. We’re just having fun. I even... last night, I even told him that. He was trying to get me to come over to his mom’s house for dinner.” He laughed, turning around. “I mean, can you picture that? Me, having dinner with Mom?”

“Yes.”

Alex glared at him. “Well, I can’t. And I told him that last night. In no uncertain terms.” He looked out the window again. “Felt bad about it afterwards, but I guess I didn’t need to. Looks like it didn’t take him long to find a replacement.”

“Alex.”

“What?” He stayed at the window, staring out of it.

“Are you ever going to tell me what happened between you and John?”

Alex stayed where he was. *Damn it*, he thought, and he closed his eyes.

FOUR a.m., and Chris couldn’t sleep. He rolled over again, trying to get

comfortable. It wasn't working. Finally, he gave up and threw the covers off, wearily rising to his feet. Maybe a glass of water would help. He tried not to think about the way his last late-night trip for a glass of water had ended. That was obviously all over now, and there was no point making himself feel worse.

When he reached the kitchen, he was surprised to find it wasn't empty. "Mom," he said, kissing her cheek. "What are you doing up?"

"I just got home," she said, a puzzled look on her face. "You know I had the night shift tonight."

"Right," he said, heading toward the sink. He felt her eyes on him as he filled a glass with water.

"What about you?" She stayed seated at the table, but her voice was heavy with concern.

"I couldn't sleep." He aimed for a casual tone, but glancing at her face, he knew she wasn't fooled. "Mom, I don't want to talk about this."

"Yes you do." He looked at her, surprised. "You wouldn't have come out here at four in the morning if you didn't."

"I didn't know you would be here."

"Yes you did."

"Mom, God..."

"Christian Michael Bennett, sit down right the hell now." There was no escaping the middle-naming, so he hung his head, sinking into a chair across the table from his mother. "I've had about enough of this. You've been avoiding me for weeks, and don't think I haven't noticed. Lately, you've seemed happy, so I left well enough alone. But when you're up at four o'clock in the morning looking like you're considering doing harm to yourself with that water glass—"

He kept his head down. "I'm not."

"Honey." There was a warm hand on his now, and he looked up. "I love you. Just tell me what's going on."

Chris set his glass down, looking across the room. He paused for a long time before he spoke. "I guess... I don't know. I guess I'm having trouble with... kind of everything." He looked back at her, but she was sitting quietly, watching him, waiting. "I have all these choices, y'know. What to do for a living. Whether to go to college."

"Who to be with."

He looked down. "Yeah," he said softly. "That too."

"I don't really know Alex. We've only spoken a couple of times. But he seems like a very nice guy. A good person."

"He is." Chris clenched his jaw. "He's... he's great, actually. Really great. But I think... I think I messed it up."

"How?"

"I just... I don't know. He thinks I was pressuring him, I think. I didn't mean to. But, I mean... I don't know. Maybe I was."

"Well—"

"But there's more than that." Chris stood up, walking to the other

end of the kitchen. He couldn't sit still anymore. "Seth came over today."

"He wants you back?"

Chris laughed a little. "Well, not back, exactly. He never had me in the first place. But he seems to want to be with me now."

"What do you want?"

He turned around slowly, facing her. "That's the thing," he said. "I don't know."

Now his mom stood up, going to him, resting a hand on his arm.

"It's confusing, I know," she said. Her voice was quiet and kind. "You're at a time in your life when you're supposed to be making all these big decisions, and nobody's giving you a road map for any of them."

Chris nodded. "Yeah."

"Like with art school." He looked up suddenly, his mouth dropping open slightly. "Honey, I know you've been researching art schools. I use the same computer you do, and you have a tendency to leave your browser windows open. You're not exactly 007." He smiled a little, sheepish. "I didn't want to bring it up, because it's your decision to make. And I know it's a tough one. But if you want my advice, I think you should go for it."

"You do?"

"Absolutely. You've only got one life, sweetie. My advice for you on art school is the same as my advice in your love life: figure out what you want, what you love, and go after it, hard. And don't let anything stand in your way."

Chris was quiet for a long time. "What if I'm not brave enough?" he said at last.

"You are."

"I don't have the greatest track record. When I've tried to... you know, be bold... it never seems to work out right."

"It will."

He snorted, rolling his eyes slightly at her. "You seem awfully confident."

"Sweetie, you are strong, kind, genuine, and loving, and anyone would be lucky to have you. And trust me, that strength will come out whether you believe in it or not."

"But I still..."

"...don't know what you want?" She looked at him. "Yes, you do. Your heart already knows, even if your brain hasn't figured it out yet. When the time comes, you'll just know. And then there'll be no stopping you."

It was dorky, but it helped. He smiled, and she hugged him. "Love you, kiddo. Now get some sleep."

"I will." He hugged her back. "I love you too." He watched her as she walked toward her bedroom, taking a long sip of his water. *And I sure as hell hope you're right.*

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

SETH took a deep breath, trying to settle his stomach. His fingers were still tapping nervously on the tabletop, his whole body tense. It was Friday night, two days after that unexpected and amazing incident at Chris's house, and Chris had finally agreed to see him again. It had taken some persistence on Seth's part, multiple phone calls in which Chris had been quiet, distant, uncharacteristically sad. And at first, it hadn't gone well at all.

The first time he'd called, on Thursday morning, it was just as awkward as it had been Wednesday night. When he'd sat on Chris's floor, staring up at him, waiting for him to speak, or at least to smile. Trying to pretend that the sight of Chris with his pants shoved down and his cock still half-hard wasn't turning him on all over again. After a moment, he'd stopped pretending, and reached up to touch Chris's hand, hoping that after this weird silence was over, Chris might be up for some kind of Round Two. But Chris had just pulled his hand away, finally opening his eyes only to turn away and pull his pants up, saying something so quietly that Seth had to ask him to repeat it.

"I said, I think you'd better go." He'd kept his back turned when he said it, his head lowered, eyes focused on his hands as they refastened his belt. "My mom's coming home soon," he added, almost as an afterthought.

