



Scoring in Cedarwood

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Description: Tanner Fox wasn't sure being traded to the Cedarwood Wildcats was the right path for his life, but if Dr. Dane Bloom is part of the package, then he'll play for keeps. Tanner "Foxy" Fox knows he can do one thing—play baseball. His days in the outfield are numbered, but he's a fan favorite. Everyone wants a piece of Foxy—almost everyone. The Anti-Gay Coalition wants nothing of a gay player on the town baseball team, but Tanner isn't about to back down, especially when he lands sponsorship from the silver-fox doctor in town. When Dr. Dane Bloom opts to sponsor the baseball team, he knows he's going to be asked to sponsor a player. Having a younger man living in his home and invading his trust? Why not? Dane's not wild about opening up, but when he sees Tanner, something in him shatters. He wants to get to know Tanner, beyond the Foxy façade to the man inside. Can he and the player find a way to score in Cedarwood, or will the coalition and self-doubts keep them apart?

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Chapter One

Dr. Dane Bloom strode into the baseball complex. If he'd been told a year ago there'd be a professional-style baseball program in Cedarwood, he'd have laughed. Now, standing in the building, he believed the hype. He'd always wanted to play baseball, but his aptitude in sports had lagged far behind his abilities in the classroom. Excitement shot through his veins. He refused to keep his pride hidden. His town had come into its own.

"Well?" Devlin Chase made his way up to Dane. "What do you think? You like it?"

"I do." He nodded. He'd only visited the medical and rehabilitation portions of the complex, but the state-of-the-art facility pleased him. "This is worthy of the hospital."

"Good. That's what we were going for." Devlin gestured to the doorway. "I want you to meet someone. Dr. Raji Chopra is going to serve as our team doctor. Dr. Raji, this is Dr. Dane."

The tall dark-haired man joined Devlin. Both men grinned. "Dr. Dane Bloom. I've heard good things about you."

"I hope so." Dane shook hands with Raji. He swept his gaze over his fellow doctor. Ever since he'd split from his last boyfriend, Dane had believed he wasn't going to find another man to make him happy. Raji ticked a lot of his boxes. He liked tall men—someone to look him in the eye. But if this was Devlin's attempt to fix him up, Dane wasn't having it.

“We’ve got a good bunch of players and can’t wait to start the season.” Raji winked then turned to Devlin. “I need to finish my paperwork, babe. Stop by my office before you leave.”

Babe. Ah. Dane suppressed a groan. So much for thinking he’d been fixed up. He gritted his teeth. Why had he gone right to worrying about relationships? Devlin had only introduced Raji, not pushed them together.

Raji left the corridor and disappeared into one of the offices. Devlin cleared his throat. “Sorry,” Devlin said. “He wanted to meet you.”

“And he has.” Dane folded his hands behind his back. “Since you need to get to your boyfriend, I’m going to leave.”

“I wanted to talk to you first,” Devlin said. He directed Dane across the hallway to another office. “I should’ve told you I was seeing Raji. We didn’t think it would happen, but it did. I apologize for pushing our relationship under your nose.”

“Don’t be sorry for being happy.” Dane stayed by the doorway. He drank in the view of the room. “Is this your office?”

“It is.” Devlin blushed. “I wanted to keep things simple.”

“Being across the hall from Raji doesn’t hurt.” Dane nodded once. “Sorry. I’m being catty.”

“You have the right.” Devlin tensed. “What you and I had wasn’t going to last. We’re too different.”

“I know.” He’d enjoyed dating Devlin, but his former boyfriend was right—they weren’t meant to go the distance. But he was thirty-eight and wanted to settle down.

Too bad his ex hadn't wanted that, too. "What did you want to speak to me about? I've seen the rest of the complex and I'm happy my medical group is a sponsor. You've done well."

"Thank you." Devlin paused. His cheeks reddened. "I never thought we'd be at this point—friendly."

"What's to argue? We split and we're still talking. I see no reason to be angry." He'd packed the hurt away ages ago. Dane had no issues looking back, but he preferred to move forward.

"Just... Never mind." Devlin sank behind his desk and his chair creaked. "I wanted to discuss the possibility of you sponsoring a player."

"I don't know." Dane shook his head. "Devlin, I'm best when I'm at my practice or when I'm on my own."

"You say that, but I don't believe it." Devlin rested his elbows on the table. "We have three players that need a sponsor family. I've got something in the works for two of the players, but the third one... He's a custom fit for you."

"Custom fit?" Jesus. "You're buttering me up."

"Of course."

"Why? I'm not looking for a roommate." He didn't spend enough time at home to have house plants, let alone someone living with him.

"You'd both live at your house, but you wouldn't have to see him." Devlin groaned. "Why do you have to make this hard? Don't fight me. This player needs a place to live while he plays ball and you've got the room."

“I’m never home and I’m not a good fit for anyone.” He massaged his temples. “Remember what Phillip said? Your brother hates me and you and I are friends at best. You’ve both claimed I’m horrible to live with, so why would you push me to having someone I don’t know exist in my house?”

“My brother hates you because he’s a prick.”

Ever since Dane and Phillip had split, Dane had wondered if he was meant to be part of a twosome. Thank God he’d never mentioned to Phillip he’d dated Devlin. The brothers would never speak again. “I’m at work all the time and I’m happy on my own. You said I’m grouchy. Why would someone want to share my house if they have to deal with a snarly man?”

“You’re a liar.”

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“You heard your brother. He dumped me because I couldn’t give him enough and you dumped me for being gone too much.”

“He’s a needy bastard,” Devlin said. “As for what I said, Dane, I was hurting, but I was also lashing out so you’d hurt, too. We had fun, but we needed to be real. I like a guy who’s around. You’re dedicated to your job—which is not wrong. It happens. Don’t beat yourself up because I wasn’t strong enough to understand who you are and because my brother is selfish.”

“I’m trying, but it’s not easy.” He’d never expected to hear Devlin apologize...ever.

“I hate to admit this, but my brother is a chump. He expected you to take care of him. You were supposed to be home and at his command.” Devlin sagged in his seat. “I told him you were dedicated to your profession, but he refused to listen. He knew the score.”

“I know.” He’d told Phillip many times that his work with his patients came first. Maybe he’d always known Phillip wasn’t his future, but he’d never seen the point of putting Phillip before his job.

“Life doesn’t work the way my brother wants—people aren’t pawns for him to use.”

“I know.” He shook his head again. “I couldn’t afford his tastes, either.” He’d gone into debt trying to make Phillip happy. He never wanted to work that hard for so little ever again.

“Which is why I encouraged him to move on,” Devlin said.

“You did?”

“Dane. I knew you were going through hell.”

“I’m stunned.” Now he’d seen a side of Devlin he hadn’t thought existed.

“Honey, I knew he’d never give up and he’d drive you to bankruptcy. He needed to grow up and go somewhere,” Devlin said. “He’s moved on with Brian, but he refuses to mature.”

He nodded. “I remember the night Phillip left. He shouted, raved and accused me of being cold. Imagine if he’d known I dated you first. He swore I’d never find someone better than him and I’d end up alone. Maybe he was right. I’m better off on my own.” But that didn’t dull the ache in his heart.

“He was drunk that night.” Devlin leaned forward. “I couldn’t let him do that to you. I should’ve said something before that night, but he’s my brother and I thought he’d change.”

The wind rushed out of Dane and he eased onto the closest chair. His head hurt. He’d tried so hard to be good for Phillip. He’d thought he was a horrible person because of Phillip. He’d thought he wasn’t good enough to be with anyone.

“You deserve better than my brother.”

“I did,” Dane said. “He’s in the past.”

“You do and past, present...it doesn’t matter.” Devlin toyed with his tablet. “See this player? This is Tanner Fox. When he’s off the ballfield, he’s quiet, shy and does his job. He’s the quintessential Gary Cooper type. When he’s in front of an audience, he becomes a different person. He falls right into the Foxy Fox persona. He’s one hell of

a ballplayer, but he's got to find balance. He needs to be part of a family and in a situation with someone who won't cater to his ego but will make him mellow out. All he really needs to do is come in, have some food, go to practice, be at the ballpark and play baseball. He won't make a mess and won't throw parties. When he's not in public, he keeps to himself."

"I see." Dane hesitated to answer. He felt imaginary hands pushing him. "Why do I feel like I'm being asked to adopt him?"

"You're not." Devlin laughed. He pointed to the photo of Tanner. "He needs a sponsor family and you're perfect."

"I'm not."

"Yes, you are." Devlin left his chair. He held the tablet in front of Dane. "See? He's cute, young and not going to cause trouble."

Dane perused the photograph on the tablet. In his headshot, Tanner did look cute, but so young. "He looks twelve."

"He's twenty-five. Promise."

"He doesn't look it. Does he shave? He can't have more than three chin hairs." Yet, he was drawn to Tanner. He wanted to see the rest of the player, but he wasn't sure if sponsorship was in his plans.

"He's twenty-five and yes, he shaves." Devlin switched photos. "See? He loves to play to the crowd. The shrieks from the ladies ratchet up his ego and the way he works the male portion of the audience... He's dangerous. He can hit well when he's focused. If he's got a stable place to live and feels secure, he'll settle down."

“Is he gay?” Dane blurted. Fuck. Tanner’s sexuality wasn’t his business.

“I don’t know.” Devlin sat on the edge of his desk. “Give him a chance. You might find you’re compatible.”

“Are you trying to fix me up? Or get me to sponsor him?” Dane narrowed his eyes. “You’re being rather persuasive.”

“You can’t date him.”

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“Ah.” Good to know. He wasn’t looking for a boyfriend and preferred knowing Devlin wasn’t trying to hook him up. Still, he couldn’t shake his irritation with Devlin. Why hadn’t his friend told him about butting into the relationship with Phillip? Why keep his intrusion quiet for so long? He appreciated Devlin caring enough to get him out of a bad situation, but he could’ve said something.

“Well?” Devlin pointed to the tablet screen. “Tanner?”

“What do I have to do?” He couldn’t believe he’d capitulated. Then again, he hadn’t seen much of a reason to say no.

“Feed him, give him a place to stay and be supportive. That’s it. If you want, we have an app that shows you how he’s playing and when he’s in a game.” Devlin grinned. “He’s got his own transportation, so you don’t have to drive him anywhere.”

He should consider this decision longer with careful, thoughtful musing. He wasn’t one for snap decisions. “Sure.” Had he just agreed? So much for considering his options and thinking this through. According to Devlin’s widening grin, he’d not only agreed but must’ve looked pleased, too. Well, shit.

“I’ll give him your address and he’ll report to you tonight.” Devlin shook Dane’s hand. “You won’t regret it.”

“How can I? If this is as painless as you claim, I should be fine.” He stifled a groan. He’d just optioned to have a minor league baseball player live with him. He liked the sport and always wanted to play, but never thought he’d sponsor a member of the team. His fellow doctor at the medical group, McCormack Stevens, loved baseball.

He should be the one sponsoring a player. He'd been the one to suggest the practice put their money and name into the team. He probably already had a player living with him, but still.

He shook hands with Devlin. "He'll be at my house tonight?"

"Yes. I'll send the information to you both. He'll learn about you and you'll know everything about him. Deal?" Devlin asked. "It's a good pairing. You'll temper him and he'll bring you out of yourself."

"Yeah." Hadn't Devlin said something about them not dating? If he was going to be good for Tanner and vice versa, there had to be more than just living together involved and that was off limits. Still, he couldn't tamp down his giddiness. "I'll look for the email." He'd just opted to take in a baseball player.Swell.

* * * *

Tanner drove like hell. He had twenty minutes to reach the baseball complex before the offices closed for the evening.Jesus.Why had he been traded? He'd been just fine in Chicago. Okay, so he hadn't gone to Chi town, but there wasn't much wrong with Gary, Indiana, was there? He'd been happy. After a few more games, he'd be able to prove to the head honchos he belonged at the next level.

Instead, he'd been traded. He'd hit a skid in his batting average and his numbers had slipped. The downturn wouldn't be forever. He knew that to his core. Baseball was his life. He couldn't do anything else. His college degree had been worthless because he'd spent more time practicing than studying in the classroom. He should've been able to step into a broadcast booth and dissect the game, but no. He had no idea what to do once he got there. His coaches had him passed so they could keep him on the team. Not exactly ethical, but back then he hadn't worried about ethics. Baseball was in his blood. But now the owner of the Yellow Jackets knew the only thing he could

do was play ball.

What his former owner thought didn't matter. Now he belonged to the Cedarville Wildcats.

Tanner knew nothing about Ohio. What was in the state? So far, all he'd seen were cornfields, barns and cattle. Oklahoma had all those things, too. What made this state different? Nothing. He groaned. The longer he spirited down the road, the more it felt like being lost in the middle of nowhere.

He spotted a sign in the distance.

Cedarwood, Crestline and Danbury. Exit 1 Mile.

He was close. Good. At the exit, he left the freeway and turned north in the direction of the sign for Cedarwood. He still had ten miles to go. He thunked his head on the seatback when he reached the stop sign. Christ. Ten miles seemed like an eternity. If he ever arrived in Cedarwood, he'd take a long nap.

His phone rang. He tapped the button on the stereo display to connect the call and set it to speaker. According to the ID, Devlin Chase was on the line. Devlin Chase owned the Cedarwood Wildcats and had his hands in every facet of the running of the team. Shit. He had to pay attention and be professional.

"Mr. Chase," Tanner said. His hands shook on the wheel. "How are you?"

"I'm great. You?" Devlin asked.

"I'm doing well." He turned right onto the two-lane road. "I'm about seven miles out. I should be at the offices soon."

“Good. When you reach the outskirts of town, let me know. I’ve got directions for you,” Devlin said. “I’ve also secured you a sponsor.”

“You did?” He hadn’t expected that. He’d struggled to find a sponsor in Gary. No one wanted to open their home to a traveling baseball player. Instead, he’d spent the last six months lying about his home situation and working enough hours each week at an Italian restaurant to make the rent. He’d barely slept and all his money went to his housing situation or baseball. He snorted. His money and work situation had to be the root of his hitting issues.

“Tanner?”

Shit.He was still on the phone with Devlin. “Sorry. I’m driving. So I have a sponsor?”

“You do. He’s a doctor.”

“Doctor? An older guy?” The man had to be older. Tanner didn’t know any young medics. “Will he be a creeper?”

“No,” Devlin said. “I think you’ll like him. He’s a few years older than you, but not by much. He’s a silver fox, though, and I know him personally. You should get along without incident.”

Fuck me.He was going to hate this. “You know him. Are you kidding me?” The Fox with a silver fox? The pairing would never work. He’d rather be sponsorless than the object of ridicule on the team. “Maybe there’s someone better.”

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“Excuse me? I don’t expect you’ll be boinking my friend,” Devlin said.

“Boinking?” How old was Mr. Chase? “I’m gay, but I’m not exactly broadcasting it. The guy might not know or care.”

“I have the feeling you’ll be fucking sooner than later.”

Tanner gritted his teeth. He wasn’t making a good impression on Devlin Chase. Normally, he’d be quiet and cooperative. It was only when he took the field that he let his ego control him. Now, he couldn’t seem to keep his mouth shut.

“I put you with Dr. Bloom because he has the space, the money, a crazy schedule and no interest in you whatsoever,” Devlin said. “Do you understand?”

“He’s straight.” Good.

“No.”

Damn it. “Oh?” He shouldn’t be intrigued by Dr. Bloom being gay, but his heart beat a little faster and his interest rose—even if the guy was older and a silver fox. Why? Because Tanner had been without a lover or boyfriend for too long. He needed to feel someone in his arms and someone holding him. Besides, he wanted to come out and be himself all the way—not just live up to his image on the field.

“Tanner?”

“Yes?” Time to focus. He spotted the city limits sign. “I’m at the edge of town. I

should be nearing the offices, correct?”

“Yes. Turn left on Park Street and follow it past the aluminum plant. We’re behind the factory. The lights are on around the stadium, so you shouldn’t be able to miss it,” Devlin said. “See you very soon.”

“Yes.” He hung up and swung onto Park Street. The aluminum factory lumbered against the twilight sky. Was the factory abandoned? He’d have to ask Devlin. Behind the building, a gigantic Wildcat sign caught his attention. He couldn’t miss the neon lights. Despite the huge advertisement along the front of the stadium, the complex wasn’t large. He wasn’t sure why he’d expected bigger. None of the complexes were enormous, but this had to be the smallest stadium he’d seen. Then again, the town wasn’t large, either. They probably had a total of five traffic lights in the village.