Seth hadn't argued, even though he wanted to. This had to be done carefully, a little at a time. No point rushing things and screwing everything up all over again. So he'd pulled up his own pants and walked to the door, glad that at least Chris accompanied him there. As he walked out, he turned to face Chris. "When can I see you again?" He'd tried to keep the desperation out of his voice, but Chris still didn't meet his gaze. And he didn't answer. "Can I call you?" Chris paused, then nodded, and Seth leaned in and placed a gentle hand on his cheek, turning Chris's face so he could kiss his lips. Chris let it happen but nothing more, and Seth tried not to be offended by that. With a last lingering look, he turned and headed back to his car, feeling Chris's eyes on him the whole way.

He wasn't sure if Chris would pick up when he called the next day, but he did. He hadn't said much, other than that he couldn't see him that night. *Plans with Alex?* Seth wanted to sneer, but he didn't. Careful. Cool. *You can do this*, he kept reminding himself. A little at a time.

And with a few more phone calls, he'd made some progress. Chris had agreed to see him, and though he wouldn't let Seth just come over to his house, he'd said they could meet for dinner. Which meant this was a date. *You're on a date*, Seth thought, turning to the window and staring at his reflection in the glass. *You're on a date with a guy*. It still felt weird, but it was getting a little easier. *You're on a date with Chris*, he thought, and that was enough to make him smile.

GET out of the car. Chris sat in the parking lot, staring at the steering

wheel, wondering what he was doing. *You made it this far. It's what you wanted. Now get out of the fucking car.*

He brought a hand to his temple, rubbing. This would be a lot easier if this damn headache would finally go away. It had been bugging him for three days now, since the fight with Alex, the one where he opened his big mouth and ruined everything. It got worse on Thursday, when Alex had come home much later than usual, which Chris knew because he'd stayed up like a loser, a pathetic psycho loser, just to watch his door. When Alex had finally gotten in, past ten o'clock, he'd just gone straight in the house and immediately turned off his porch light. Might as well have just hung a neon sign on his front door that read, "Attention Chris Bennett: You're not welcome here."

It was definitely over. And Chris still hadn't quite figured out what went wrong, how he'd screwed it all up so badly. But Seth kept calling, kept talking to him, being so *nice* to him, nicer than he'd ever been. And Chris knew not to trust it, knew not to trust *him*. It was dangerous to let himself get in too deep. But he kept thinking about that look in Seth's eye, the one that said *I'm desperate for you, I need you, I want you so bad I can't stand it*. The one that was jealous about Alex, fucking *jealous*. The one that finally wanted Chris back. He kept thinking about that grocery store argument, about these two gorgeous men basically fighting over him. Over him, Chris Bennett. How the hell had that happened?

So Chris gave in to the phone calls, the sweet words, the flattery. He wasn't going to jump into bed with Seth again, but a little dinner wouldn't kill anyone. And maybe he'd figure it out. What he was feeling. What he wanted. What the hell he was going to do next.

With a quiet inhalation, Chris opened the car door.

ALEX extended his arms slowly, monitoring his breath as he manipulated the weights in his hands. *Six*, he thought, gradually lowering them again, then raising them back up. *Seven*. He repeated the motion. Nothing like a workout to clear one's mind, regain one's focus. *Eight. Nine. Ten*.

He set the weights back on the rack and picked up his towel, wiping the sweat from his hands and neck. As he picked up his water bottle and uncapped it, he let his gaze travel around the gym. It was quiet on Friday nights, nearly empty. *Most people have better plans*, he thought wryly. Not that he couldn't have plans himself, if he wanted them. He was meeting Marty later for drinks. And maybe a little cruising, if Marty wasn't being too much of an ass about it. Nothing wrong with that. But he couldn't quite seem to get himself in the right mood.

It wasn't as bad as Thursday. Thursday, he'd stared at his computer screen all day, scrolling up, scrolling down. He couldn't focus on anything, couldn't get anything done. It had been such a bad idea to spill all that shit to Marty, to stir up all the crap that he'd traveled three thousand miles to get away from. Such a bad idea that he'd spent a few hours after work getting drunk alone, which was never a good idea. He'd been so shitfaced that he hadn't even responded to the hot guy who tried to

hit on him at the bar, hadn't used any of his usual lines, hadn't turned on the charm at all. He'd just smiled politely and gone back to his drink, and what the fuck was that about? It was the alcohol, definitely. That had to be it.

Except now it was Friday, and he didn't want to go home. And he didn't really want to go cruising, either. Part of him just wanted to pack up and move again, just leave all this shit behind. But that was stupid, and chickenshit, and all the other things Marty had called him on Wednesday night. *Out of love*, he thought, snickering as he headed to the locker room, Marty's voice in his head. *I only say it out of love, hon.*

He stripped quietly and stepped into the shower, his brain instantly providing him with an unwanted image of a wet, naked Chris winking at him from under the spray. When Chris had done that last week, Alex had grabbed his arm and pulled him in close, kissing him deep, tasting fresh water on his lips before spinning him around and pressing him up against the shower wall. Grinning at the gasp/whimper/moan that emerged when Alex pressed up behind him. *Quit it*, he thought, shoving the image aside. As he closed his eyes and lifted his face into the warm stream of water, it was memories of Wednesday night that came flooding into his head:

"ARE you ever going to tell me what happened between you and John?" Marty's question hung in the air like a challenge, like a dare. Alex tried to get out of it, the best he knew how.

"Why are we talking about this now?" He kept his back to Marty, kept staring out the window like there was something fascinating out there.

It didn't work. "Because you need to. And because you never do."

"What are you talking about? I talk about John."

"Bullshit. You've mentioned John's name twice in the past six months. Once when you called to tell me you two had broken up, and then just now, in the sentence 'I talk about John.'"

Alex turned around, frustrated. "Marty—"

"No, Alex, quit it, enough. You have never told me what happened with you guys. You were together for three years, and suddenly you break up, and you never tell me why, but you move out instantly, and you go from friend's couch to friend's couch all over the greater Boston area and then suddenly announce you're moving to California. And that's great, hon, really, I love having you here, but a different guy showed up than the one I used to know. Whatever happened with John has seriously fucked you up, and you've got to quit being a chickenshit and just tell me what the hell went down."

There weren't many people who could call Alex names and get away with it, but Marty was one of them. Especially when he was right. Alex was quiet for a long time, staring across the room. But finally, he walked slowly to the couch and sat down, turning to face his friend.

"Okay," he said, quietly. "Okay." Marty stayed quiet, just watching him. Alex took a breath and began. "It was early November, and I was at

that work thing in Atlantic City. You know, that conference I always complain about?” Marty nodded. “I was sitting in a casino with a bunch of other coders one night after we were done for the day, and they were all getting drunk and being obnoxious straight guys, hooting at women and making asses of themselves. So I just kind of drifted off, y’know, started thinking about other things. I’d been there for four days, and I was miserable, and cranky, and I started thinking about why. And then I saw this bride and groom walk by, like literally just at that moment, heading for the casino chapel. And I realized that the problem was that I missed John. That he made me happy, just being with him, spending that time with him, and I wanted that to go on for the rest of my life.” He took a long drink from his beer before continuing.

Marty watched him. “Go on,” he said.

“So, the Mass Supreme Court decision was still pretty new then, the whole gay marriage thing, and John and I had been talking about it but it was more abstract, you know? Like, isn’t it awesome for queer rights. But it never even occurred to me that it’s something he and I could, like, *do*. Or would ever want to do. Y’know, imitating some lame hetero ritual that’s all about property exchange....”

“Yeah, yeah. I’ve heard the arguments.”

“Right. So. We’d never talked about actually doing it. But right then, in that moment, looking at this bride in a cheap white polyester dress and a groom in a suit that was two inches too short for him, I suddenly knew that I wanted that.”

“The white polyester dress?”

“Har har.” He smiled a little. Marty always knew how to make things easier. “No. Not the suit either. Not the wedding at all, really.” He paused again. “The marriage.” He glanced at Marty for a laugh, but there was none coming. “Sharing my life with the person who wants to share his life with me. The person who makes me happy. I even pictured asking him. I’d say, ‘Marry me, baby,’ and John would smile and jump on me, and we’d make passionate love on the living room floor.”

“Sounds pretty good.”

“Yeah.” He paused. “I had this whole thing worked out in my head, this big realization, all while sitting at the casino bar.” And now, he stood up again. If he was going to say this part out loud, it was going to have to be told to the windowpane. He stood there for a long minute, waiting for interruption. But none came. Finally, he spoke again. “I got up right there, went to my room, packed my suitcase, and checked out. I drove straight through the night, got home around six a.m. By the time I arrived, I had this whole speech planned out, about how I loved him and wanted to be with him and we could make up the rules ourselves, use cracker jack rings and go to the courthouse or blow a huge wad and have a massive celebration, whatever we wanted, just so long as it meant we could be together.” *We can make up the rules for ourselves, baby. Do it our own way.* He sighed, coming back to the present. “And then I walked in the

door, and he wasn't alone."

Even in the fuzzy reflection in the window, Alex could see Marty's jaw drop. "Oh, *shit*."

Alex smiled, a little. "Yeah. It was our downstairs neighbor, who has a wife and three kids and apparently had spent the previous eight months fucking my boyfriend on the side." Marty stood up, unable to contain himself. But Alex couldn't stop now. "And that wasn't all. He wasn't even the only one. John had been trolling the internet for casual hook-ups almost as long as we'd been together. He'd fucked guys in public bathrooms, met up with them in seedy motels. He told me all this when we were screaming at each other, when he was mad that I was mad and said he'd been getting bored with me anyway, that our fling had been flung for him ages ago. When I told him the reason I'd come home, he laughed in my face."

"Oh, Alex," Marty said, trying to draw him into a hug. But Alex shrugged it off, walking away.

"So I just left. I couldn't handle it. I couldn't look at him anymore. And I never went back. A buddy I stayed with for a while finally went over and packed up my clothes, because he was tired of me borrowing shit from him, but that was it. I couldn't stop going over it in my head, going over every minute of the past three years. How could I have been so wrong about him? How could I have gotten everything so ass-backwards? What the hell was I thinking?"

Marty stayed where he was, looking like he was choosing his words very carefully. "Come up with any answers?"

"Yeah." He folded his arms, swallowing hard. "I decided the problem was me. That I'd bought into some Hallmark version of what the world is like, something created by Disney and Lifetime television as a way to sell cleaning products to lonely housewives. That really, guys aren't capable of that bullshit, like relationships, and monogamy, and fucking *love*." He said the word like he was spitting out lemon juice. "So I'm done with all that. There's no point to it. It doesn't work. Just give me the fucking, and leave the rest of that crap for somebody else."

Marty was watching him very intensely now. "And that's why you pushed Chris away."

Alex snapped his head back to Marty, eyes flashing with anger. "I didn't push Chris away! I was honest with him right from the beginning. I didn't want any of that dinner-with-Mom crap, I just wanted to fuck him. And I'm sorry we're not doing that anymore, but it was his fucking choice."

Marty sighed, a loud, weary sound, and then crossed the room to pat Alex gently on both tense arms. "Oh, sweetie," he said, his voice kind. "You're an even bigger idiot than I thought."

ALEX chuckled, turning the water off and giving his head two rapid shakes before stepping out of the shower. Marty could think whatever he wanted to think. He could think Alex was a coward, or that he was running

away again. Not that he'd run away the first time, he reminded himself, as he reached for a towel and began to dry himself off. He just didn't like being near John, and saw no need to stick around that city with all the people and places he'd gotten to know as part of a couple, when every one of them now made him feel like a fool.

And Marty didn't know what he was talking about when it came to Chris, either. He'd never even met Chris. How could he know what they had together? Or didn't have? Hell, Alex was the one involved, or whatever, and he'd never been able to figure it out.

And it doesn't matter now, anyway, he thought, wrapping the towel around his waist and heading toward the locker that held his clubbing clothes.

Whatever it was, it's over.