Christ. He deserved to be in a bigger market. He could play the game of baseball. His on-field persona, Foxy, drew in the crowds.

Tanner turned onto the next road and continued around the complex to the parking lot. The town of Cedarwood might be underwhelming, but they had an interesting ballfield. Trees ringed the property and many of the walls were covered in artistic vines. There were even copious amounts of green space in the parking lot.

“Not bad,” he muttered. He wouldn’t buy in until he stood in front of a Cedarwood crowd, though. He parked in the staff lot. Where were the guards? Security?

A man strode up to the car. Tanner knew him right away. He rolled the window down. “Devlin Chase. It’s good to see you again.”

“You made it. I knew you would,” Devlin said. He stood next to the driver’s side of Tanner’s vehicle. “Nice wheels.”

“It was a bonus from a dealership next door to the Ferrell City Slickers. They offered a free Corvette to anyone who could hit thirty-eight. I hit forty home runs last year and got the car.” He turned the engine off and left the vehicle. “I could’ve had something more sensible, but it was a free ’Vette. I’m not turning down a free car.”

“You won’t be offered anything like that around here, so it’s a good thing you took it.” Devlin nodded. “You might get free ice cream or your laundry done for nothing at the laundromat.”

“I see.” There weren’t sick perks in Cedarwood? No wonder no one wants to play here.

“You can’t be quite so entitled out here, but our fans are rabid,” Devlin said. “We’re a small venue, but our fans turn out. The businesses in Cedarwood will help you out, but on a lesser level than you’re used to. We don’t give away cars. Sorry.”

He should’ve guessed. “I’m not going to be paid in chickens or kittens, right?”

“Don’t be a jackass.” Devlin frowned. “I could cut you from the team before you even have a workout.”

“Sorry.” His damn ego... He’d have to rope it in.

“I got you a sponsorship, like I mentioned.”

“Does he know I’m gay?” Tanner asked. He leaned against the rear fender. “Is it going to be an issue?” He’d been kicked out of two sponsor homes because of his sexuality. Although he’d tried to be understanding and didn’t flaunt being gay, the sponsors didn’t want him around.

“Did you forget? Your sponsor is gay, too,” Devlin said.

“You’re throwing us together and forbidding us to date. You do realize the sparks will fly.”

“He’s your sponsor and isn’t interested in dating you. This is a place for you to stay.”

Tanner sighed. He had to be honest with Devlin. “I’ve bent the rules before.”

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“I know.” Devlin gestured to the office building. “Come inside. We’ll talk.”

“Let me roll my window up and lock the car.” He accomplished both tasks then followed Devlin. He drank in the view inside the complex. He appreciated the electric atmosphere. The scent of cleanser curled around him. The floors glimmered beneath his feet. He could see himself playing here for more than one season. Was that bad? Maybe not.

“So.” Devlin ushered Tanner into an office. “I’ve heard the rumors. Are they true?”

“Depends on which ones.” Tanner folded his arms and widened his stance. He’d be honest, but he wasn’t going to volunteer every detail.

“You had a job while you played ball in Gary,” Devlin said.

“I did.” He sucked in a ragged breath then exhaled. “I had no choice. If I wanted to eat and sleep in a stable place, I had to pay for it. Maddow Davis at Ciro’s allowed me to wait tables three days a week and live above the restaurant.”

“Tanner.” Devlin groaned. He massaged his forehead.

“I’d been tossed out of my sponsor family’s home because they didn’t want a gay baseball player living with them. What was I supposed to do?” Tanner asked. “I had to survive. I wanted to keep playing with the team, but I needed a place to stay.”

“There’s not much you can do, but it still irks me.” Devlin shook his head. “I heard the rumors and now coming from you, the truth pisses me off, but it’s in the past.”

“I had to... Wait. You’re okay with it?” Tanner asked.

“Let me show you something.” Devlin gestured to a door at the side of the office.

“Are you going to throw me out?” He stuffed his hand into his pockets and followed Devlin. When he stepped through the doorway, his breath lodged in his throat. The ballfield. He marveled at the pristine turf, the bright colors and welcoming spirit in the stadium. “Damn. This is nice.”

“We have few complaints.” Devlin faced Tanner.

“I can see why.” He leaned against the retaining wall and the weight of the moment hit him hard. “When is practice?” He paused. “You’re letting me practice, right?”

“You start tomorrow, but after you meet your sponsor.” Devlin notched his chin in the air. “I don’t like what you had to do to keep playing ball. That’s not fair. You should’ve been able to focus on playing. How you conduct your personal life, as long as you’re not doing anything illegal, isn’t anyone’s business. I’m sorry you had to go through that, but I hope this experience with Dr. Bloom is better. We need you in the line-up.”

“I’m happy to be here and will do my best to live up to your expectations. I’ll do my best to stay in my sponsorship situation as well.” He’d thought he’d hate it here, but now that he’d stepped onto the property and seen the field, he wanted to stay in Cedarwood.

Chapter Two

Dane finished cleaning the spare bedroom and stepped back to inspect his work. Devlin had shown him one photograph, but the more they talked, the more Devlin swore Tanner was better looking in person. The man was handsome in the

image...how could he be better in person? Dane shook his head. He had a feeling Devlin wanted to mess with him. Dane preferred order and to know what would happen next. Surprises chafed him and Devlin loved to keep him on his toes.

Dane straightened the comforter then scrubbed his forehead with the back of his hand. He'd been away from his office all day, but he had to be sure his player was someone he wanted in his home. What if Devlin had read the guy wrong and had hired a dangerous man? Probably not, but still.

According to the last email from Devlin, the ballplayer, Tanner Fox, had been given the keys and directions to Dane's home. The very thought of allowing a stranger into his home bothered Dane. He checked the clock. Devlin had said Tanner would be there by nine. He had ten minutes or he'd be late.

Dane left the bedroom and headed to the kitchen. When he'd bought the house, he'd considered the ground-floor bedroom with exterior door a silly feature. He wasn't planning on having guests over much and why did they need their own exterior exit? But he'd loved the layout of the home otherwise and kept the guest room door locked at all times.

The doorbell rang and Dane froze. Tanner? He checked his watch. If so, the man was punctual. Score one for the ballplayer.

Dane strode through the home to the foyer. The door opened. Shit. He'd forgotten about the agreement including Tanner having keys to his home.

"Hello." Dane waited across the foyer for Tanner to enter. His heart beat faster and the temperature in the room had to have spiked. His throat ran dry. "Hi," he managed.

"Hi." Tanner offered his hand. "I'm Tanner Fox. I'm also known as Foxy. Per the directive from Mr. Chase, I'm yours for the season."

Dane nodded. He wanted to speak, but his tongue felt sixteen sizes too big for his mouth. Plenty of handsome men had come and gone in his life. He'd had his share of relationships, but he'd never had anyone stay with him just to have a roof over their head and something to eat. He could've sworn the earth stopped moving when he met Tanner's gaze. The man was gorgeous. Tall, slender, seemingly healthy and oh so off limits.

"Are you Dr. Bloom?" Tanner asked. "Are you his roommate?" He paused then waved his hand in front of Dane's face. "Are you okay?"

Oh fuck. He'd been caught staring. "Sorry. I'm Dr. Dane Bloom. It's nice to meet you." Did he sound ridiculous? Probably.

"Right." Tanner didn't appear impressed. He dropped his duffel bag on the floor.

Dane wanted to kick himself. He was a respected member of both the medical community and the community in Cedarwood, and an adult. He could conduct himself in public with ease, but the moment a handsome man walked into his home, he'd forgotten himself. He needed to screw his head on straight, but the feat was so hard because of Tanner.

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“Do you have a space for me?” Tanner crinkled his eyebrows. “What should I call you?”

Dane tipped his head. He expected to come into contact with Tanner often, but he had to be cordial right now. He couldn’t hide from Tanner during the duration of his stay. “Dane.”

“Uh-huh. Dane. It’s a pleasure to meet you.” Tanner smiled. “I’m glad you offered your home for my use.”

Dane slipped into his professional attitude. “I do have a place for you to stay and I’m glad you’re here. Do you need help bringing your belongings in?”

“I’ve got another bag, but I’ll manage. My gear is back at the ballpark,” Tanner said and scooped up his bag. He walked with a swagger and his ass filled the jeans out a little too well.

Dane fought the urge to drool. He’d bet Tanner would be dynamite in the sack. “Okay. Well, your room is down here.” He directed Tanner to the guest suite. “There’s a bathroom with shower connected to your room.” He pointed to the exterior door. “This goes outside and I usually keep it locked. I don’t go in here often, so you don’t have to worry about my intrusion.” He tapped the doorframe. “The fridge is always stocked, but if there’s anything you want—something particular—let me know. I’ve got a space in the garage for your car as well.”

“Nice.” Tanner dropped his bag on the bed. “It’s not frilly. The last home I stayed in involved so much lace.”

“I like clean lines and modernity,” Dane said. “Lace isn’t my forte.”

“Yet you live in a remodeled Victorian home.” Tanner grinned. “I love what you’ve done with the place.”

“One can keep a contemporary look on the inside and have the original exterior. I like a few antique touches along with my cool modern lines.” Dane hooked his thumbs in his front pockets. He’d worked hard to make his home inviting and clean, yet still fit within the Victorian framework.

“Sure.” Tanner sat on the bed. “I’m guessing you have rules, too?”

“A few.” Are rules bad?

“Like?”

“Besides the ones in your player contract, I expect you to observe quiet hours from around eleven p.m. to six a.m. I expect you to be discreet as well. Don’t bring people over and no parties while I’m not here,” Dane said.

“You’re no fun.”

“I like my privacy.”

“So no big bashes. Got it.” Tanner nodded. “Makes sense.”

Dane swallowed his irritation. Tanner’s swagger and attitude would be the death of him. The guy knew how to be cool yet aggravating.

“Anything else?” Tanner asked.

He'd lost track...shit. "No guests, parties, observe quiet hours...lock up and don't leave a mess in your wake. I don't clean messes that aren't mine." He shuddered to think about scrubbing someone else's bathroom.

Tanner nodded again.

"So you know, I'm gay and proud," Dane said. "While I don't care that I am, there are those in town who do. Some folks would like to make my life miserable because I'm not straight. In case they get bold and decide to rob me—or anyone decides to really—I'd prefer you lock up and use the security system. If someone really wants to rob me, I'm sure the system and locks won't mean much, but they give me peace of mind."

"Understood."

He paused. "I'm sorry. I'm being overbearing, aren't I? I've never had a baseball player live with me."

"Have you had anyone live with you?" Tanner frowned then chuckled. "You could have all the players you want."

Dane froze and replayed what Tanner had said. Oh shit.

"I meant, sponsored ones."

He shook his head. "When I get nervous, I can't stop talking and I sound pompous. That's not what I meant. I'm trying to be welcoming, but it's not working."

"I'm tripping you up." Tanner laughed. "I'm not known as Foxy for nothing. I'm not here to date you, but I'm all for a little attention. I'm also all for following rules. I respect you and your home and I'll do what you want to give you that peace of

mind.”

“Thank you.” He hesitated again as he considered the first half of what Tanner had said. “You know I meant sponsorship—not dating.” Jesus. He could handle himself in the office and with patients, but not a handsome baseball player.

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Tanner snorted. “I’m teasing you to get you to loosen up. I’m not going to get wild and crazy. I won’t open your house up to everyone who walks by. I know boundaries and even though I should feel insulted by the rules, I understand. You’re a guarded person. That’s cool. Rest assured I’ll treat you with respect. You won’t know I’m here.”

“Well, okay.” Dane pinched the bridge of his nose. “I’m sorry. I’ll relax in time. Let me help you with your bag.”

“I’m good.” Tanner grinned. “Get your heart rate back into a normal range.” He clapped Dane on the shoulder then walked out of the room.

Dane bowed his head. So much for making the right impression. He’d messed the welcome all up and put a wedge between himself and Tanner—and they had to live together. What did he have to show for his overprotectiveness? His privacy and his home were intact, so there were pluses. But Tanner was a tad too handsome for Dane’s own good. He scrubbed both hands over his face. “Dev, I hate you,” he mumbled. “Why’d you swear I needed to sponsor a hot baseball player?”

* * * *

Tanner retrieved his bag from the trunk. He should put the car away in the garage—maybe after he settled in.

Dr. Dane confused and intrigued him. On one hand, the man came across so stuffy and well-crafted, but on the other, very nervous. He was cute, too. He could see himself making a move on Dr. Dane. But Devlin’s words came to mind—no dating

the hosts. Did Devlin realize Dr. Dane ticked almost every one of Tanner's boxes for a possible date? Probably not.

Tanner wandered into the house. Bone-deep weariness hit him. For the first time in a long while, he didn't want to play the role of Foxy. He wanted to be a baseball player without a reputation. He was getting too old for the brash persona. He'd found out two years ago not everyone wanted to fuck him and those who did just wanted to say they'd been with him. They wanted attention because of what he'd done. How is that fair? Screw that. He should focus on baseball—not getting in Dr. Dane's pants.

“You have the keys. Here's the security code, as well as a remote for the garage.” Dane strode into the bedroom and collided with Tanner. He grasped Tanner by the shoulders. “Sorry.”

“You didn't know I'd be coming in and out.” Tanner breathed in Dr. Dane's scent—clean, fresh and sexy. He cleared his throat but didn't shrug out of the doctor's hold. He needed to get a grip on his libido and willed his burgeoning erection to stay hidden. “I'm going to pull the car into the garage.”

Dr. Dane nodded and let go. “Sure. Help yourself.”

“Thank you.” He took the remote, keys and paper from the doctor. He danced back and forth, trying to dodge Dane. “Sorry. Are we going to two-step?”

“I'm...” Dane ducked around Tanner. “Good night.”

“Yeah. Good night.” Tanner tucked the new keys and remote into his pocket. “Oh, wait. Is this the code for the house or what?”

“The alarm system, yes. You tap the keypad just to arm it, but if you accidentally trip the alarm, then that's the code.” Dane stood in the corridor. “Anything else?”

“No. I’m good for now.” But he could use another one of those not-quite hugs. He wanted to be pressed against Dr. Dane. “I appreciate everything you’re doing.” He dropped his second bag in the bedroom before heading through the garage to the driveway. He parked his car in the empty stall. A strange feeling swept over him—like he belonged in the good doctor’s home. Odd. He hadn’t put down roots anywhere in five years. Other than living over the restaurant, he hadn’t stayed in the same place for more than a few months at a stretch. Why is residing in the doctor’s house any different? He wasn’t sure.

He pressed the button on the fob to close the garage door and went inside. He debated wandering through the house but opted to head back to his bedroom suite. Dane didn’t strike him as the type to appreciate intrusions. He put his clothes away then flopped onto the bed.

Someone wanted him. Okay, so maybe the doctor had only sponsored him, but he hadn’t said no to having him live there. Yes, Dane was a little different, but so what? He could deal with the doctor’s quirks.

His phone pinged. Tanner checked the notification—a text from Devlin Chase.

Settling in? Happy with your sponsor?

He shrugged. He had to answer, but with tact.

Sure. He’s okay. I hope things work out. Will sign in tomorrow on the app and see you at practice in the morning.

What a liar. He loved the idea of having a gay man as his sponsor. He had the freedom to come and go as he pleased, no one would judge him for his sexuality and it was a stable home. Who could argue?

He checked in via the team app then tossed his phone aside on the bed. Devlin Chase and everyone else with the Wildcats would know he'd come to town. Good. He wasn't leaving any time soon—unless his hitting slump continued.

Fuck me. He didn't want to think about his statistics or much of anything else. If he focused on what he wasn't doing, he'd never get anywhere. The slump had dominated his thoughts. That had to be why he'd gotten into a decline on the field. He'd deliberated too long on his situation. He'd let his need for a second job and the other stresses in his life overrun his game brain.

He turned the lamp off. Shafts of light from the security floods seeped through the slats of the window blinds, giving the room an odd striped glow. He should change out of his clothes and into pajamas, but the will to do so wasn't there. Despite being tired, he couldn't sleep.

Tanner kicked out of his socks. He stretched and rubbed his chest. Silly thoughts entered his mind. He'd been alone a long time. Despite not having a date in the last six months, he wasn't upset about being without a guy. But he did miss the touch of a lover. Someone to make him feel important. To be loved. He missed having his boyfriend beside him as he slept and waking up to a hard male body in his bed.

Dane appeared to be in shape—just the way Tanner liked. He struck Tanner as the type who would cuddle. Tanner would have to work to get under Dr. Dane's skin and open him up, but once he did, he had the feeling the doctor would be a world-class snuggler.

Tanner shoved his shirt out of the way, exposing his abs. His skin sizzled. Had the temperature in the room hit an all-time high? His cock hardened. He caressed his flat belly then down to his erection. The clothes had to go. He stripped and embraced the cooler air on his body.

A groan rumbled in his throat. He pinched his nipple, then wrapped one hand around his dick. Touching himself helped with the pressure in his being, but not enough. He'd rather have a handsome man there with him. Dr. Dane would do nicely. He longed to hear the doctor's voice and feel his breath on his neck. Was Dr. Dane a biter? Screamer? A bottom? He imagined Dane's hands on his body.

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“Yes, touch me.” Heat enveloped him. He stroked himself in time with the pinches. “Mark me.” Tanner panted. He needed more than just touches. He planted his feet and braced his shoulders on the bed. Despite the darkness in the room, he closed his eyes. He massaged his balls and continued to stroke his shaft. The pleasure overwhelmed him. He groaned again and writhed.

What if Dr. Dane were there watching him? He let his mind wander. He wanted the doctor to join him in masturbating. Shoulder to shoulder, tandem stroking. Fuck, that’s hot. He moaned. Would Dane hear him? He didn’t care. Part of him wished the doctor would and come investigating.

Tanner arched his back. He couldn’t catch his breath. Every nerve ending in his body was on fire. He slid his fingers between the crack of his ass. Jesus, he wanted to be fucked. No, he needed to be. He licked his lips and stroked faster. He toyed with his asshole. With each thrust, he flexed his hole.

“Dane,” he murmured. He’d only met the guy that day, but damn, Dane had made an impression. He wished he had more than two hands. Then he could touch himself everywhere—better yet, he wanted Dane to be there with him.

He allowed his mind to stray to fantasy. As he stroked his cock, Dane wandered into the room.

“Thought I heard you moving,” Dane said. “Damn.” He paused in the doorway. “That’s hot.”

“Join me.” Tanner kept his eyes closed as he embraced the fantasy. “Don’t want to be

alone.” He imagined Dane opening his shirt, sending buttons flying across the room. The garment drooped and gave Tanner glimpses of his toned chest. He settled beside Tanner on the bed. A lock of Dane’s dark hair slid over his forehead. His eyes shimmered.

Dane rested his hand on top of Tanner’s, stroking in time with him. “Sexy.”

Although it was only a fantasy, Tanner loved what he saw. His blood heated and his thoughts blurred. He could almost feel the warmth of Dane’s breath on his skin and the weight of his hand on Tanner’s. “Fuck me,” Tanner murmured. A whimper escaped his throat.

He pumped his hips, pushing his dick into his curled fingers. He couldn’t stifle his groans. Tanner tensed, his nipples beading. He’d closed his eyes, but now squeezed them shut. His restraint snapped and his movements turned jerky. He moaned as he came. Cum spurted onto his hand and belly. Fuck, the orgasm had happened too fast. He’d wanted to draw out the act of masturbating, but he hadn’t played with himself in so long. Oh well. He’d craved the release.

Tanner continued to stroke, but slower. He panted. Within moments, he sagged on the bed. Too bad Dane hadn’t somehow joined him. The man would’ve gotten one hell of a show—a short one, but still. Next time he’d hold out longer. He’d savor the moments.

Another wave of calm washed over him. Shit, I needed that. He relaxed more than he had since he’d learned about being traded to Cedarwood. Sleep filled his brain now. He was in a safe place. Dr. Dane was gay and didn’t mind that Tanner was, too. He opened his eyes long enough to grab his shirt. He cleaned the cum from his chest and hand. For the first time since he’d arrived on the scene in Cedarwood, he wasn’t worried about his home or his job. He could be successful in this town, with this ball club and in this personal situation.

The Wildcats hadn't seemed like the right fit for him, but the longer he stayed in Dr. Dane's home and around the sexy man, the more he believed fate had made the right choice.

* * * *

Tanner woke the next morning happier and more refreshed than he had in ages. He left the bed and snorted. His shirt from the previous day lay crumpled in in the blankets. He couldn't remember the last time he'd slept with a garment soiled from a hot night of masturbating. Probably because he hadn't done it in quite a while.

He shuffled nude into the shower. Despite his misgivings, he appreciated Dane's attention to detail. The doctor had left soap, shampoo, conditioner and a razor for him. Was the doctor trying to take care of him? Tanner hoped so. He'd packed his essentials, but he wasn't in the mood to dig any of it out of his bag.

He turned on the water and listened for Dane in the house. The quiet both soothed and unnerved him. He liked the privacy but couldn't shake the feeling he'd intruded on Dane's private space. But Dane had agreed to sponsor him. If he'd had misgivings, he wasn't voicing them. Maybe he had trodden on Dane's life. He wasn't sure.

Still, the spring had returned to Tanner's step. He looked forward to practice today and meeting his new teammates.

He showered then dressed in a simple T-shirt and jeans. Unlike some of the guys on his former teams, he preferred to stay low-key in his attire. Then again, he didn't have space in his duffel bags for neckties and suits. The garments would've ended up rumpled by the time he got to his next destination.

Tanner padded barefoot across the house to the kitchen. A piece of paper had been

propped up on the counter.

Interesting. Tanner unfolded the page.

Tanner,

I don't cook much, but I've stocked the fridge and what I have you're welcome to. Let me know what you'd like for meals so I can pick it up at the store. I'm still getting used to having a housemate and this sponsoring thing, so forgive me if I make mistakes. Let me know when you're ready to do laundry and I'll go through the instructions.

Have a great day at practice and with the new team. I'm sure you're going to be fantastic. If you have problems or need to touch base with me, call my cell and if I don't answer or you don't want to leave a voicemail, call the office.

Dane

Tanner abandoned the note on the counter. Dane's attention to detail and willingness to work with him scored points with him. He could rely on Dane—just like a teammate. He rounded the bar and opened the refrigerator. Despite Dane claiming there wasn't much to eat in the house, he was wrong. Tanner had never seen so many varieties of bagels in his life—outside the selection at the store. He withdrew the bag of blueberry ones and cream cheese, plus a knife, then settled at the bar.

None of his boyfriends had ever left him a note. He spread the cream cheese on half the bagel. Dane had left the newspaper on the bar, so Tanner perused the sports section. Part of him wished he were mentioned. The trade from Gary had been big because the Wildcats had claimed they needed a centerfielder. He fit the bill. He scanned the stories for any mention of the Cedarwood team. Nothing. The baseball team wasn't bad—they had a winning record. They'd even had a game two nights

ago. Why wasn't there any mention of them in the paper? He'd have to change that.

Tanner finished the bottom half of his bagel. He could see many mornings like this. With him at the bar, the paper there and Dane in his life. He'd rather be sharing the sweet moment with his housemate, but there'd be time for that sooner rather than later. He'd won Dane over enough to sponsor him. They'd had a decent start at being friends, too.

Was he prevalent in Dane's mind? More than as a person sharing the house? He hoped so. His thoughts had been consumed with Dane from the first moment he'd seen the doctor. Wouldn't Dane be shocked if he found out Tanner had masturbated to his image in his mind? His blood heated at the thought of seeing Dane again. He couldn't wait for practice to conclude so he could return to the house and his doctor. He barely knew Dr. Dane Bloom, but he had a crush on him. Getting together was forbidden. Good thing Tanner enjoyed skirting the rules.

Chapter Three

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Dane blew out a ragged breath. In the three days since Tanner had arrived, Dane hadn't relaxed. He wasn't used to having a house guest. The last seventy-two hours felt like an eternity. He stared at his computer screen but didn't see the words. All he could see was Tanner's grin and the way he'd swept his gaze over Dane. Did he have to look at him with such distaste? Or was that longing? How in the hell do I know? He hadn't been on a date in almost a year and the last guy he'd tried to flirt with hadn't wanted anything to do with him. His radar had been so off.

"You look like you haven't slept in a week." Dr. Hammell Kelly stood in Dane's office doorway and leaned against the frame. "What happened? Tell me you met someone and have had a white-hot tumble in the sheets."

"I met someone and I didn't sleep, but it wasn't hot." Dane massaged his forehead. "It's not what you're thinking."

"Who is he?" Hammell stepped into Dane's office then pushed the door most of the way closed. "Is this guy a looker? Or is this person a she?"

"I'm gay," Dane snapped. "You know that."

"I know, but you could've met a great woman or a drag queen."

"I didn't."

"Well? Who is he?" Hammell settled on the chair opposite Dane's. "You've been miserable since Phillip walked. You deserve to meet someone and be happy."

“You make it sound like I need a boyfriend.” Dane snorted. He did, but he wasn’t about to admit that to Hammell.

“You should be happy,” Hammell said.

Maybe so. “I spend a lot of time here at the office. I’m dedicated to my patients. There isn’t much space in my life for another person.”

“You’re trying to find reasons to be alone.”

“So?” Dane shifted in his seat. He hated when Hammell was right.

“You shouldn’t be. The person out there for you will be able to work with your patient schedule and balance you.” Hammell snorted. “Unless you’re actively pushing that person away.”

“Hammell.” Damn it. His friend didn’t have to be correct...again.

“Who is this guy?”

He might as well tell Hammell the truth. “Remember the chunk of money we donated to the Cedarwood Wildcats?”

“Yeah. My kids can’t wait to go to the games. Zeke thinks he’d like to play for the team after high school. He’s only seven, so it’s a long way off and he’ll change his mind, I’m sure.” Hammell shrugged. “But who knows. Why?”

“Zeke’s got a good arm for seven.”

“Right, but he’s a kid. I wanted to be an astronaut when I was seven,” Hammell said.

“The Wildcats seem to have a stocked roster. Why? Did you get to meet the team?”

His eyes widened. “You did. We aren’t supposed to get close to them, but I won’t tell if you’ve met one and hit it off.”

“I’m sponsoring one of them,” Dane said. How’s Hammell like that?

“Is that the new lingo?” Hammell asked, seemingly unfazed. He grinned. “Whatever works.”

“I’m not dating him.”

Hammell’s grin faded. “Other than the rules, why wouldn’t you date him?” He fiddled with his phone. “Now to figure out which one. Looking through the roster and if I were to select one of them for you...I’d go with this guy.” He turned the phone around. “Zeppelin Starr.”

Dane glanced over at the image and shook his head. He couldn’t date a player, but Zeppelin Starr was indeed handsome. He had to say something intelligent. Zeppelin Starr struck him as a porn name. The guy had appeal, though. Dane appreciated dark eyes, sandy hair and dimples—all of which featured on Zeppelin. The guy had potential, but there was no assurance he’d be interested. “He’s cute, but there’s no guarantee he’s gay or if he’d be interested in an old man like me.”

“You’re thirty-eight. That’s not old.” Hammell darkened the screen on the phone. “I didn’t say I was hooking you up, just that he’d be a good one for you based on his appearance. He seems like he might be your type.”

“Maybe.” He wanted a boyfriend, but wasn’t sure Tanner wanted him in return. “I’ve got enough on my plate. I’m happy with my work here. My patients are everything.”

“Liar.” Hammell scrolled through the roster once more. “Who is your housemate? Him? No. What about this one?”

Dane sighed. “I don’t know who you’re pointing to, but the guy is Tanner Fox.”

“Foxy?” Hammell met Dane’s gaze. “Are you kidding me?”

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“No.” He didn’t understand. “What’s so great about Tanner Fox? Is he a decent player? I thought the fans called him Foxy because he’s handsome.”

“Decent? Until he hit this last skid, Foxy had one of the best batting averages in the league. Rumor has it he was going to be called up, until his averages tanked.” Hammell placed his phone on Dane’s desk and folded his arms. “Besides being a star player, he’s a hit with the ladies—like you said. I bet you’ll have an influx of mail or visitors trying to meet him.”

Dane froze and his blood chilled. Meet him? As in coming to my house? “Hammell.”

“He’s popular, but not around here. He hit a skid. The batting average sucks so he may not be able to coast on his appearance.” Hammell shrugged. “Or he could find his mojo again.”

“Dear God,” Dane muttered. He frowned and the dull ache behind his eyes increased. “Do you realize how shallow that sounds? The ballplayer is handsome and popular, but because he can’t hit at the moment, he’s worthless? That’s a terrible thing to say.”

“He’s not worthless, but most of his fans follow him because he’s great at the plate. It’s the fickle cost of fame. They want you when you’re on top, but the moment you slide, they hide,” Hammell said.

“You sound like a bad poet or a horrible motivational poster,” Dane said. “It’s all awful.”

“I know and I’m not saying I abandoned him. Zeke thinks he’s fabulous and Jenna

watches him because he's cute," Hammell said. "They're seven and thirteen. She's discovering boys aren't gross and I'm not happy about it, but it's life. As for you, you've got a great ballplayer in your home."

"I guess." Dane couldn't back out now. Tanner needs a place to stay so he can chase his dream. Tanner needs to focus on his game, right?

"That's why they get sponsorship—so they can worry about the game, not their living arrangements," Hammell said. "Didn't Devlin explain everything to you?"

"He did." He'd just ignored half of what he'd been told and read.

"Then you'll be fine." Hammell stood and retrieved his phone from the desk. "Enjoy the ride. Don't spend all your time here at the office. The patients need you, but you need to take care of you, too."

"I know."

"I wonder if you do. You're not invincible."

He hadn't thought Hammell worried about him this much. "I am."

"By living at work?"

Damn it. Hammell had him there. "Hammell."

"You're always here. Go home. See if the baseball boy is there. Flirt with him. That's my prescription for your future." Hammell nodded once. "You need to work what you've got."

Dane considered the suggestion. He wanted to move on but wasn't sure how. His past

kept coming to the forefront and his heart still ached from being dumped. “Did you know Devlin split Phillip and me up?”

“No. Why?” Hammell asked. “Although I can’t say I’m not thrilled. You and Phillip were a horrible match.”

“Devlin said something close to that.”

“He wasn’t any better for you than Phillip, but if I had to pick one of them, Devlin was the lesser of the two evils.”

“Devlin forbade me from dating the baseball player,” Dane said. “He was quite blunt about it.”

“Ah.”

He’s got nothing for that comment? Good.Dane wasn’t done. He had to clarify the situation. “Besides, we’re all assuming an awful lot.”

“How so?”

“We think this guy will like me. Tanner might not even be gay,” Dane said. “No one seems to have thought of that.”

“True.”

“And we all seem to think he’ll want to be with me. I’m available, but I’m not a catch to everyone.” Dane sighed again. “What if he’s not wanting a relationship with me? I’d be investing time and energy in something that’ll never happen.”

“You aren’t sure about him, either?”

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“I don’t know what to think.” Dane leaned back in his chair. The springs squeaked. He wasn’t ready to admit he’d overthought, assumed and hoped more was possible than Tanner could give.

“Well...shit.” Hammell pocketed his phone. “I’m sorry I assumed you’d kind of figured out he was gay and interested. Do you get the vibe there’s a chance?”

“No.” He hadn’t spent much time around Tanner, but still.

“Then see if you can be friends. Maybe he has someone he knows might be interested. You could double date.”

“I doubt it.”

“See? That’s the negative thing you’ve got to stop doing.” Hammell stared at him. “Go home. Make a friend. You’re living together for the next few months, right? You’re better off being civil and possibly friendly than not running into each other at all.”

Hammell had another point. Dane opened his laptop long enough to log out then pushed away from his desk. He turned off the lamp. He said nothing as he tucked his papers and tablet into his messenger bag. “I’m leaving, then.” He slid his phone into the front flap of the bag and patted his pocket for his keys. “I’ve got everything and your message has been received. I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“There you go. This is what you need.” Hammell followed him out of the office space. “Hang out with your player.”

“Foxy?” The name didn’t fit the Tanner he knew.

“Yeah. Find out if he lives up to the name.”

“If you and I weren’t friends, I’d hate you for that comment,” Dane said.