DINNER started out awkward, which wasn't much of a surprise. Chris didn't really know what he was doing there, and he found he was even quieter than usual. Seth seemed to have no problem finding ways to fill the space with words, however, so he didn't worry too much about it. But he couldn't seem to stay focused. He listened to story after story about college and life in Maine, but none of them seemed to hold his interest the way Seth seemed to expect they would. There was the drunken stunt he'd pulled with six of his buddies that Seth still found hilarious, but to Chris sounded kind of mean. The "Nazi bitch econ professor" who had given him a B- on his final and wouldn't budge on it, no matter how many times Seth explained why her grading system was stupid. The thirty-inch snowfall they'd gotten in January, and how they'd stolen lunch trays from the cafeteria and gone sledding in the main quad—and after they scratched the trays to hell and left them in the snow, it was the cafeteria workers who got blamed for not keeping a tighter eye on school property, and wasn't that a riot. Sometime after he made a crack about the size of their slightly overweight waitress's ass, Chris just sort of drifted away.

The more he thought about it, the less he could understand what had happened with Alex. After all, it was just an invitation. He could have just said no. He *did* just say no, but Chris didn't understand why he was being punished for even asking the question. Alex wasn't talking to him at all now, was obviously avoiding him. And fucking that other guy right under his nose—what was that about? He had to know Chris might see him.

They lived right next door to each other, for God's sake. At least when the guy was arriving, or when he was leaving, there was a chance that....

Chris froze, suddenly understanding. *Oh, shit.* "He knows."

"What?" Seth was looking at him strangely, and Chris realized he'd said the words out loud.

"Oh, sorry, nothing," he said, scrambling. "Just, uh, clearing my throat."

Seth looked at him for another moment, but then smiled again and picked up his story, and Chris went back to his train of thought. *Okay. So he knows something happened between me and Seth. So what? Why should*

that make such a difference? He had just told me he didn't do boyfriends, that I should call him for orgasms and nothing else. So why would he care what—

Oh, *fuck*. Chris practically slapped himself in the forehead. What an idiot he was. *He was lying.*

He still didn't understand. He didn't know why Alex would lie, why he freaked out so much in the first place, what the hell was happening between them. But it meant *something* had been happening between them, and Chris suddenly smiled bigger than he had in days. Maybe for the first time at all in days. And the fact that it made him so happy told him something too.

Your heart already knows.

He pressed his lips together, trying to keep from jumping out of his seat at the revelation. Seth hadn't seemed to notice that anything had changed. He was still talking, expounding on the lameness of the art major geeks with their weird clothes who act *so gay*, and finally Chris couldn't take any more.

"You know, I'm going to art school."

The words were quick, startling Seth, interrupting the stream of words. He stopped short, surprised. "Oh! Really? Um, since when?"

Chris smiled to himself. "I think I just decided."

"Just now? Uh..."

"Seth, what are we doing here?"

The poor boy now looked utterly confused. "What? You picked the restaurant."

He shook his head. "No. I mean, what are *we* doing? What are we doing?" Seth just stared at him, not speaking. So Chris continued. "We don't actually have anything in common. Not anything. Like, at all."

Seth bristled. When he spoke again, he sounded a little pissed.

"Look, I'm sorry I made a crack about art majors, okay? Shit, how was I supposed to know?"

Chris almost laughed, but he didn't. "That's not... that's not the point." He stopped, trying to figure out how to explain this. Finally, he leaned over the table and grabbed both of Seth's hands. "The person you're with should complement you, light a fire in you, make you smile. It should be someone you want to spend days *and* nights with, someone who knows your stories and shares your sense of humor, someone you can have fun with and be silly with and get serious with and get dirty with. *All* of it. I want *all* of that. And..." His voice drifted off, as he realized that Seth had gone tense, not listening to him, sneaking glances around the restaurant. Chris looked down at their joined hands and sighed, dropping them, and Seth visibly relaxed.

He tensed up again, though, when Chris stood up. "Where are you going? Wait, don't leave." He grabbed Chris's hand, pulling him down into the seat again. "Look, we can hold hands, okay? Just, maybe under the table? I'm not—"

“Seth.” He squeezed the hand that was holding his, keeping it under the table. No need to make this worse. “I don’t think we should see each other anymore.”

Seth looked genuinely hurt, and Chris’s heart ached a little to see it.

“Why not?” he finally asked, pulling his hand away and sitting back.

“Because I won’t make out with you in the middle of a restaurant?”

“No,” Chris said softly. *When the time comes, you’ll just know.*

“Because I’m in love with somebody else.”

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

CHRIS was speeding. Normally a pretty careful driver, he found that he suddenly couldn’t seem to keep control of his velocity, couldn’t seem to go at a reasonable pace. He had a destination, and a goal, and every second he spent in the car was a second he wasn’t talking to Alex. And that was something that just couldn’t wait.

It wasn’t hard to figure out where to go. Alex had complained that he spent so much time working that he’d barely had time to check out the local club scene, so Chris knew there were only a few places he might be. The first one had been a bust, and he was only five minutes away from the second possibility, five minutes that suddenly seemed like a lifetime. He needed to be there right *now*. An hour ago. Yesterday.

Not that he’d quite figured out what he was going to say yet. Chris swallowed, glancing at the rearview mirror before hastily changing lanes, thinking about it. It was one thing for Chris to know that they belonged together, but he had no idea how exactly he was going to convince Alex of that. And yet somehow, he wasn’t nervous. He didn’t need the *boldness* mantra, didn’t need his mom’s advice, didn’t need anything. He just needed to plant himself in front of the man he loved and make him see how ridiculous they both had been. And it would wipe away that other guy Alex slept with, wipe away the stupid hookup with Seth, wipe away everything and give them a clean start.

Chris swallowed again. *I hope.*

THE phone rang, and rang, and rang. Seth sat on his hillside, phone pressed to his ear, waiting for an answer. Amy wasn’t picking up, which was a little weird. It had gone to voice mail once already, and he knew she wouldn’t be ducking his call. She knew what a big deal tonight was, and she’d be surprised to be hearing from him so early. When they’d talked about it, they’d both assumed he wouldn’t have time to call her, since after dinner was over he’d be too distracted by the more X-rated activities his big date would entail. So now that he was calling at this hour, he’d figured she would pick up right away, worried, confused. Just like he was. But she didn’t.