“I know, but you don’t hate me.” Hammell laughed. “Get out of here.”

“Doing that now.” Dane left the building and stepped into the night air. The leaves had filled out on the trees. A light wind wrapped around him. He missed having afternoons to himself. No, he missed having someone to come home to after a long day at the office. He checked the app Devlin had conned him into installing on his phone earlier in the day. According to the application, he’d know where Tanner was at all times—at least at the ballfield. He tapped Tanner’s name. A photo of Tanner appeared on the screen, then a camera view of Tanner at batting practice.

His mouth watered. He’d seen guys in baseball uniforms before, but none of them filled out the suit the way Tanner did. The tight fabric showed off his muscle and long legs. Each time Tanner glanced back at the camera and grinned, Dane swore he was mugging for the viewer. Is he?

Part of him wanted to consider Tanner might be smiling for him. Who else could see the video? He didn’t know. The rest of Dane doubted Tanner cared. The man had to live up to his public persona and impress. He hadn’t been dubbed Foxy for nothing.

Dane groaned and closed the app. The longer he watched Tanner at batting practice, the more he’d embarrass himself. He rubbed the growing bulge in his trousers. He’d gotten a damn erection from observing Tanner at work. He put his phone in the console then stuffed the key into the ignition. He should go home.

The more he thought about Tanner and what he’d seen, a few issues came to mind.

Once he got home, he'd have to ask Tanner some questions. According to the calendar, it was already the middle of June. Didn't training for the new season start in April? Spring training? Why hadn't Tanner joined the team before now? Had he been traded? Why? Was any of this Dane's business? Not really, but he wanted to know.

Dane drove across town but barely paid attention to the landscape. All he could see was the image of Tanner in those tight pants. He managed to pull into his driveway and parked in the garage. No fans. He'd expected to see people milling around the hedges surrounding his home—if Tanner was so popular, wouldn't there be fans waiting for him? Maybe the fans were more civilized in Cedarwood. He closed the garage door. Silence enveloped him. Being home and in the blessed quiet centered Dane. He tended to overthink things. From his patients and their needs to his personal life—he considered all angles and outcomes before making a decision. The mentality worked great when treating his patients but lousy in his life outside the medical office.

Then Tanner had come along. He hadn't seen Tanner before, yet he'd agreed to sponsor him. The choice had changed his life and he had no idea how different it would end up being, but he'd done it. No thought—just action. What had he been thinking?

The light came on, forcing him to blink. He'd been adjusted to the darkness. He frowned. What the hell? He noticed the figure at the window of the door into the mudroom. Tanner. He waved. Why not be polite?

Tanner pushed the door open. "Thought I heard you come in. Did you have a rough day?"

Dane left the car. "Not really." He retrieved his bag from the passenger seat. "The flu is going around Cedarwood, a farmer broke his hand and another accidentally shot a nail into his shin. It's rather routine stuff—save for the nail." He shrugged. "I'm used

to something new coming into the office every day.”

“A nail in his shin?” Tanner shrank back from Dane. “Really?”

“Most days I leave my work at the office, but you asked.” He headed into the house. “What brings you home so early? I thought you were at the stadium.”

“I was, but we’re done for the day.” Tanner followed him through the kitchen to the bar. “I saw your office. I never went in, but I stopped in the parking lot. I also visited the bookstore in town. The guys working there are nice. Are they brothers?”

Dane nodded. “Colin and Farin Baker. They opened it two years ago, I believe.” He carried his bag to his home office then returned to the kitchen. “Colin’s dating Officer Jordan Hargrove...for a year, I think. Farin, Colin’s brother, is seeing a teacher at the elementary school, Steve Moore. They’re all nice guys. Colin’s got a son, Gage, and Steve’s taking care of his baby sister, Genie.”

“Wow.” Tanner sank onto one of the bar stools. “So no one minds they’re gay?”

“People mind, but those four don’t pay them any attention. What those guys do isn’t anyone else’s business and they aren’t hurting anyone.” Dane rapped his knuckles on the counter. “I have the same mentality. I’m gay and I’m not hurting anyone. It shouldn’t matter that I’m gay or anything else.”

“No, it shouldn’t.” Tanner paused. “I investigated the house this afternoon. I’m in awe of the glass doors on your home office. Those are beautiful. Are they custom pieces?”

He hadn’t invited anyone over in so long, he’d forgotten the nuances of his house and how others might be impressed by his choices. “They are custom. I had a patient who worked in glass and wanted to thank me for giving him care. He and I had a deal. He

fashioned the doors for my office and I helped treat his asthma.”

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“I love them.” Tanner didn’t leave his seat. “Your office is full of papers and they’re everywhere. Do you actually leave your work at the medical office?”

“No.” Dane chuckled. “I don’t.” He sat beside Tanner. “Until you came along, I didn’t have anyone to ask about my day. It’s strange and refreshing.” He liked the way they fell into conversation so easily.

“Why?” Tanner frowned. “You don’t have a boyfriend, do you? Not even anyone you’re sort of seeing?”

“I had a few boyfriends, but they weren’t interested in long-term.” Gee, that sounded horrible, but his partners hadn’t been nosy about his life—just his bank account. “I can’t talk about most of my work because of privacy laws, but it’s nice to have someone to chat with.”

“I bet it is.” Tanner folded his arms and stared at Dane. “I heard you logged into the team app.”

“You heard? Does the app tell you I did? Or does Devlin?” Dane asked.

“I get a notification, but yeah, Devlin let me know,” Tanner said. “Since I wasn’t playing when you logged in, it’ll show you what I did today. It’s so you can keep tabs on me and make sure I’m doing what I say I am. Some players will show up for practice or try to make the team, get sponsorship so they have a place to live, then won’t put in the work. The app keeps us honest and lets you know how your investment is doing.”

“That makes sense.” Dane sighed. He liked accountability and Tanner’s honesty.

Tanner grinned. “I’m a late addition to the team, so I’m getting caught up. I’ll play my first game on Saturday. Are you coming to watch? I can get you tickets for the owners’ section if you’re interested.”

“I work this Saturday.” But he wished he could be at the game.

“Why?” Tanner blurted. “Sorry. I guess people get sick every day of the week, not just Monday through Friday.”

Dane shrugged. He could’ve sworn he smelled the tanginess of cheese and basil in the air. Did he have anything to make pasta in the house? “Did you cook?” He didn’t see pans on the stove or in the sink. “Or did you order out?”

“I brought home food from the stadium.” Tanner blushed. “I’m horrible in the kitchen. When I worked at the restaurant, I was removed from my position as a cook. I burned too many dishes and made a ton of messes.”

“You’re a better waiter than cook, eh?” He shrugged out of his sport coat. “I can’t do much in the kitchen, either, but I do enjoy eating.”

“Which is why we’re good together.” Tanner left his seat and rounded the bar. He pulled a box from the paper bag on the counter beside the microwave. “I brought home enough for us both.” He pushed the box toward Dane. “You can’t exist on air and water alone. Eat up.”

“Thank you.” The tips of his ears burned. Now who was embarrassed? He waited for Tanner to sit again. “You don’t have to cater for me—but I appreciate the gesture.” He opened the box. “Lasagna. I love this dish. Where did you order from?”

“It’s funny you asked that. I guess the powers that be are upgrading the food choices at the stadium and we were encouraged to try the offerings.” Tanner folded his arms and rested his chin on his hand. “There was more than enough, so I brought some home for leftovers and you, too.”

“Thanks.” He retrieved a fork from the drawer then returned to his stool. “I forgot there are fancy food vendors at the stadium.” He dug into the lasagna. A groan rumbled in his throat. He’d never had anything so delicious. The gooey cheese melted on his tongue and the cooks had added the right ratio of noodle to sauce. “This is wonderful.”

“I liked it, too.” Tanner stared at him a tad too long. “I should leave you to eat.”

“Why?” he asked between bites. “I’m supposed to spend time with you. Stay.”

“You gave me the impression you wanted to keep our lives separate.” Tanner stayed on the stool. “Did you change your mind?”

“I did.” He swallowed his current bite. “You’re living at my house. We should get to know each other.” Why be standoffish?

Tanner didn’t speak right away. An odd look crossed his face. “Okay. What do you want to know about me?”

If you’re gay, single, looking for someone...interested in me?He had to play it safe. “Where are you from?”

“Keilorsburg, Indiana. I left when I was six. Dad got a job in Pittsfield. Mom and Dad split when I was twelve. I guess she couldn’t handle him working nights.” Tanner shrugged. “I lived with my mother until she decided the cost of my sports equipment was too high. Dad liked me being an athlete, so he footed the bill. I spent all of high

school in Pittsfield. After I graduated, I went to Detroit, then Indianapolis until I made it through two years at the community college. I played baseball when I wasn't in class and a scout for the state college recruited me to play for them. I earned my degree in sports broadcasting—meaning I can do play-by-play at a baseball game—and I was drafted by a semi-pro team. I went from St. Louis to Raleigh, then to Durham before landing in Gary, Indiana. Now I'm here."

"You've had quite a life." He hadn't realized he'd polished off his dinner until he scraped the bottom of the box. He also hadn't put much thought into what kind of life Tanner had led. Tanner had seen more of the world than Dane. "I'm impressed."

"Don't be. I can't seem to keep a job. I play well and bring in fans then get traded when I hit a slump." Tanner flattened his palm on the counter. "I'm not good at putting down roots and I travel with just enough to get by. I never know when I'll be traded to another team and have to leave."

"Doesn't that suck? Don't you want to belong somewhere for more than a season?" Dane asked. He pushed the box away and stretched. "I'd hate to keep moving."

A wry smile curled on Tanner's lips as he sat up. "Some days I love being a wanderer. It's nice to go on adventures and every team I've played for involved some sort of journey."

"But other days?" Does he want to put down roots in Cedarwood?

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“I miss having a home base. I spent a lot of time alone or with the team. The guys are great, but right now I’m still an outsider. They’ve got their family here and friends. I’m still finding my way.” Tanner swiveled on his seat. “Devlin can probably get you passes, too.”

“I have a ticket, but don’t you have family? Your father doesn’t visit?” Dane asked. He wasn’t close to his father, but living across the country from each other made being tight almost impossible. Plus, his father had his second family. Dane was a throwback to his father’s first marriage and not as important as the new one.

Tanner shook his head and toyed with Dane’s fork. “My father loves baseball, but he works a lot and still lives in Indiana. On top of that, he’s had heart problems and a quadruple bypass surgery a couple years ago. He’s still paying the bills from that and I doubt he’d make the trip. As for my mother, she lost control when I was sixteen. I haven’t talked to her in nearly ten years.”

“I’m sorry to hear that.” He couldn’t imagine being in Tanner’s shoes. He hadn’t talked to his parents in ages, but he trusted they were okay.

Tanner shrugged. “After they split, she became someone else. She drank a lot, never worked, had a new guy every couple weeks... It wasn’t a good place to have a kid. She’d threaten to send me to Dad’s if I misbehaved. A child shouldn’t have to live like that.”

“No, you shouldn’t,” Dane murmured. Tanner’s situation must’ve reinforced his decision to live a nomadic life. No need for ties if he never knew how long he’d be kept around.

Tanner rapped his knuckles on the counter. “You got me to open up. That doesn’t happen unless I’m talking to an owner I’m trying to impress.” He bumped Dane’s knee with his own. “Devlin doesn’t know about my mom.”

Electricity shot through Dane’s body. He wanted to collide with Tanner again. He patted Tanner’s hand and took away the fork. The sizzles increased. He suppressed a groan. Being so close to Tanner was dangerous, but hot. “I’ll consider myself lucky then.” Had his voice gotten lower? The temperature in the room must’ve spiked. Damn. He needed to shuck a layer of clothing.

“You are lucky.” Tanner didn’t pull away for another moment.

Does he feel the electricity, too?

“I should hit the sack. I’ve got another round of practices before the big game on Saturday.” Tanner hesitated. “If you can make it, I’d appreciate having a fan there.”

“You’ll have lots of fans. Everyone loves you,” Dane said. “You’re Foxy.”

“Maybe, but you seem to see the real me.” Tanner smiled then left his stool and ducked out of the room.

Dane sighed. He had to be rusty at knowing the signals, but he could’ve sworn Tanner had flirted with him. The food, conversation, touches...holy shit. If they hadn’t been flirting, then he was clueless.

He closed the paper box. He had to check his schedule—he’d be on call this weekend. He couldn’t shirk his duties at the office, but maybe he wouldn’t be needed all that much during the game. He wanted to see Tanner, not on the app, but in action.

Tanner strolled to his room and couldn’t hide the smile. He’d gotten the doctor to

converse with him. Sure, he'd done most of the talking, but so what? He'd spent time with Dane. Maybe he'd even convince Dane to attend the game. One step at a time.

Chapter Four

The next afternoon, Tanner changed out of his sweaty practice uniform. He stood in front of his locker, his muscles aching. He'd done two hours of batting practice and three of outfield drills. He still loved the game, but would rather be playing in an actual contest, not going through the motions.

Zeppelin Starr, the current darling of the Wildcats, edged in beside Tanner.

"Hi." Tanner pulled a towel from his locker, then grabbed his shampoo. "Good game?"

"It wasn't bad." Zeppelin elbowed Tanner. "We'll be better when you're on the field. I heard you're working hard. I'm surprised they didn't have you observing the game."

"I wanted to, but Coach figured I'd be better with more practice," Tanner said. "We've been contracted to do our best and go for wins, so I'm trying to fulfill my role on the team. You have to put in work to get results."

"Do you take breaks?" Zeppelin asked. "Or are you all work?"

"Depends on who happens to be asking." If Dane wanted to explore their off-hours together, he'd be all in.

"What if I'm asking?" Zeppelin followed Tanner to the showers. While Tanner stripped out of his boxer briefs, Zeppelin shucked his clothes, too. He stepped into the stall next to Tanner. "What would you say?"

“I’d be surprised.” Was Zeppelin coming on to him? He fiddled with the faucet handle and stepped under the spray. The heat soothed his muscles and the noise gave him a moment to compose his thoughts. He wasn’t interested in Zeppelin. Maybe he had alternative tastes, but he tended to gravitate toward older men. Zeppelin was younger than him by two years.

“Why would you be shocked? You’re hot. I’m hot. If we go out together and get seen around town...we could show Cedarwood our baseball team is fabulous and filled with sexy guys.” Zeppelin lathered his washcloth. “We’d bring positive attention to the town and our team. We all win.”

“Ah.” He nodded. Zeppelin wasn’t flirting—he was talking business. Boring. “We get people excited about the Wildcats, eh?”

“Yeah. Go to a bar, hang out with the locals and get pictures taken.” Zeppelin elbowed him again and splashed Tanner. “And if we happen to leave together, I know a great club near Cleveland that asks no questions.”

“What do you have in mind?” Tanner asked. He wasn’t sure he wanted to club with Zeppelin, but a guy could have options.

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“Lower your voice.” Zeppelin crowded in beside Tanner. “Cedarwood isn’t cool with gays. I’d come out, but I don’t want to lose my job.”

“They can’t fire you for being gay.” If he proved he’d lost his knack at the game, then yes, he could be removed, but not for his sexuality. Besides, he hadn’t pegged Zeppelin as being gay.

“They can trade us.”

“If you’re playing well and getting along with the others on the team, then there’s no issue.” He inched away from Zeppelin and finished washing himself. He dunked his head under the spray again. If Zeppelin was so worried about anyone hearing him, then why the hell was he standing so damn close? “No one has to know either one of us is gay.”

“So you’re fine with everyone knowing you’re gay?” Zeppelin asked.

“I don’t care who knows.” He washed his hair. “If you’re trying to get me to say I’m gay, save your breath. I am and I’m proud. I don’t make a big deal about being open, but I won’t lie.”

“You’re so popular.” Zeppelin shrank away from him. “I don’t understand.”

“You can’t be a favorite and be gay?” Tanner snorted. “I need to focus. I’m here for the team, not to get a date.” He rinsed the suds from his hair. “Happy showering.” He stepped under the showerhead once more, then turned the water off and grabbed his towel.

“Wait.” Zeppelin hurried through the rest of his shower.

Tanner strode back to his locker and donned a fresh T-shirt then stepped into clean boxer briefs. He draped the towel over the bench. He wasn’t in the mood to talk to Zeppelin. Why discuss his sexuality? If Zeppelin didn’t want a date and wasn’t trying to warn him, then what was the big deal? He withdrew his phone from his locker and checked the player app. Someone had logged in. Good. He hoped Dane had watched him practice.

“So you don’t want to club?” Zeppelin asked. “We’d make a great duo.”

“Maybe.” Tanner put on a pair of jeans. “I need to get moving. I’ve got laundry to do when I get home.”

“You’re a tough nut to crack.” Zeppelin stood beside him, clothed only in the towel. “How can I play alongside you and trust you have my back on the field if you can’t tell me the truth?”

“About what?” He donned his socks. “I don’t know what you’re talking about, but I’m trying to get into a rhythm with the team. After my first game, we can discuss the club thing again.” He stepped into his shoes then stuffed his phone and wallet into his bag. “You know, I almost thought you were trying to get me to say something about coming out in front of everyone. The way you asked your questions and got so pushy, I’d think you don’t want gay people on the team. I’m told Cedarwood can be less than welcoming to the LGBT community, but I’m not worried.” He’d heard the rumors of threats and violence but ignored them. He wasn’t causing anyone trouble and wasn’t doing anything wrong. Hell, he wasn’t with anyone.

“I’m hurt.” Zeppelin remained in his towel. The terrycloth separated, giving glimpses of his dick. “I thought you were different.”

“Me?” He shook his head. “No.”

“I had to ask. Being a hot player—one popular with the ladies—and to make a big deal about coming here, it makes the coalition happy. They want our team to be straight. You being so good with the ladies makes it seem like you’re not gay.”

“That’s ridiculous.” Tanner shook his head and picked up his bag. “I’m not out to reveal anyone’s secret or date anyone from the team. I want to play ball. Whether I prefer dick or pussy isn’t important, but I am gay. So what?”

“Just remember you’re here for baseball.” Zeppelin folded his arms. “Oh, and I’m not actually gay. I lied to test you.”

“That’s fucked up,” Tanner spat. “You came on to me.”

“I just...it’s a test. I needed to know I can trust you.” Zeppelin shrugged but didn’t otherwise move.

“If you’re not gay, then you be the special one that the coalition can hold up as an example. Let me play ball. I can handle myself,” Tanner said. “Okay?”

“Cool.”

Tanner suppressed his irritation. He had to speak to Devlin and his head coach, Skipper. After the confusing conversation with Zeppelin, he wanted to know what he was up against with the coalition. The group of people wanting to rid the town of Cedarwood of gays was fucked in the head. Who cared if he sucked dick as long as he did his job? “I’ll see you tomorrow. I’m set to start in left field for the first game of the double-header.”

“Nice.” Zeppelin waved but didn’t look Tanner in the eye. “Just remember what I

said.”

He’d never forget it. He left the locker room and headed straight to Devlin’s office. He knocked twice before nudging door. Devlin claimed he had an open-door policy. Instead of sitting at his desk, Devlin stood between a pair of legs in front of the desk. Tanner cleared his throat. He shouldn’t have barged in, but if anyone else caught Devlin and friend, they might not be so nice.

Devlin froze. The hands and legs around him stilled.

“We’ve been caught,” the man with Devlin said.

Tanner knew the voice—Dr. Raji, the team doctor. He didn’t care if Devlin screwed the doctor, but they probably shouldn’t be getting close at the stadium.

“Sorry.” Devlin detangled from Raji and stood beside him. “That was unprofessional.”

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“You don’t have to apologize to me. I walked in with little warning.” Tanner entered the room and shut the door. He hadn’t given Devlin and Raji much notice of his presence. “What you do and with whom is your business. If you’re happy, then great. I don’t care and you don’t need my permission anyhow.”

“It’s been a long day,” Devlin said from beside Raji. “Now you know our secret.”

“I’m cool with it.” Tanner dropped his bag on the floor. “But others might not be.”

“What did you need?” Devlin asked. “One of us?”

“You, but it’ll concern you both.” Tanner sat on the thin arm of the nearest chair. “I know the policy about dating sponsors. I’m not, so there’s no issue there, but what about the players dating each other? Is that prohibited? Daly and Selzer want to join the team. They’re together, but they’re married.” How would the coalition, bent on removing gays from Cedarwood, handle a happily married gay couple on their baseball team?

“I don’t believe there’s a rule, no.” Devlin glanced over at Raji. “It’s not encouraged because it can lead to issues on the field, but Daly and Selzer are exceptions to the rule—and they aren’t on the team as of yet. We’ve also not had to worry about anyone dating until now.”

“I see.” He mulled over the information. Devlin had explained the situation just fine. “Then there’s no problem with me being gay? Daly and Selzer are gay. Raji, you’re gay. Being homosexual isn’t a big deal, right?”

“No one cares if you’re gay,” Devlin said. “I’d appreciate decorum—meaning don’t screw anything and everything while getting on the local news doing it. Live your life. If you’re gay, then great. If not, that’s great, too.”

“I’m homosexual.” He hadn’t hidden it up to this point. Why start now? “I thought you knew.”

“I didn’t check and it wasn’t my business to know.”

Raji stood. “I should go.”

“Wait,” Tanner said. “If there’s a rule against being gay and living our lives as homosexuals, as long as we’re careful and mindful of our roles on the team, then I want to know. If there’s not, then why would another player be testing me? Why would they ask if I’m gay and act like it’s a big deal?”

“Tested?” Raji asked. “The only one doing any kind of testing is me. Not even the trainers handle drug tests.”

“Not drug testing.” Tanner folded his arms. “Look, I didn’t fight being traded because I wanted to try this market. I like Cedarwood—what I’ve seen of it. I want to play ball and inspire kids to take up the game. I’m not here to pimp myself out to call attention to the team. If there’s a fucked-up plan or whatever in place to ferret out guys for being gay or my being out will make me a target, I want to know.”

“Wait.” Devlin put his hands up. “Have you been approached by the coalition?”

“Not by name, but I’ve been tested to see if I’ll admit I’m gay or if I’ll make a pass at another player,” Tanner said.

Raji sighed. “We knew they’d find a way in.”

“We did,” Devlin muttered. He turned his attention to Tanner. “Who did it? Who got nosy?”

He didn’t want to name anyone. Careers could be at stake. “Why? I don’t want to get anyone fired.”

Devlin lowered his voice. “The coalition lives to make hash out of the lives of people in the LGBT community. You’ve met Colin and Farin Baker, right?”

Tanner nodded. He rather liked the brothers who ran the bookstore in town.

“They and their respective partners have been in the crosshairs of the coalition. Graffiti was sprayed on Colin’s vehicle, shit was delivered to his home, there have been incidents of public embarrassment, shouting matches, loss of business and things have been said to their children. It’s out of control.”

Tanner shook his head. He hadn’t heard any of those things in the rumors but knowing Devlin didn’t lie... Fear gripped him. Combined with what Zeppelin had said and the concern in Devlin’s eyes, he’d had enough. “That’s not how I want to live my life—worried about who’s watching me.”

“We never said you did,” Raji said. “But you should know these people are ruthless. I’ve been the target of offensive acts. I’ve never hidden the fact I’m homosexual, but I lost half of my patients when the wordfagwas spray-painted on the building. I’ve been followed and assaulted, too.”

Jesus.“Let them come at me.” He straightened his spine. “I’m ready. I’ll show everyone I’m not here to be pushed around. I can and will play at my highest level.” He wasn’t going to let anyone keep him from the game he loved.

“I hope you do.” Devlin sighed. “Be ready for hurled beer cups and food wrappers.

Even if you're playing well, some folks don't like gay in their sports."

He should've checked the market he'd been traded to before he'd come, but there hadn't been time. Besides, he'd had no choice. He'd gone where he'd been offered a job. "I've been attacked before and I'm not backing down."

Feelings he'd suppressed came to the surface. His anger won out and he balled his hands. "I want everyone who comes to the ballfield to know we're inclusive. I don't have to wear my sexuality on my sleeve, but I'm not ashamed. I'm not going to stand by and watch a group bully everyone they don't like or me because I might have a boyfriend. I've had some of my dearest friends commit suicide because they were pushed around for being homosexual. I'm not burying another friend."

He stood and picked up his bag. He'd unleashed more frustration than he'd thought he still held. He'd come to Cedarwood and every other baseball team he'd played for to be a role model and damn it, he took his job seriously.

"I'm behind you all the way," Devlin said. "I appreciate strong figures on my team."

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“Same goes for me,” Raji said.

“Don’t let the coalition break you.” Devlin grasped Raji’s hand. “We’re trying not to capitulate to them. It’s tough.”

“I can see why.” Tanner held tight to his bag. “Thanks for the information. I’ll speak to Coach about what I’ve learned, but I’m guessing he already knows.”

“He does, but he’ll appreciate your candor,” Devlin said.

“Good luck,” Raji said.

“Talk to Coach. We’re all sick of the coalition. Coach just wants the Wildcats to play ball. If you can jumpstart the change and prove you’re a ballplayer no matter who you sleep with, then do it. We need to shake things up.”

“Agreed.” He slung his bag over his shoulder. “Thanks and see you.” He needed to be somewhere else and knew just where he wanted to start the shaking.

* * * *

Dane sat in his car and listened to the silence in the garage. His brain buzzed. Every time he’d thought he could settle down and his schedule would even out, something else hit, causing turmoil. The strain of flu making the rounds in Cedarwood hadn’t died down at all. His appointment schedule had been filled and double-booked at times. He loved his job, but if he didn’t have to listen to another hacking cough for at least twelve hours, he’d be happy.

He noticed the empty spot in the garage. Tanner wasn't back yet.Huh.He probably had a later practice. That had to be the case. What else would a handsome man, a single one at that, be doing on a Friday night? Not sitting alone in a damn garage.

He sagged in his seat. No matter what he did, he would never shed his dorky image. He had no life outside work. He'd convinced himself all he needed was his work... Who was he kidding? He wanted to be loved and held—not to be alone.

Dane left the car and headed into the main part of the house. His stomach growled. He wished he had some of the pasta left over. He could order a pizza, though. Where was the menu for Maddel's Pizza?

He flattened his palms on the counter.Damn.He'd reverted to dorkiness again. He'd be alone with his pizza on a Friday night. Sure, he had to work in the morning and be on call through the weekend, but he deserved a few hours out...tonight?

He picked up his keys, then glanced down at his attire. A dress shirt, slacks and open necktie weren't proper club threads. He should change. He yanked his tie from underneath his collar and unbuttoned his cuffs, then the rest of his shirt. He kicked out of his shoes, then padded upstairs to his bedroom. Deciding to treat himself to a few hours at the club both freed and scared him. He hadn't gone out for a night on the town in almost three years. Even Phillip hadn't wanted to club with him.

He removed his shirt and threw it as well as his tie onto the bed. He tossed his undershirt onto the pile. Chilly air kissed his nude torso and he shivered.Well, fuck.What should he wear to go out? He scratched his belly and surveyed the garments in the closet. Nothing screamed club clothes, but what did he know? He was so out of practice.

“Dr. Dane?”

Dane froze. Tanner? Dane darted toward the hallway but stopped in the doorway when he collided with a solid wall of man. He grunted.

“Sorry.” Tanner grasped Dane’s biceps. “I wasn’t sure if you were home. I saw the car, but it’s so quiet.” He didn’t let go. “I figured you might be on a date.”

Dane settled into Tanner’s hold. Being in Tanner’s arms, even at a distance, pleased him. He couldn’t think straight. “Uh, yeah...” Wait, he didn’t have a date. “I mean, no.”

Tanner grinned. “You look frustrated—by your lack of a date? Or because you have one?”

God damn it. How could he say he was just horny without sounding like a jackass? Blood rushed to his dick and fever filled his body. He stared at Tanner’s mouth. If he leaned forward, he’d be able to kiss him.

“Dane?”

“Yes?” He met Tanner’s gaze. “Sorry.”

“Do you run around half-naked often?” Tanner asked. “Do you have a date?”

“Yes. No.” Fuck. “I was changing.”

“For that date you may or may not have?”

“No.” Shame washed over him. He wanted to feast on Tanner’s mouth. The scent of Tanner’s cologne soothed him. Yet, he couldn’t act on his urges.

Tanner tipped his head. He still hadn’t let go. His grin widened and his eyes sparkled.

“So you don’t have a date?”

“I don’t.” Confession might be good for the soul, but it was hard as hell on the ego.

“But you’re changing?” Tanner caressed Dane’s biceps with the pad of his thumb.

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“I wanted to go out.”

“Where to?” Tanner asked.

“I didn’t plan ahead.” Fuckety fuck. The man who normally detailed his life to the tiniest detail had no plans whatsoever.

“Would you be interested in staying in?”

“Since my plans are rather loose, yeah, I could stay in.”

“Good. I need you.”

He had to have heard Tanner wrong. “Need me?” he blurted.

“Yeah.” Tanner kissed him. The momentary touch of his lips on Dane’s pleased and surprised him. The action flew by, making Dane wonder if it’d even happened.

Dane blinked. Tanner had kissed him, but he doubted himself. Was the memory of Tanner’s lips and the scruff on his chin real or imagined? His heart fluttered and he wanted another kiss. He wanted to caress Tanner and feel the roughness of Tanner’s whiskers once more. He wanted to gaze into Tanner’s eyes and commit the color patterns to memory.

Tanner slid his palms over Dane’s bare chest. “Don’t you want me to kiss you?”

“I do, but only because you want to.” Not because he’d been forced or any other

reason. “I’m taken aback. I assumed you’d have a date tonight.”

“I have a game tomorrow,” Tanner said. “I very much want to kiss you because it feels right.”

He hooked his fingers into Tanner’s front pockets and pulled him tight to his chest. Dane shouldn’t be acting so boldly, but he needed this. He slanted his mouth over Tanner’s. The scrape of Tanner’s day-old whiskers on Dane’s cheeks sent shivers down his spine. He bumped noses with Tanner. When the ballplayer opened to him, Dane slid his tongue into Tanner’s mouth. He swallowed Tanner’s moan.

Tanner threaded his arms around Dane and stuffed his hands into Dane’s back pockets. He broke the kiss. “Yes.”

“Good?” Dane rested his forehead on Tanner’s and sighed. Up close, he noticed the flecks of cobalt in Tanner’s eyes and the dusting of freckles on Tanner’s cheeks. Dane licked his lips. “This isn’t smart.” But he loved every second of being a twosome.

“Nope,” Tanner said. “It’s forbidden.”

“It is.” Being bad has never been this good.

“We shouldn’t.”

“Huh-uh.” Dane swayed with Tanner in his embrace. He brushed his mouth over Tanner’s, kissing him again. “We could get into trouble.” He didn’t care. “Could get deep.”

“We’d be in over our head.”

“Yeah, but I don’t give a shit.” Dane wanted more of Tanner. He hadn’t let go in this way in forever.

“You don’t?” Tanner stiffened. “We should stop.” He patted Dane’s ass but didn’t pull away. “I know better than this and so do you. If neither of us cares that we’re breaking the rules, then this can’t end well. I still have to live with you until the end of September.”

“I know.” His cheeks and the tips of his ears burned. Part of him couldn’t shake the embarrassment. He knew the rules. Any other time, he’d have been the one enforcing the code of conduct. The rest of him detested the rules. “I still want you.” Despite the argument, he wasn’t swayed.

“Good to know.” Tanner released him. He flopped onto Dane’s bed and sighed. “We are so fucked up.”

He frowned. Confusion clouded his mind. What had just happened? One minute he’d been tangled up with Tanner and now? Tanner was on his bed, but not inviting him to join in. “Tanner.”

“I’m sorry.” Tanner shook his head then scrubbed his face with both hands.

Dane sat beside him. “For what?” For teasing me?

“I need you.” Tanner rolled onto his side and caressed Dane’s thigh. “I want nothing more than to be with you, but I’m messed up.”

He should put on a shirt. Instead, Dane stretched out opposite Tanner. “I’m not wild about being teased, but I won’t take advantage of you in this manner. You’re hurting. Talk to me.”

Tanner didn't speak right away. He swept his gaze over Dane a couple of times then palmed Dane's hip. "I didn't want to come to Cedarwood. When I learned about the trade, I was pissed. I trashed my apartment then cleaned it all up because I needed to get the deposit back. But I had a chip on my shoulder. I downplayed my feelings because I didn't want to be labeled difficult."