The outgoing message began to play, and Seth pressed End with a sigh, tossing the phone on the ground next to him. He wrapped his arms

loosely around his knees, staring off into the distance. Apparently, he was on his own this time. And he couldn't figure out what had gone wrong. It wasn't like he hadn't noticed that Chris was being all quiet tonight. Even quieter than usual for him, which was really saying something. But Seth had no problem talking, so that's what he did. He joked, he told stories, he tried his damndest to make Chris smile. But nothing was working, and then Chris was cutting everything short, fucking breaking up with him before there was anything to break up. And he didn't understand. "Damn it," Seth muttered, picking up the phone again and hitting speed dial 1 again. If Amy wasn't going to answer, at least he could leave her a message, and she could call him back whenever she got back from whatever was so goddamned important that she—

"Hello?" The voice was unfamiliar, and male. Seth brought the phone in front of his face, staring at the number he'd dialed, but no, it was right, this was Amy's. What the fuck? "Hello?" the guy said again.

"Uh, hi," Seth said, bringing the phone to his ear again. "Um... is Amy there?"

"She, uh... can't really come to the phone right now. Can I take a message?"

What the *fuck*. "Who is this?"

"This is Danny. Who—oh, wait, hang on, she's coming out." Seth heard some muffled noises, and Amy's voice in the background, and then suddenly, there she was.

"Seth! Dude! What the hell are you doing calling at this hour? Why aren't you—"

"Amy, who the fuck was that? And why weren't you picking up? I called three times."

"I was in the shower. Chill out."

"In the shower? Since when do you let your hookups answer your phone?"

She paused. "Um... he's not exactly a hookup."

"What? Who is he?"

Another pause. "His name's Danny Martinez. We've been working together this summer. And we're... okay, we're kind of going out."

Seth's jaw dropped. "Holy fucking shit, Ames, *you* are—"

"I know, I know." He could practically hear the eye-rolling. "An actual relationship, with public outings and meals together and repeated sexual encounters. Never thought I'd see the day. My mother's so happy she could shit."

He laughed, big. "Amy, that's fucking great! I can't believe you didn't tell me. Good for you."

"Yeah, yeah. It must be the apocalypse or something. I'm, like, going steady with someone, and you're dating a guy. Which, enough about me, by the way. How'd it go? Why are you calling me instead of off getting down and dirty with your man?"

The smile faded as quickly as it had appeared. "Yeah. Didn't go

well. He, um, dumped me, I think.”

“Oh, shit.” She sounded genuinely concerned. “What happened?”

“I don’t... I don’t know.” Suddenly, his voice was straining. He stopped, clearing his throat. “I don’t know,” he said more quietly. “He said we don’t have anything in common.” He decided to keep the part about Chris being in love with another guy to himself for the time being. There was only so pathetic he was willing to get in one phone call.

Amy was quiet for a moment. “Do you?” she finally said.

“Do we what?”

“Do you have anything in common?” She paused, and Seth furrowed his brow. *What?* “Because, Seth, don’t take this the wrong way, babe, but, from the way you described him to me... I’ve kind of wondered that myself.”

“You have?”

“Yeah.”

He let the silence stretch out as he tried to come up with a response.

There must be *something*. Video games? No, that’s lame. And he only really played them because Chris was into them, anyway. They never had any classes together, didn’t like any of the same music. They’d had some good times, but only after a lot of beers, which Chris didn’t actually seem to like. He didn’t even care about cars. “I... shit.”

“Yeah.”

“So, okay. So maybe we’re not soulmates, exactly. What’s your point?”

“Nothing. You wanted to fuck him, and you got jealous when somebody else got to him first. Not like I don’t understand *that*.” Seth grabbed a fistful of grass, not answering. After a moment, she spoke again.

“And it still sucks to be dumped.”

“Yeah.”

“I’m just saying, maybe this wasn’t really the guy for you in the long run.”

He tore the clump of grass out all at once, then opened his fist, letting the blades fall loosely back to the ground. “So now we’re sure I should be with a guy in the long run, but the first one I’ve wanted didn’t want me?”

“Seth. No. We’re not sure of anything. Just... fuck. I’m sorry. I’m not helping.”

“No, it’s... it’s okay. I know.” He lay back on the grass, closing his eyes, taking a deep breath and then letting it out. When she spoke again, her voice was as gentle as he’d ever heard it.

“Look. Why don’t you come home for the rest of the summer? Orange County doesn’t seem to be doing you much good.”

“What? Come back to Maine?”

“Yeah. You’re barely seeing your parents. You hate your job. Quit it and come back. Danny can get you a job here, no problem. He’s nodding. See, no problem.”

“What is he, your boss?”

“His dad is.”

Seth guffawed. “Amy. Fucking the boss-man’s son? Slut.”

“Bitch. Shut up.” He could hear her smile, and he matched it with his own.

“Okay. I’ll think about it.”

“Good. Listen, I’ve got to go, but call me tomorrow, okay? And look, I know this sucks right now, but, y’know. It’s gonna be okay.”

“I know.”

He watched the sky for a while after they hung up, mulling that over.

Yeah, he thought, a little surprised by it. *I know*.

ALEX stared at his drink, not talking. Marty was saying something, hadn’t shut up all night, actually, but Alex had just sort of tuned him out. He had a sudden urge to just go home. The club was crowded, and smoky, and the bar he was hunched over was sticky with some unidentifiable substance, and had it always been so *loud* in here? And he was sick of all of it, sick of talking about it, sick of being here. He just wanted to be alone.

A hand landed on his shoulder, again. He shrugged it off, not bothering to turn around. Why was it that he always got hit on the most when he was least in the mood for it? Or maybe it just seemed that way.

Usually, he was the one doing the approaching, not that he wasn’t receptive to it happening the other way around. But not tonight. He wasn’t up for it. The guy could just go find some other ass to cruise.

The hand was back. “Look, fuck off,” he said over his shoulder. “I’m not interested, okay?”

“I just want to buy you a drink.”

Alex’s stomach clenched at the familiar voice. He turned around on his barstool, slowly. And there was Chris, with his fucking blue eyes and his stupid blond hair and his beautiful fucking body, just looking at him, waiting for a reply. “You’re not even old enough to drink,” he said, finally.