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“Tanner.” He held the ballplayer’s hand. “We all have things change when we want them to stay the same. It’s natural to be upset.”

“Maybe.” Tanner laced his fingers with Dane’s. “I still think I should be big time. I have what it takes to play in the majors.”

“I have no doubt you do,” Dane murmured. Was he wrong to be loving this closeness?

“But I’m not headed for the pros. I’m probably done with baseball once my contract is up in Cedarwood,” Tanner said. “I’m getting too old to move to the next level.”

“How old are you?”

“Twenty-five.”

“That’s not bad.”

“It’s ancient. I should’ve moved up by now,” Tanner said. “They want young and talented. I’m talented, but I’m not young—by baseball standards.”

Dane wasn’t sure what to say. He’d never thought about the age range for athletes. “Don’t give up.”

“How can I not?” Tanner sat up and raked his fingers through his hair. “Do you know I got fan mail today?”

“I didn’t.”

“Five letters. One from a fan who wants to marry me. She’s a woman, but she doesn’t realize I’m gay. Two from kids who look up to me. Fine because I want to be a role model to them. But the other two letters are from this group in town. I didn’t open the envelopes until I got to the house. They came to the stadium.”

“Who are they from?” Dane sat up and matched Tanner’s pose. “What do they say?”

“I need to get the hell out of Cedarwood.” Tanner faced Dane. “If I’m going to be gay, I need to leave. If I’m not gay, but I’m living with a gay doctor, you might turn me gay. If you don’t turn me gay, I might realize I am homosexual and they don’t want my kind—our kind—in Cedarwood. Not only am I being pushed out for who I am, or am perceived to be, but because I’m aging out of the sport I love.”

Dane suppressed a growl. The coalition had struck again. He’d never understand why people couldn’t learn to get along. Why did the love life of Cedarwood residents have to be public fodder? And why couldn’t he and Tanner have a few hours of fun? What if they bent the rules more than a little? If he could give Tanner comfort for a while, he’d make the sacrifice—but could Tanner?

Chapter Five

Tanner groaned. He needed to center, but being with Dane messed him up. The worries over the letters, the comments from Zeppelin, his being out but not blunt about it...none of that mattered when he wanted to bury himself in Dane. He’d broken plenty of rules and, most of the time, didn’t care when he’d done it. But this was different. He wanted to be good enough for Dane.

“What are you thinking?” Dane asked.

He wanted Dane. He needed to be loved. He craved stability in his life. Could he say any of that? So soon? “My first game is tomorrow and I’m kind of freaking out.” Tanner faced Dane. He hadn’t lied. “How do you do it?”

“Do what?” Dane smoothed the wrinkles in Tanner’s T-shirt. “Put up with the coalition?” He paused. “Until a very short time ago, I didn’t know they had a name. But what I try to do is ignore them.”

“How is that working?” He needed to know. He’d try anything to get his head into the game.

“Depends on the day,” Dane said. “One week they leave me alone. The next week I get accosted at the store. I’m leery of new people, despite seeing new patients all the time at the office. I hate change, but I can’t stay away from it. I prefer to do my own thing. I don’t flaunt myself, but I’m not hiding, either.”

“How do you stay sane?” He’d be miserable in no time if he tried to ignore the haters.

“Did you notice I lived alone until you came along?” A tiny smile curled on Dane’s lips. “It’s not because I enjoy my own company.”

“And here I thought you did.” He tangled his legs with Dane’s again. This was what he missed—relaxing with his lover and having a sanctuary in the midst of the chaos. But he and Dane weren’t lovers.

“If you love your life and don’t engage the coalition, they’ll leave you alone. If you opt to fight, they’ll bring it. I try to stay below the radar, but I don’t lie about who I am.” Dane shrugged. “You’re doing what you love and being yourself. Don’t let a group of jerks take that away. I’m on your side. I want you to succeed.”

Tanner embraced the reassurance in Dane’s voice. “You are?”

“I’ve been there. I didn’t grow up in Cedarwood. I came here to work and haven’t left.” Dane settled on his back. “When I was offered the chance to live here, I thought I’d found a quiet town to doctor in with a friend of mine.” His voice caught. “I’m still here.”

“What happened to your friend?” Tanner paused. “If you don’t want to tell me, I understand.” He shouldn’t pry. “It’s not my business.”

“Ashton Pierce. We went to college and med school together. He told me about this town. He grew up here. He’d say it was quaint, quiet and friendly. All through our residency, he talked about coming back. He sold me on Cedarwood. Once residency was over, he got into the practice I’m at today. He knew the head doctor who opened the original office—right next door to the hospital. It was almost too good to be true, but I went along with Ashton’s ideas.”

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He loved the sparkle in Dane's eyes and the wistfulness in his voice. He could listen to Dane for hours. "I didn't see Ashton's name on the office list."

"He moved away," Dane said. "His wife didn't like me. I spent more time with Ashton than she did and she hated me for it. He left the practice and me."

The twinge in Dane's voice spoke volumes. "You had an affair with him, didn't you?" He snuggled up to Dane and rested his head on Dane's shoulder again. He draped his arm across his belly.

"Not when he was married."

"You loved him." Probably still did.

"I did." Dane rubbed his cheek against the top of Tanner's head. "We were inseparable in college. He was my first boyfriend. Everyone thought we were just friends. No one knew when we went back to the dorms... Anyway, we split because he wanted to date a woman and I'm not bisexual. He wasn't going to come out, even to admit he was bisexual, and once he met Nissa, I refused to come between them. We stayed friends and even worked together, but the tension was always there. He kissed me once during the last Christmas party and I didn't push him away when I should've. After the first of the year, he left the practice and they moved to Kentucky."

"I'm sorry, but I'm not sorry." Tanner toyed with the trail of short hairs leading beneath Dane's waistband. "I like having your attention and I can kind of see how Nissa would feel threatened. You're sweet and handsome and caring. You had history

with Ashton. If you were with someone, she'd be happy. But you alone were too much for him to resist. I get it. You're too much for me to resist. If you were with him or anyone else, what you and I are doing right now wouldn't be possible."

"I suppose not."

Tanner rose up on his elbow again. He could have nights like this all the time if he wanted. But he had to be honest. He'd never bared his soul to anyone—not even to his family. Right now, he wanted to tell Dane everything. "I'm afraid."

"Of what?" Dane asked. "Me? I won't hurt you. I won't ask you to leave, either."

Thank you, God. "I'm happy to hear that." He relaxed a bit more. "The last family that sponsored me didn't want a gay man in their house and kicked me out. I didn't have the balls to tell the owner of the team that I'd lost my sponsorship, so I lied."

"I thought you were supposed to focus on baseball." Dane caressed Tanner's cheek. "Tanner."

"I lived above a restaurant and waited tables when I wasn't playing or practicing." He massaged his forehead. "I'm not proud of lying, but they threatened to tell everyone I was gay. Back then, I didn't want anyone to know. I have a reputation for being the hot guy on the team—the one the women want to be with."

"You didn't want to lose your notoriety." Dane cocked his eyebrow. "Why not be notorious for playing ball? Why have a gimmick?"

"I thought it would help my game. Those six months of working myself to the bone didn't do anything for my playing ability, other than dull it." He summoned his courage. "I worked hard to be where I am, but I'm scared. I'm afraid to be out and proud. I say I'm not worried, but I'm bullshitting everyone. In private, I'm happy."

This last week has been the best in a long time. But I see what happens when you're not true to yourself. Being a gay athlete can suck ass. The guys in the locker room may not accept me. I might be looking at them strangely or want to come on to them."

"Do you?" Dane asked. "Really? Are you a stark-raving madman just looking for dick when you go into that locker room?"

"No."

"Then you have nothing to worry about—concerning them." Dane grinned. "You could've had me and you didn't pounce the way I thought you might. Makes me think I'm repulsive."

"No, you're not." Tanner crawled onto Dane, stretching out on top of him. "Feel that? I'm very much attracted to you and want to be with you." He paused. One more second and he could take this to places he wasn't ready to go, or he could slow down. "But I don't want to screw this up. I doubt you'd turn me in if we split, but I don't want you to think I'm doing this because you're right here and so sexy."

Dane stuffed his hands into Tanner's back pockets. "You're trying to fix my wounded ego." He laughed. "I like it. You're pretty sexy, too."

"Thank you." He brushed his nose along Dane's. "You've got the prescription for anxiety, don't you? Being hot?"

"I am a doctor." Dane patted Tanner's ass. "What else is bothering you? I can see it in your eyes. Talk to me." He shifted beneath Tanner, rubbing the bulge in his pants over the one in Tanner's. "Are you upset about the rule? The one stating we shouldn't be doing this?"

Heat seared Tanner from within. “Don’t want to talk.”

Dane kissed Tanner and slid his hands along Tanner’s back.

“Yes.” Tanner straddled Dane. He stripped his shirt off and flexed. “Like what you see?”

“I do.” He palmed Tanner’s chest. The man had so much muscle. He pinched one of Tanner’s nipples.

“Fuck.” Tanner arched into his touch. “I love that.”

Dane sat up the best he could and trailed his fingers over Tanner’s ribs. At the same time, he bit one of Tanner’s nipples.

Tanner ran his fingers through Dane’s hair, holding him to his chest. A groan rumbled in Tanner’s throat. He tipped his head back. How had he gone this long without Dane? Easy. He hadn’t been in Cedarwood. Coming to the small town had been a boon Tanner wouldn’t relinquish.

Dane scraped his teeth across Tanner’s nipple. He had Tanner on the edge before they’d even fucked. Each bite and suck on Tanner’s skin elicited a slew of groans. Dane smoothed his hands around Tanner’s ribs to his back, then down to the swell of his ass.

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“Jesus, I want you in my ass. Want it so much.” Tanner held Dane against his chest. “Fuck.” Every synapse in his brain buzzed.

“Give me a chance. You’re holding too tightly,” Dane managed.

Tanner let go long enough to scramble off Dane’s lap. He stripped out of his clothes in record time. Dane wriggled out of his trousers and boxers.

Tanner groaned. He’d guessed at Dane’s appearance under those boxy dress garments and now that he saw the true man, he loved what he saw. No tattoos, dark curls surrounding his dick, pure muscle on a trim form...and those eyes. He could stare into Dane’s eyes forever and not tire.

“You don’t have a tattoo,” Dane blurted. “Sorry.”

“No.” Tanner blushed and the heat spread from his cheeks to his chest. “Never had the desire. What about you? I see you’re bare, too.”

“I couldn’t decide on what I’d get. I’m not fond of permanent things on my body.” He stroked his dick. “But I’d love to have you on my body.”

Fucking balls in heaven. If Dane continued to stroke himself, Tanner would get off on the visual. “I’ll go wherever you want.” Tanner crawled onto the bed. He pushed Dane’s legs apart. Instead of climbing on for a ride, he rested on his elbows and knees. He buried Dane’s cock in his mouth. He’d never tasted anything so good. Without a second thought, Tanner swallowed him to the root, then pulled back. No finesse. No toying beforehand. Just right into the action. He stroked himself in time

with his sucking and humming.

“Yes,” Dane murmured. “You’re turning my insides out.”

Heat swarmed in Tanner. The urge to relax battled with the tension building. He liked to suck cock, but Dane made concentrating difficult. Dane palmed the back of Tanner’s head, the gentle urging adding to Tanner’s pleasure.

Precum slid down Tanner’s throat. He had Dane right on the edge. Time to pull back a bit. Tanner sat back on his heels and wiped his mouth. “Yummy.” He stretched out on top of Dane and kissed him. His dick throbbed against Dane’s. “Like that?” The grinding of erection against erection turned him on. He slid one hand between their bodies and stroked both shafts in his hand. “Dane.”

“Can’t think straight.” Dane bit back the rumble in his throat, but not the invasion of Tanner’s tongue on his. He slapped Tanner’s ass. The crack echoed in the room. “Want me inside you?”

“Yes. I need it,” Tanner whimpered. “Now.” He wanted another one of those spankings. Being with Dane pleased him. He hadn’t felt this free or happy in a long time. Electricity shot through his veins. “Make it fast.”

“I gotta prep you.” Dane slapped Tanner’s butt again. “Stretch out.”

Tanner did as told and waved his rear at Dane. “I love how you punish me.” He didn’t have to think and instead just followed his base instincts. When he glanced over his shoulder, Dane was watching him.

Dane crooked his eyebrow but said nothing as he retrieved the lube and a condom from the nightstand.

Tanner pressed his face to the bedding and braced himself for whatever Dane might do. His skin sizzled and anticipation filled his brain. He flexed his asshole, listening for the click of the lube bottle and the crinkle of the condom wrapper. What was Dane doing?

“Antsy?” Dane swatted Tanner’s backside.

“Yes,” Tanner said. He hadn’t been penetrated, but he felt Dane in his soul. “Please?”

Dane’s breath warmed Tanner’s skin. Dane rubbed his nose along one of his ass cheeks while he caressed the pucker of Tanner’s hole. Tingles shot through Tanner’s body and another whimper bubbled in his throat.

Dane kissed along his lover’s back and spine. When Tanner groaned, Dane dribbled lube down the crack of his ass. The change in temperature cooled some of the fever in Tanner’s body, but not much. Tanner backed into Dane, encouraging Dane to enter him.

“Needy.” Dane eased one finger into Tanner’s ass.

The pressure and stretching resonated within Tanner. He moaned but didn’t relent. “More.”

“I will.” Dane resumed kissing Tanner’s lower back. He pushed his finger in deep, then pulled most of the way out to prep him. Within moments, he worked into a gentle rhythm.

Tanner rocked against Dane’s digit. He couldn’t think straight, nor did he want to. He appreciated the lightheadedness of the moment.

“Ready?” Dane added a second finger. He scissored his digits until he relaxed

Tanner.

Something within Tanner snapped. He embraced the excitement and buried his face in the blankets. He panted. Blood rushed to his erection and he longed to touch himself. Jesus Christ, he wanted to come. Dane had him right on the edge, but not ready to go over.

“Fuck me,” Tanner bit out. “Can’t wait.”

“I will.” Dane continued to pump into Tanner. “Need you so close.”

“I am.” Tanner shivered. He slid his knees farther apart. If Dane kept this up, he’d never be able to hold back.

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Dane withdrew his fingers and left the bed.

Tanner missed his lover's warmth. He let go of the blankets with one hand and wrapped his fingers around his shaft. If Dane wouldn't give him relief, he'd find it on his own. His balls ached. Damn it. He needed to come.

"Oh no you don't." Dane grasped Tanner's hips. He rubbed his cock between Tanner's ass cheeks. The tiny move caressed his hole.

Tanner groaned. When Dane added lube, another set of shivers struck. He squeezed his eyes shut and tugged on his cock.

"Now you're ready." Dane lined his erection up with Tanner's hole. Inch by inch, he sank into Tanner's body.

A fresh groan emanated from Tanner. "So full," he mumbled.

"You're holding me tight." Dane leaned over him and kissed Tanner's shoulder. He wrapped his arms around Tanner. "So good."

Tanner wanted to respond, but the words evaporated. His nerve endings were on fire. He gasped. "Dane."

Without another word, Dane released him enough to hold on to Tanner's hips again. He moved, slow at first, but building into a frenzy. In and out, to the hilt, then most of the way out. He swatted Tanner's ass with each push.

Tanner writhed beneath him. He loved being this full and needed. He backed into Dane once more, sending him deeper into Tanner's body.

"Mine." Dane dug his fingers into Tanner's skin. He pistoned into Tanner, the sound of skin slapping skin echoing in the room. "Stroke yourself. Want to see you come apart."

Tanner planted his hand in the sheets and braced his knees. He hadn't needed any encouragement to masturbate, but he liked complying with Dane's demands. He wriggled on Dane's erection, loving the feeling of fullness and completion. His senses were on high alert and nothing mattered besides this moment and Dane.

Dane reached around him and pinched one of Tanner's nipples. The streak of pain made him happy. The orgasm was right there. One more good push and he'd come apart. Hell, one more pull on his dick would send him over the edge.

Despite wanting to last longer, Tanner let go of his inhibitions and embraced the moment of joy. His balls ached and he shuddered. "I'm coming."

"Yes," Dane murmured. He shifted his hips and his dick caressed Tanner's prostate.

Tanner's resistance shattered. He jerked forward as the climax hit. Holy shit. For a split second, he felt weightless. Nothing ached and the world centered on Dane. Cum splattered on the bedding beneath him. He tensed, despite shivering. Once he'd gathered his bearings, he glanced over his shoulder and met Dane's gaze.

"Beautiful." Dane increased his speed. He surged into Tanner and his cock throbbed. "Fuck."

Tanner flexed and gripped Dane from within. He rode the fresh orgasm from Dane. He wasn't ready to let go of his lover. He'd rather be cradled in Dane's arms than

leave when the morning came.

“Damn.” Dane brushed his lips across Tanner’s shoulder. “That happened way too fast.”

“It was just right,” Tanner whispered. So they’d moved rather fast. They could make up for it and practice slowing down next time.

“You’ll wear me out.” Dane kissed Tanner’s shoulder a second time and pulled out of Tanner’s ass.

“You’re not that old.” He wished he had Dane’s warmth and connection all the time. He rolled onto his back and panted. “You’ll like being worn out.”

“I will,” Dane said, his voice low. “I already do.” He left the bed long enough to remove the spent condom. Perspiration shimmered on his skin. He reminded Tanner of a statue come to life. “I’m rather fond of you.”

Then the connection isn’t one-sided? Good.

“I don’t know what to do,” Dane said. He rested his hands on his hips.

Tanner panted and parsed through the things Dane had said. He needed a few more minutes to understand. Dane wanted to be here, but they’d crossed a hundred lines tonight. They’d fucked a lot up. But he didn’t care. “Going so soon?” He wanted Dane to stay more than anything.

“Stay with me tonight,” Dane whispered. “Just like this.”

“I need to set an alarm.” Tanner dragged the blanket over their bodies. “What time do you have to get ready for work?”

“I’m on call, so I should be up by five-forty-five.” Dane caught Tanner in his arms. “I’ve got the alarm on my phone set and the one next to the bed.”

“Well, okay. I don’t have to be up until seven.” He breathed in the scent of Dane and kissed his lover’s throat. Words he’d kept silent until now teetered on his tongue. “My best friend killed himself because he was made fun of for being gay. He hid who he was and let everyone get in his head. I say I’m tough and I want to be a role model, but I’m not always comfortable in my own skin. Jesus. I shouldn’t feel alienated, but I do.”

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“Tanner.” Dane held him closer. “You’re always going to have people disagree with you, but you’re a role model. There’s a reason you’re on the Cedarwood Wildcats and it’s not because you’ve got a nice ass. It’s because you can play. Because you’re an individual. You’re bigger than a group of jerks trying to take your happiness. Fuck ‘em.”

“Dane.” He kissed Dane’s throat. He’d never had anyone quite like the doctor in his corner. He didn’t feel confident, but he’d claimed he wanted to shake things up. He’d done that and more by sleeping with Dane. Still, his poise had taken a hit.

“I’d bet your teammates would have your back if you’d let them in. They know you’re gay and the more players who are out and not worried about who cares that they are, the better for everyone. That kid, afraid to come out but loving baseball, will see you and them. That kid will see a person who isn’t afraid to be himself and love himself. You may never meet that kid, but you’ve made a difference. You’re opening a door for others who want to come to Cedarwood and play ball. I support you. There is so much more to you than your team persona. You’re smart, funny and great at your sport. When your playing days are over, you’ve got a future in sportscasting. I bet you’ll be great.”

“You think so?”

“I know so.” Dane sighed and rubbed Tanner’s back. “I’m behind you all the way. Be yourself and be proud. There’s nothing wrong with you being you. There’s nothing wrong with who you are. The haters are wrong.”

“Thanks, Dane.” Tanner clung to Dane. “I needed everything you’ve given me and

more.”

“I know,” Dane murmured. “We’ve all been there—the confusion, fear...but you’ve got a support system. You do.”

Tanner closed his eyes. He’d grown closer to Dane than anyone in his life. Less than a week was enough time to realize he cared for the doctor more than as his sponsor. He needed Dane always. He wanted him as a friend and lover.

“Stay tonight. When I get up in the morning, I’ll reset the alarm so you won’t be late for your game,” Dane said. “Keep the rest of the world away for a few more hours.”

“I’m yours all night.” His stomach growled, but food was the last thing on his mind. He embraced the happiness he’d found. He wasn’t going anywhere. For a little while, the pressures of baseball, the coalition and being himself weren’t so hard. His only problem? He wanted to stay awake and allow Dane to fuck him all over again. Too bad he couldn’t keep his eyes open. At least he had the rest of the season with his doctor.

* * * *

Dane woke with his alarm the next morning and stretched. He hadn’t slept so well in forever. Because he wasn’t alone? Yes, but mostly because Tanner had stayed. They’d forged a bond deeper than he’d thought possible. He liked Tanner. The night before he’d thought they’d never take the relationship to the next level. Now he knew better. He also understood Tanner. The man embodied strength and resiliency, especially on the field, but he needed reassurance, too. Tanner wanted to belong and have a safe place to rest. Dane could give him those things—maybe not the confidence, but he’d never judge him.

Tanner reminded him of Ashton. Both men cared deeply and craved attention. Tanner

wanted to be strong and rise above. He had the power within him to be a great player and leader in the community. With the right push, he could achieve anything. Ashton hadn't been so determined. Ashton had wanted a relationship with Dane that involved sneaking around and lying. Life had to be easy for him—if he ran into roadblocks, he couldn't deal. The struggle of being gay in a community notorious for being anti-gay had been too much for him.

What about Tanner? With the right reinforcement, Tanner could take on anything and come out stronger on the other side.

Dane left the bed and hurried into the bathroom. He showered and shaved before dressing. Once ready to walk out of the door, he reset the alarm for Tanner. He admired Tanner's nude body in his bed. He'd been lucky when he'd agreed to sponsor a baseball player.

Tanner inhaled and rolled over. When he exhaled, he opened his eyes. "Dane."

"Right here." Dane sat on the edge of the bed. "Sleep. It's early and you need your rest. I've got to get to work."

"I'll let the front office know you may come to the games. They'll have a ticket waiting for you." Tanner grasped Dane's hand. "I hope it's a super slow day and you're able to see my debut."

"Why see the first game when I get to see every inch of you when you come home?" He kissed Tanner. "I can't guarantee anything, but I'll do my best."

"That's all I can ask for." Tanner closed his eyes and snuggled in the sheets.

Dane left his lover alone in the bedroom and headed down to the main floor. He snagged his phone from the charger and checked his messages. Devlin had called, but

no notifications from the office. Good. He'd call his friend later on the way to work. He gathered his phone, keys, wallet, tablet and tucked all but the keys into his messenger bag. Before he strolled out of the kitchen, he rifled through the stack of mail on the counter. He'd have to thank Tanner for bringing the pile in.

A flier fell out of the stack. He snorted. A pink tri-fold advertisement. He tended to ignore these kinds of bulk mailings, but the desire to open the page overwhelmed him. When he read the words, he gasped.

Stop Gays in Cedarwood. Protect Our Children.

He massaged his forehead then glanced over at the corridor leading to the second story of his home. At least it was a bulk mailer with no addressee names on it. Tanner had his first game today and Dane didn't want him to see this kind of trash. Neither he nor Tanner had time for hate.

Dane picked through the rest of the mail, separating the bills and magazines from the ads. He'd found someone good and now had that man in his life. Yes, Tanner had moments of fragility, but there was more to him than that. Dane carried the bills to his office, then locked up before heading to the kitchen to retrieve his bag. He made his way to the garage. Within ten minutes, he'd backed out of the garage, closed the door and started down the street to work.

Instead of calling Devlin, Dane drove straight to the office. He pulled into his usual spot. When he walked up to the staff door, he checked the mailbox. The same pink flier had been mixed into the other envelopes.

"They just don't quit," he muttered. He went into the building. Sandra, the head receptionist, waved. She'd already assumed her position at her desk.

"You've got a full schedule," she said. "Oh, and you need to phone Devlin Chase. It's

not urgent, but he'd like to speak to you."

"It's six-fifteen in the morning." He placed the stack of mail on her desk. "Did he call you or was it a message with the answering service?"

"I just got off the phone with him." She laughed. "Something is bothering him. I haven't heard him this irritated in a while." She handed him a tablet and pointed to the schedule. "You're booked solid through noon. I've got ten calls from the answering service line asking for time during our walk-in hours. If we get out of here before six, I'll be shocked."

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“Thanks.” He didn’t mind busy days, but he’d wanted to attend Tanner’s game—one of them at least. “I’ll call Devlin once I get to my office.” He paused. “Hey, Sandra? Did you get a pink flier in the mail yesterday?”

“That horrible anti-gay one? Yes.” She crinkled her nose. “I threw it away. Why? Did we get one here, too?”

“We did and I got one at the house, as well.” He knocked on the doorframe. “I wish they’d stop.” He hated the group hell-bent on destroying lives just because some residents of Cedarwood happened to be homosexual.

“Considering you take care of so many of the members of that group, they know you’re gay and also that you’ll heal them. They shouldn’t complain.” Sandra flipped through the stack of envelopes. “If we get another one of those fliers, I’ll have it returned to the sender and notify the post office we don’t want those pieces of mail.”

“Thanks. I appreciate the help.” He nodded once. “I’ll be in my office, calling Devlin.” He left the front of the building and went into his private space. He placed his bag on his chair then withdrew his phone. He dialed Devlin.

After three rings, his friend answered. “Dane.”

“Devlin.” He closed his office door. “What’s so pressing you had to call my phone and the practice this morning? Sandra just gave me the message and I haven’t had time to listen to your voicemail.”

“Are you coming to either game today?” Devlin asked.

“I’m not sure. I’m scheduled through set hours and will have a full house during the walk-in time. Plus, I’m on call for the rest of the weekend. Why?”

“I’ve got bad news,” Devlin said. “Someone defaced the stadium.”

“Are you serious?” His stomach lurched. He’d hoped this wouldn’t happen—why wreck a perfectly good public space? “What happened?”

“The person or persons spray-painted hate speech on the parking lot and the Wildcat statue,” Devlin said. “The police have already taken pictures and once the grounds crew arrive, it’ll be cleaned up, but still.”

“That’s terrible.” He wasn’t sure why Devlin felt the need to tell him, though. “It can be fixed by game time, right? I don’t know anything about removing paint, but I’m guessing the stadium crew will.”

“Just...I can’t get a hold of Tanner. I’ve called the other members of the team, but I wanted to touch base with him in particular because the hate speech concerns him.”

“Because he’s gay.” Dane sighed. “Fuck. Was it the coalition?”

“Not sure,” Devlin said. “Would you call him? I want him to be on guard when he comes to the stadium. I’m pissed, hurt and annoyed. This should be Tanner’s big debut, but instead it’s a mess. Fans don’t want to see anti-gay messages on the stadium grounds. They want to see a game. And what’s worse? The coalition is already having a ball with the incident. They swear it’s not them, but they’ve posted on social media. Raji brought it to my attention.”

“They know about Tanner being gay.” Dane sank onto his desk. “This is getting out of control. This isn’t something to be proud of.”

“Tanner hasn’t come out, per se, but he’s never said he’s not gay.”

“He’s not flaming because he knew shit like this would happen,” Dane snapped. “And you can’t guarantee he’ll be safe. If the coalition wants to throw stuff at him or deface his car, they might not be caught.”

“I’ve increased security and am working with the police to have more patrols, but damn,” Devlin said. “I want my players to be happy here. I’ve already had two threaten to quit the game if they have to fear coming to the stadium.”

“I can’t say I blame them. It’s scary.” He wasn’t sure what else to do. “I’ll call Tanner when I’m off the phone with you.”

“Raji’s freaking out. He found the posts and arrived with me at the stadium. We were the first to find the graffiti. He keeps checking on me,” Devlin said. “I’m worried someone will destroy my field.”

He paused. He’d heard Raji’s name mentioned twice now. “I’m glad you and Raji finally got together.”

“I—we...” Devlin fumbled. “You knew we... Dane?”

“I knew you liked each other. It wasn’t hard to see and you told me earlier you were a couple. You have a thing for tall, dark and handsome, plus, you’re attracted to doctors.” Dane bit back a chuckle. Devlin certainly had a type.

“I am.”

“It’s natural that you’d get together.” Besides, he wasn’t jealous.

“You’re not pissed? I didn’t want you to find out this way,” Devlin said.

“You’re not my boyfriend. I wish you the best with Raji and hope it lasts forever.” He massaged his forehead. The feelings surprised him. He’d expected to be angry when he found out Devlin had moved on, but he wasn’t. A weight, one of the many, lifted from his shoulders. “If you’re good, then I am, too.”

“Damn, Dane. You’re mature. I’d be upset if I knew you were with someone. It’s selfish, I know,” Devlin said. “I always kind of hoped you’d be hung up on me—like I was the one that got away.” He sighed. “Just be advised. A gay man on my baseball team, a gay man who is out, seems to be the tipping point for the coalition. They’ve attacked before, so be aware, okay?”

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“I will and you, too. I’ll touch base with Tanner.”

“Keep an eye on your car. I’d hate to get paint on a perfectly good Beemer.”

“Me too.” He couldn’t imagine cleaning graffiti off Tanner’s ’Vette, either. “Call me or the desk if there are more developments.”

“You bet,” Devlin said.

“Thanks.” He hung up and bowed his head. Jesus fuck. He dialed Tanner. The call rang through to Tanner’s voicemail. Dane pounded his fist on the desk. He hated to wake Tanner up, but this was important. He tapped the icon for the call again.

After the fourth ring, Tanner answered. “Hi. You don’t need to wake me up. I’ve got the alarm.”

“I believe you.” He couldn’t hide the tension in his voice. “I didn’t call for that.” Besides, he wasn’t Tanner’s father.

“You’re angry.” Tanner sobered. “What’s wrong?” he asked, more awake.

“Can you get a ride to the ballpark? Would you let a friend of mine drive you to the stadium?” Dane asked.

“I could, I suppose, but I have a car. Why?”

“Someone defaced the parking lot of the stadium and painted all over the statue. Hate

speech.” Dane stared out of the window at his own car. At least they had security cameras in their parking lot and a healthy relationship with the police. If something happened, they’d know and the situation could be rectified quickly. “I’m worried that when you go to the stadium, you’ll be attacked,” Dane said. “It’s dangerous.”

“I’ll need a ride home,” Tanner said.

“I’ll get you.” He didn’t have to think twice. He couldn’t leave in time to deliver Tanner to the Wildcats facility, but he could retrieve him.

“Dane.”

“I protect my own.” He’d surprised himself with his defensive streak.

“Your own? I belong to you?”

“Do you not want to?” Dane asked. I’ve overstepped my boundaries, haven’t I?

“I like being kept by the doctor,” Tanner said. “But I didn’t think you cared that much.”

“I do,” Dane said. “I’m going to call my friend Lindsay. He’ll give you a ride.” His friend owed him a favor or two. “Once I’m sure he’ll be there, I’ll text you with the kind of car and what he looks like.”

“You don’t have to do this, but I appreciate how much you care,” Tanner said. “Thank you.”

“I’m hoping it’s a one-time graffiti incident, but with the fliers and other shit happening, I don’t want to take any chances.” He suppressed a groan. “I want you to be safe.”

“You trust Lindsay?”

“I do. He and I met at the October Faire after I moved here and have been tight ever since. He’s part of the newspaper staff, so once I tell him about the graffiti, he’ll be right on the story.” Dane nodded, not that Tanner could see him. “He’s smart and will help.”

“All righty.” Tanner hesitated. “It’ll be okay.”

“I hope so.” Am I acting like a father figure? Kind of looked that way. Do I care? Part of him did, but the rest didn’t. Tanner’s safety was the most important. “I’ll see you at the end of the second game tonight. I won’t miss it.”

Tanner snorted. “I’m looking forward to seeing you. I never thought you’d come through, but I’m glad.”

“Good. Until later,” Dane said.

“Until later.” Tanner laughed then hung up.

Dane typed a message to Lindsay and made a mental bet as to how fast Lindsay would reply. He’d make sure Tanner was taken care of—even if it meant calling in favors. If he could prevent Tanner from being assaulted, then all the better.

Lindsay replied slower than he’d expected.

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Will do. Was heading to the stadium for the story. Glad to help.

Within seconds, he sent another text.

You've never called in a favor. Must be a hot guy. I'm jealous, but happy for you.