“You think Boston has the market cornered on fake IDs?”

Alex stared at him for a long, long moment. “I already have a drink,” he said, moving to turn back around. But Chris’s hand landed on his thigh, strong, stopping him.

“So forget the drink. Just talk to me.”

“I told you. I’m not interested.”

“I don’t believe you.”

Alex raised his eyebrows, surprised. “Excuse me?”

Chris took a breath, speaking a little louder now. “I think you’re lying to me. Just like you were lying when you said you didn’t believe in boyfriends.”

“Chris, what the hell—”

“Let me tell you what I’ve figured out in the last few hours. First of all, you’re full of shit.”

Alex was getting angry now. “Chris—”

“I don’t know what happened to you. I’m guessing some boyfriend fucked you over royally, but I don’t really know. I do know that I’m not him. You know? I’m not him.” Alex just stared. Chris stared back. “And I know that what you and I were doing was more than just sex.”

Alex’s chest was getting tight. His stomach still hadn’t released. It might have helped if he’d eaten something today, but he couldn’t seem to manage that. “Well, you seem to have it all figured out,” he said, unable to hide the edge in his voice.

“No. I don’t. Not at all. But neither do you.”

That was too much. He exhaled sharply, his voice all edge now.

“Look who’s the voice of experience already. A few weeks ago, you were the kid who—”

“I’m not a kid.”

“You’re nineteen years old, Chris. There are whole worlds of things you don’t know.”

“You’re twenty-six. And ditto.”

Alex clenched his jaw. “Goddamn it—”

“You want to hear what else I know?” Alex started to answer, but Chris just barreled on ahead. “I know that your favorite flavor of pancakes is blueberry. I know you think the Red Sox never should have traded Jeff Bagwell for Larry Andersen. I know you complain about your job but secretly love it, and I know you feel the same way about your friends. I know you make me laugh the way nobody ever has before, and I know that there’s nobody on this planet that I’d rather spend a lazy Saturday afternoon with, talking and joking and being idiots and making love. I know that you’ve been hurt.” He paused. “And I know that you’re scared.”

Alex’s face was getting hot. There was a pounding in his ears, and it was somehow getting difficult to breathe. But he didn’t answer.

When Chris spoke again, his voice was quieter. “I know that you know I hooked up with Seth the other day.”

And there it was. Alex’s stomach twisted, turning quickly over. He opened his mouth, but no words came out.

“It was a mistake,” Chris said. He put his other hand on Alex’s other thigh now, holding him gently in place. “I never should have done it.”

“You can do whatever you want,” Alex managed. He still couldn’t look away.

“But that’s just it,” Chris said. “I don’t want him. I only want you.”

Alex’s breathing was increasing. His heart was pounding hard now, like he was in the middle of a workout. “I saw him tonight, and I told him that. I’m not going to see him again.”

“Why not?”

A hand moved to his face now. “Don’t you know?” Chris asked, his voice soft.

Alex closed his eyes. “Stop it,” he said, quietly. “Just stop it.”

The hand stayed where it was. “Why?”

“Because I can’t do this. I’m not going to do this.” With effort, he

opened his eyes again. And there was a new look on Chris's face now. Uncertain. Sad. This newfound confidence, wherever it had come from, was rapidly slipping away. And underneath, Chris suddenly looked lost. And... heartbroken. "I can't," Alex said, barely aware of what he was saying anymore. "Not again."

Chris paused for a long time before talking. "I'm not going to hurt you like he did," he whispered. His voice was uneven. Alex suddenly realized Chris was trying to keep from crying, and his chest began to ache. "How do I know that?" he whispered back. Chris's hand was still holding his face, and he didn't move it away. He couldn't seem to move at all.

Chris leaned a little closer, pressing his lips together as he pondered his response. Finally, he spoke again. "I guess... I guess you don't," he said. "Neither of us does." They stared at each other for a long moment, just breathing. "But I think... I think some things are worth the risk." He paused. "Aren't they?" Alex didn't know how to answer, so he didn't. And Chris kept talking. "The last couple of weeks have been the best time of my life. You make me happy. I think I make you happy too." Alex exhaled slightly, watching Chris's face, not answering. Chris took it as the acknowledgment that it was, and he smiled a little. "And the sex has been the best sex of my life, not that I have much to compare it to. But I think it's been the best sex of *your* life too." He paused. "Tell me I'm wrong." He couldn't. And he couldn't tear his eyes away either. Slowly, he placed a hand on the side of Chris's face instead, mirroring him. "Holy SHIT!" Marty shouted, and Alex jumped. He'd forgotten he was still there. "Sorry! Sorry. Don't mind me." He knocked Alex on the shoulder. "Best sex of your life? You didn't tell me *that*, stud." Alex felt his cheeks growing warm. He dropped his hand. "Chris, Marty. Marty, Chris," he mumbled quickly, indicating the introduction with a tilt of his head.

Chris had dropped his hand too, and was staring at Marty. "Wait. I know that voice." Suddenly, his eyes got very wide. "You're the one who was there on Wednesday! *You're* Marty?"

"Pleased to meet you," Marty said cheerfully, waving like a dork. But Chris was staring straight at Alex now, dumbfounded. "You didn't sleep with him."

"In his dreams," Marty snorted.

Alex turned his head, glaring at his friend. "Marty, don't you have some urgent business to attend to in the other—"

"Got it. See ya, kids." He stood and moved quickly away, and Alex turned his attention back to Chris, who was still staring at him like a puzzle to be solved.

"No," he said, clearing his throat. "I didn't sleep with him."

"Why did you want me to think you had?"

Alex looked down at his hands. "I saw you with Seth. Okay? I just...

I wanted..." He cleared his throat again. "Shit." *Quit being a coward.* He

looked up, straight into those blue eyes that were going to fucking *kill* him one of these days. “It hurt. Okay?” He paused. “And I didn’t... I didn’t want you to see that.”

Chris looked at him for another long moment. And then he brought his hands to both sides of Alex’s face, leaned in, and kissed him. Alex broke it quickly, surprised, but Chris just pressed forward again, and suddenly, without quite knowing how it was happening, Alex was kissing him back. And once he started, he couldn’t seem to stop. Their lips parted and the kiss deepened, and all of a sudden there was nothing more important in the universe than meeting every move of those lips with his own. He slid his arms around Chris’s waist, drawing him closer in, kissing him like he never wanted it to end. Which he didn’t, particularly. But finally, Chris broke the kiss, leaning close, his eyes still closed. “You’re an idiot,” he panted. “We are both such idiots.”

“I know,” Alex said, kissing him again, holding him tight.

“Don’t do that again,” Chris said, between kisses. Kisses that were growing more and more urgent, more and more hot. “Either of us. We can’t do that again. God, I’ve been fucking miserable for the past three days.”

“Me too,” Alex whispered, and he was flying now, all that stupid tension gone, nothing left in his body but the need to keep kissing this beautiful man.

Chris pulled back slightly, finally opening his eyes. “Come home with me,” he said.

Alex looked at him, this perfect creature, his lips swollen and wet, his skin flushed with desire, his hair messy from Alex’s hands. “No,” he said.

Chris froze. “No?”

“We’re going to my place. I don’t think you want your mother overhearing what I’m about to do to you.”

And then Chris smiled big, his lips parted, eyes sparkling, and it was the most beautiful thing Alex had ever seen. He matched it with his own smile, squeezing Chris a little tighter. “What exactly are you going to do to me?” Chris murmured. “Should I be concerned?”

“Oh, very,” he said, kissing him one more time. “But I don’t think—”

“Oh, for God’s sakes, Alex,” Marty shouted. The take-a-hike message had apparently only gotten him as far as three stools away.

“Would you quit with the banter already and go have sex with your boyfriend?”

Chris laughed, and Alex laughed, but they didn’t turn to look at him. Alex squeezed Chris a little closer, keeping his eyes locked with those beautiful blues. “You know, I think I will,” he said. And they kissed again, one more time, well, a few more times, before finally pulling away from each other and hurrying toward the door.

WHEN they got inside the house, there was no more talking. They kissed

hungrily, sloppily, pawing at each other's clothing as they stumbled toward Alex's bed. Chris pulled at Alex's shirt, nearly ripping it, his heart flying along at a thousand miles a minute. He couldn't remember the last time he'd been this excited, needed something so much. Or someone. Eventually, he got the shirt off, and he grabbed handfuls of Alex's muscular back, digging his fingers in, pulling him closer. He needed to mark him, to leave something permanent, something lasting. Alex gasped into his mouth, but he didn't pull back. Which was good, because Chris wasn't sure whether he'd have been physically able to let go if he had. Alex's hands were trembling, tugging. He pushed Chris's shirt up as high as his armpits and then seized his skin, covering Chris's back and sides with a needy, desperate grasp. Their mouths hadn't detached from each other yet, their tongues searching, battling, finding, dancing. Alex was still walking Chris backward toward the bedroom, not such an easy task when Chris was practically trying to climb onto his body as they walked. They almost fell twice, and when they reached the bedroom doorway, Alex just grabbed the hard surface and pressed Chris against the threshold, kissing him harder than he ever had. Chris let out a soft moan as he kissed him back, delighting in every sensation: the warmth of Alex's bare stomach against his, the softness of Alex's hair running between his fingers, the hardness of the groin grinding into his own. And now Alex's hands were moving again, fumbling with Chris's shirt, pushing it up, struggling with it. The collar got caught on Chris's chin and his head jerked back slightly, thumping loudly against the doorjamb, finally breaking the kiss. Alex hissed in apology and brought a hand to the back of Chris's head, caressing it. "Ow," Chris said sheepishly, bringing his own hand around to rub the spot. "Sorry," Alex said, his eyes tender. He stroked Chris's cheek and finally slowed down, kissing his lips softly, gazing into his eyes. Chris's breath hitched for a moment as he gazed back. *God, you're so beautiful.* Carefully, Alex gathered the shirt one more time and eased it over Chris's head, tossing it to the floor. He placed both hands on Chris's cheeks and kissed him again, a long, sweet, lingering kiss. "Are you okay?" he whispered, and Chris's heart skipped again. "You could say that," he managed. Alex smiled at him, and he smiled back. "I'm usually better at this," Alex said, grinning now. Chris wrapped both arms around Alex's neck, squeezing him tightly. "Maybe I'll just have to take the lead," he said, kissing him again. It was possible that Alex made a witty retort to that, but his hands were on Chris's ass and his mouth was pressed hard against Chris's, and awareness of pretty much anything else was falling quickly by the wayside. Before he knew it, they had landed on the bed, Chris's legs wrapped tight around Alex's waist, both sets of hands roaming freely over every accessible stretch of skin. Alex was on top of him, his lips attached to

Chris's, tongue probing Chris's mouth strongly, the most delicious sounds emerging from deep in his throat. Alex worked a hand between their bodies, which was another challenge, given how tight they were pressing together, but somehow, he managed it. And then that hand was pulling at Chris's fly, and Chris forgot how to breathe.

Suddenly, Alex had Chris's pants open, and he used both hands to shove them quickly off his hips. When he broke the kiss to lean down toward Chris's erection, Chris spoke up again. "No," he gasped, sharply, quickly. Alex snapped back up again, mouth open. "Want you inside me," Chris said, his hands busy on Alex's belt now. "Make love to me. Okay?" He glanced up, holding Alex's gaze. "Okay?"

Alex nodded, desperate, covering Chris's mouth with his own again. He pulled off his own pants and underwear, managing to tangle himself in both, and Chris helped, running his hands down strong legs and then cupping Alex's ass to pull him in for another kiss. They broke long enough to get Chris's pants the rest of the way off, and Alex was breathing hard now, and Chris knew there would be no torturous teasing tonight.

They needed this too much. Needed it right *now*.

Once they were naked, Alex dove on top of Chris again, kissing him deeply, slamming a hand on the bedside table and managing to knock nearly everything off it before blindly grabbing the bottle of lube. Chris laughed, and Alex laughed with him. But when the bottle snapped open, it didn't seem so funny. They slowed down, breathing deep, both watching as Alex's first slick finger lowered to Chris's opening and gently pushed inside.

"Yes," Chris whispered, grabbing at Alex's shoulders. Alex kissed his neck as he pushed the finger deeper, massaging Chris's prostate, rubbing back and forth and back and forth, the finger buried deep inside. Chris felt his whole body respond, as if the sparks from that perfect spot were shooting through every inch of his skin. "More," Chris groaned, letting his legs fall open a little more. And now a second finger was joining the first, stretching him, working him, feeling so good. Alex scissored his fingers, working his body like an instrument he had mastered, and suddenly Chris began to worry that he wouldn't last long enough to get to what he really wanted. Before the third finger had even made it all the way in, Chris was grabbing for a condom, tearing it open, pulling Alex's hand out and pushing it away. "Now," he said, fingers trembling as he slid it onto his lover's cock and covered it with lube. "Fuck me. Fuck me. Now."

And then Alex's strong hands were on his legs, guiding them up to wrap tight around his waist, and then that thickness was easing its way inside, filling him, stretching in that perfect way, skating along the edge of pain to a deep pressure that was going to drive him out of his mind. Chris rolled his head back, clutching Alex tight, groaning something that was incoherent even to himself. Alex didn't hesitate, just pushed in deep and began a perfect rhythm, pressing again and again into exactly the right

spot. And Chris rocked his hips with him, matching every thrust. How was it possible they'd gone three entire days without doing this?

"Alex," Chris moaned, his eyes shut, losing himself in the feeling.

"Yes... God, that's so good..."

"Oh, Chris," Alex panted back, holding him tight, moving deep inside. He kissed Chris's collarbone, his neck, his face. "Chris... God..."

Chris moved his hands to Alex's ass, pulling him in deeper. The pressure was perfect, building, intensifying. "God, I love that," he said. Alex kissed him, and Chris kissed him back, meeting his tongue, rocking against him. "Harder," he whispered, and Alex grunted and redoubled his efforts, hitting right *there there there there there*, and Chris threw his head back, moaning loud.

He couldn't keep his eyes closed for long, though. He opened them and watched Alex, needing to see him, needing to drink in every bit of this. Alex's eyes were shut tight, his neck slick with sweat, his lips slightly parted. He was grunting with each thrust, the sound almost inaudible against the slap of skin as their bodies met again and again, but loud enough that Chris could hear how close Alex already was to the edge. Which was a very good thing. Because no matter how much Chris wanted this to go on forever, there was no way, not when Alex was hitting that spot with every drive forward of his cock, not when every nerve ending in Chris's body seemed to be lit up like the Fourth of July. Especially not when Alex grabbed Chris's dick, sliding easily over it, pumping it just right, with the little twist at the end that he knew Chris loved, biting down on his shoulder now, still thrusting inside.

"Oh God, Alex... oh, fuck, I'm gonna come..."

"With me." Alex's eyes were open now, staring into his own, so intense, so dark, so perfect. *Building, building, building...* "Now." Chris shouted loud as the dam broke, everything pulsing through him, all over him, shooting out in stream after stream as he came and came and came. He clung to a vague awareness of his surroundings, feeling Alex's body spasm, crying out something unintelligible as his cock pulsed inside of Chris.

They stayed there, panting, clinging to each other, Alex still deep inside. "I love you," Chris said, when he could manage words again.

Alex's whole body suddenly tensed above him, and Chris watched as his face changed. *No*. He brought his hands to Alex's cheeks, holding his face, still breathing hard. "Don't," he said.

"Don't what?" Alex's eyes were closed.

"Run away."

Alex exhaled, and his head fell forward, falling into the pillow next to Chris's head. But after a moment, he brought his hands to Chris's face and lifted up, looking him in the eyes. "I love you too," he whispered. Chris smiled, and Alex leaned in to touch their foreheads together. "And I'm not going anywhere."

If there had ever been a moment when Chris had felt this happy, he

couldn't remember it now. He rolled them over, keeping Alex inside, straddling him, gazing into his eyes. "Neither am I," he said, and he kissed his boyfriend's smile.

"ALEX! Come *on!*"

Alex walked out of the bedroom with a smile on his face, still buttoning up his shirt. "Keep your pants on. Or, actually, don't." Chris blushed, and Alex smiled a little bigger.

Chris pulled him close and kissed him sweetly, then lowered his hands and took over the buttoning. "I don't know what always takes you so long," he muttered. "What were you doing in there?"

"I had to change my shirt."

"What was wrong with the one you had on before?"

Alex leaned in a little, his lips against Chris's ear. "Somebody tore it," he growled. He turned his face slightly, watching Chris's blush deepen. He kissed Chris again, and the hands got distracted, pulling him a little closer, slipping onto his skin. And then slipping a little lower.

"Hey hey hey," Alex said, not complaining at all, as Chris's hand slid over his rapidly hardening dick. "What are you doing?"

Chris's lips were on his neck now, mouthing his way toward Alex's ear with just a *hint* of teeth, and God, he loved it when Chris did that.

"Well, we're already late," Chris said, sucking Alex's earlobe into his mouth for a second and then releasing it. Those hands were doing *very* interesting things now, unbuttoning, unzipping, finding a lot more skin.

"May as well be a little later."

"She's waiting for us," Alex pointed out. Which was not entirely consistent with the fact that his own hands were suddenly busy unbuckling Chris's belt.

"Babe, can we not talk about my mother when your cock is in my hand?" Chris said. Which Alex had to admit was a perfectly reasonable request. Chris had started a slow stroking motion, and Alex closed his eyes, grunting. "Besides, you're the one who keeps wanting us to go over there. We've been there three times in the last two weeks."

"I can't... fuck. Help it. Ungh. Her cooking is... ahh... better than... oh, shit..."

"Alex, shut up." Chris was on his knees now, grinning up at him, licking his lips.

"Okay," Alex sighed happily. That beautiful mouth went to work, and Alex watched, delighting in it. Like he always did.

Dinner would just have to wait.

The End

About The Author:

RACHEL WEST lives in the Virginia mountains, where she dotes on her loving partner and their two cats and works in a job that is much less exciting than writing about boys in love. When not wandering around in her characters' world, she loves to hike, play silly board games, and read everything she can get her hands on.

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