Dane sighed and debated what to say in return.

Sandra knocked on the door. "Doc? We open soon and you've already got patients lined up in the parking lot."

"I'm almost ready." He texted Tanner concerning Lindsay then slid his phone into his pocket. He grabbed his stethoscope and dressed in his lab coat. He'd been told countless times he could be too bossy. He tried too hard to protect people. If he had a child, he'd end up smothering the kid so much he'd push him or her away. His mother, then his exes, Luis and Phillip, might have been right—to a degree. Dane had become a doctor to make the world better. Ashton claimed Dane held on too tightly. How could he stand back and allow a group of bullies to mistreat his friend/lover? He'd slept with Tanner once only, but he'd formed a bond with him. He shouldn't be having a sexual relationship with Tanner. He knew the rules. But he'd fallen for Tanner Fox. How could he keep his hands to himself now?

Chapter Six

Tanner stood in the locker room and debated his next move. No matter how hard he tried, he couldn't get his head in the game for the second one of the double-header. He understood why Dane couldn't come to his rescue and drive him to the

stadium—the man had to work. No shame in that. And Lindsay hadn't been a bad person to assist him. A bit chatty for Tanner's taste and more interested in the story than anything else, but not bad. There hadn't been any chemistry between him and Lindsay—not that he wanted there to be. He'd rather have had Dane there.

Then there was the graffiti. He'd seen the words spray-painted onto the asphalt. He saw how the statue had been defaced. Gay go home. Pussy cats. Why would anyone be so rotten? So they didn't like him being homosexual. So what? He wasn't flaunting his sexuality. Why did his personal situation have to be so important?

Part of him didn't see the need to freak out. No one had come looking for him. No one had tried to do anything to him. Yes, Dane had acted pre-emptively, but Tanner wasn't in danger—not yet.

Who was he kidding? Tanner knew better. The feeling in the stadium changed through the course of the first game. A new electricity sizzled in the air and it had nothing to do with the play on the field. He'd seen Daly and Selzer in the stands. How could he miss them? They were the only ones in the empty section.

Zeppelin stopped beside Tanner. "Do you always stare at your locker?"

"No." He chuckled to hide the tension within him. "Just lost in thought."

"I see." Zeppelin sat on the bench then tapped Tanner's thigh. "We change into our color blast uniforms. That's how we do it when there's a double-header."

"I know." He'd read the email briefing. "Coach spoke to me."

Zeppelin removed his jersey. "You got quite the response today. Ladies love Foxy." He tossed the soiled garment into his locker. "Looks like we're going to have a bigger crowd for the next game—because of you."

“I hit one homerun.” Tanner shrugged and unbuttoned his jersey. “It wasn’t much.”

“We won because of your homer. Add the two bloopers and stolen base...yeah, you’re important.” Zeppelin raked his fingers through his hair. “You’re getting hot. We need your hot streak.”

“I’m more relaxed.” Kind of. Part of him couldn’t wait for Dane to arrive. Their night of passion had removed some of his pregame jitters, but the rest of him couldn’t deny the stress. A group of people didn’t care how well he hit or if he’d been great in the outfield—they wanted him gone because he was gay.

“None of that relaxation came because of a certain doctor?”

“I told you I’m gay,” Tanner snapped. “And you knew it because you brought it up first.”

Zeppelin’s eyes widened then narrowed. “I didn’t want to believe it.”

“Believe it.” He changed out of his soiled jersey and into a fresh T-shirt. He wanted to shower before the next game. “Does my being gay bother you?” He knew the answer, but he wanted to hear Zeppelin’s rationale.

“Hell yes, it bothers me,” Zeppelin growled. “You’re the reason we had the fucking coalition show up here. Are you looking at my ass? At the asses of everyone here?”

He should’ve known Zeppelin would have a conniption. “I’m not stark-raving. I can handle myself. I’ve got a boyfriend, so no, I’m not checking out the asses of everyone here.”

“I’ve been naked with you,” Zeppelin shouted.

“We’re all naked at one time or another with each other. Big deal. I’m not going after your ass. I’ve got a guy and I’m not looking for a date.” He grabbed the shower gel and towel from his locker. “I’m focused on my stats on the field, not in the bedroom.” He strode away from Zeppelin. Jesus. He hadn’t done anything wrong.

“The coalition was right,” Zeppelin spat. “You’re trying to infiltrate everything.”

Tanner stopped in his tracks. He’d had enough. Where was Zeppelin getting this line of reasoning from? Tanner faced him. “When we take the field, the stands are filled with kids and families.”

“No shit.”

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“Those people want to see a game, not know our ideology.”

“I know that.” Zeppelin notched his chin in the air. “But they want to know we stand for something.”

“We’re examples to those kids and families and to the community,” Tanner said. “Really, they don’t give a rat’s ass about our philosophies—as long as we don’t parade them all over everywhere.”

“Which is why you should be gone. We don’t need gay players.”

His anger hit the limit. “First off, no one knew or cared about my sexuality back in Gary. They gave a damn about my playing. That’s what should define my stint in Cedarwood. I’m a good baseball player and an asset to the team,” he said, doing his best to keep his voice even. He wouldn’t give Zeppelin the honor of being yelled at—not now. “Second, you and anyone else have no idea how many of those kids and fans need role models. For some, we’re the only ones they have. They want to see strong, ethical players on the field. Some of them need to know it’s okay to be themselves. They need positive role models in sports. I’m proud of who I am and what I’ve accomplished. If I can show a kid who loves baseball but is scared to come out...if I can show it’s okay to be him or herself, then I’ll do it.”

“You’re encouraging them to be freaks.”

He hadn’t heard a thing Tanner had said. “You’re hetero. To me, you’re the freak.” Fuck. He hadn’t made any sense with that and he’d lost his cool. “Stop calling everyone you don’t agree with a freak.”

Zeppelin's eyes narrowed. "You're messing those kids up."

"I beg to differ," Tanner said. "Kids who are gay need role models. They need to know they're normal. My best friend committed suicide because he thought he was a freak. Because people like you drummed that into his head. He was gay, not abnormal. Not being accepted at face value is the abnormality."

Zeppelin's lip curled in a sneer, but he said nothing. A couple of other players stood at his flanks and one eased up next to Tanner, but no one spoke up.

Jesus. If he had to stand up to all of them, he would. "I'm gay," Tanner said. "I'm in a relationship and not interested in chasing any of you. I am interested in being teammates and playing for a league championship. I'd like to have a long and storied career in Cedarwood. If you have a problem with homosexuals being on the team, then speak up but know I'm not going anywhere." He'd lied about the relationship thing and had gotten ballsier than he'd intended but fuck it. He'd been mostly honest.

Zeppelin shook his head. He left Tanner at the entryway to the showers. Paul Black, the catcher, and Andy Keene, the right fielder, joined Tanner in the tiled room.

"Good job standing up to him," Paul said. "He needs to be reminded we're a team and not here to be his backing ensemble."

"Plus, it's nice to know you're committed to the team," Andy said. He grinned and stepped into the first stall. "I heard about you before the trade. We're going to have fun in the outfield."

"Thanks." Tanner stripped and made his way into the second stall. He turned the water on. He liked the camaraderie they'd formed. "I've got high hopes for the rest of the season."

“Very cool,” Paul said. “Oh and for your information, I’m glad we’ve diversified. You’re right. We should be role models for everyone—not some.” He stepped under the spray in the third stall. “My knees hurt like a motherfucker. I both love and hate double-headers. There’s no time to regroup.”

Tanner smiled and lathered his washcloth. He’d finally started to feel like he belonged on the team. “I’m glad we have some time between games, though. I’ve played for some clubs where they finish one game and launch right into the next. No break or change of clothes. It sucked.”

“The hell you say,” Andy said. “How do you rest up? Shower? Weren’t you drained?”

“Oh yeah, we were ragged by the seventh-inning stretch and you rested when you got home.” In his case, when he reached the apartment and passed out from exhaustion. Those had been the few times he’d been able to sleep through the noise from the restaurant below. Tanner cleaned up before rinsing. “It only happened twice. I think the players’ union put the nix on it.”

“Good.” Andy finished his shower. “My wife, Kellie, and I are throwing a barbecue on Tuesday, since it’s our day off. Bring your boyfriend. It’s a good time and we need the release.”

“He makes the best pulled pork with pineapple glaze you’ll ever eat,” Paul said. “I could devour all of it without guilt.”

“I’ll mark my calendar.” He’d have to make an excuse why Dane couldn’t come along—they weren’t a couple—not really. But he’d attend. Why not? Maybe he could convince Dane to join him.

“My neighbor, Clay, owns the diner in town. He usually brings fried chicken that’ll

melt in your mouth.” Andy ducked under the spray again then turned the water off. “It’s legendary.”

“You’re making me hungry,” Tanner said. He laughed and shampooed his hair. “I’ll have to find more than a snack between games.” He might even try to call Dane.

“Good.” Andy wrapped up in a towel. “When you’re both dressed, we’ll meet on the field for some warm-ups.” He left the shower.

“See? You fit in more than Zeppelin let on.” Paul scrubbed the soap from his cheeks. “Don’t let him get to you. We’re a team. We look out for each other.”

“Zeppelin thinks I’m the reason the stadium was defaced,” Tanner said. He rinsed the shampoo from his hair. “I probably am, but it’s not fair to put that all on my shoulders.”

“It’s not.” Paul rinsed once again. “But you’re bigger than that. You’re here to play ball.”

“I know.” He’d given himself that speech in his head a thousand times, but when Zeppelin had hurled insults, the shit from his past came back at full force. “He reminds me of my father.”

“Didn’t want you to come out?”

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“No.” Tanner turned the water off and covered his lower half in the towel. “He thought I was lying to myself.”

“He, like Zep, was wrong. Theyarewrong.” Paul dried off and followed Tanner out of the showers. “You’re in a safe place. It doesn’t seem like it when the coalition and Zep decide to be dicks, but we’ve got your back. Your boyfriend has it, too.” He clapped Tanner on the shoulder. “I need to get something to eat. Find me and we’ll warm up together.”

“Sure thing.” Tanner waited for Paul to leave the area before he dressed and shoved his feet into his boat shoes. His heart lightened. The feeling of belonging at Dane’s home and now at the stadium quashed his fears concerning the coalition and hate speech. He left the locker room in favor of the meeting space. A buffet of sandwiches, fruit, a veggie tray and other goodies had been set out for the team. He selected a roast beef sandwich and bowl of grapes, then wandered into one of the empty loges. He closed the door. If he’d figured his time correctly, he had forty-five minutes to eat before he had to report to warm-ups.

Tanner pulled his phone from his pocket and snacked on the grapes as he called Dane. He wasn’t sure if the doctor would answer, but he’d never know if he didn’t try.

After two rings, the call connected. “Hello?” a female voice asked.

He froze then checked the phone display. He’d called Dane, right? Tanner fumbled for words. “Hi. May I speak to Dane?”

“Sure. He’s finishing up with a patient. Just a moment,” she said. “Who may I ask is calling?”

“Tanner Fox.” He couldn’t say Dane was his boyfriend. They hadn’t established such terms between them. “I live with him.”

“Foxy lives with our doctor? Wow,” she said. “He never mentioned you. I wish he had. I’m a big fan. I went to Gary to see the games a few times. Tickets for the last game, probably right before you were traded last month, were a present from my husband.”

“Nice. I’m glad you were there. I’ll be in Cedarwood for the remainder of the season, so if you can, come to one of the games.” Always talk up the team. The more people in the seats, the more exposure and revenue for the team and everyone else. “I hope to see you there.”

“I’ll check the schedule, but I have to admit, I forgot we have the team.” She laughed. “And I work for one of the major sponsors.”

“Then you should know.” He chuckled and continued to snack on the grapes. “Do you think Dane will be much longer? I don’t want to be a bother.” He tried to chew without being noisy. “Sorry.”

“Don’t worry. It’s not normally his weekend to work and until this flu came along, we weren’t quite so busy.” She paused. “Here he comes. It’ll be just another moment,” she said. “I’m glad I got to talk to you.”

“Same goes for me.” He swallowed the grapes. “Silly question, but I’ve been chatting with you all this time and I have no idea who you are.”

“That’s not a question, but a fair note. I’m Sandra, one of the receptionists at the

practice. Dane gives me his phone while he's in with patients in case there's an emergency and so I can take messages for him."

"Well, nice to meet you, Sandra." He nibbled on more of the grapes. He appreciated Dane's resourcefulness. But he should've guessed the doctor would have a plan—he was a born scheduler.

The connection crackled then filled with static before clearing. "Hello?"

He knew this voice. "Hi, Dane." Tanner hurried through the bite of grapes. "How's your day been? Rough?"

"No, I'd say busy. We've had so many patients in and out today." Dane sighed. "What about you? Any news on the graffiti incident? Any new ones? You're okay, right? I've been worried about you since I called this morning."

"I'm fine and between baseball games." He settled back on the seat. The tension within him faded. "I thought I'd touch base with you. The worry, by the way, is mutual. I was afraid you'd be targeted because of me." Admitting the truth helped, but he wished he could be in the same space with Dane.

"You're in one piece, then?"

"I am, but I know a doctor who can fix me if I'm broken." He dismantled the sandwich and rolled the roast beef into a cylinder. "I hear he makes house calls."

Dane snorted. "I do."

"And his house calls are pretty darn exciting," Tanner murmured. He wanted to say more but didn't dare in case the wrong ears were listening to his conversation. He wasn't ashamed of his relationship with Dane, but if Dane wasn't ready to take things

public, then he respected Dane's choice. "How much longer do you have to be at the office?"

"I'm here for another hour. The official hours are up in ten minutes, but I've got two patients on the way up for appointments Sandra made because they've purportedly got the flu. I'd rather see them and get them meds than wait and the virus worsens." Dane sighed. "I know why we extended the summer hours on Saturdays, but I wish we hadn't. I'm tired."

"I'll bet you are. You woke up early this morning." Tanner picked at the cheese on his roast beef sandwich. He loved Cheddar but wasn't in the mood for that flavor. "Think you might make the game?" He wanted to be sure there was a ticket for Dane.

"I'm trying."

Tanner stared out at the field. Words filled his mind, but he wasn't sure what he wanted to say. "I'd like to introduce you to my friends—my teammates."

"I'd love to meet them."

Was Dane happy about the possibility? Scared? Tanner couldn't gauge his tone. "A couple of the players invited us to a barbecue." How would Dane take the invitation?

“Us?”

Again, Dane didn't sound happy or upset. Tanner suppressed a groan. “Yeah. They invited me and a plus one.” He wasn't about to say boyfriend—not yet. He needed to know Dane would join him.

“I—” Dane grumbled something Tanner couldn't understand. “I need to go. I'll be at the game at some point. You can introduce me all you want.”

Not the overwhelming and resounding approval he'd expected, but Tanner could deal. “Okay.” He paused. “I can't wait to see you. I'm dying for some of your special doctoring.”

“Are you?” Dane asked.

“Yes.” Without a doubt.

“If I didn't have patients here, I'd ask for details,” Dane said. “I'll see you at the end of the game, if not before.”

“See you soon.” He hung up. He wished he could spend more time on the phone with Dane. He liked the game of tag and the initial delight in Dane's voice. The giddiness filled Tanner and spurred him forward for the game. He'd slept with Dane and things were still tenuous but going in the right direction. He'd see his man soon and could rest beside him. His teammates wanted him around and he'd found a home. Life was good.

* * * *

Dane groaned as he drove to the stadium. He'd wanted to be there an hour ago, but as per usual, he'd taken on one more patient and stayed past closing time. He hadn't wanted to let anyone down, yet he'd forgotten to consider Tanner's feelings.

Sandra's words rang in his ears. 'The world won't end if you leave. The patients can go to the ER or another doctor can come in to help.'

But he was the one on call. He needed to be available. He also deserved a personal life. He'd come in plenty of times during his off-hours. He'd helped and stuck around when he could've left.

Now he had someone to come home to and a life.

He pulled into the parking lot. A dull ache started behind his eyes. The lot had already cleared out, save for a handful of cars. The stands, from his vantage point, seemed empty, too. Damn it. He'd missed the game completely.

Dane parked in the staff lot in the sponsor section then locked his bag in the trunk. Despite feeling safe at the stadium, he kept an eye out for the coalition. He hadn't heard anything new concerning the group, but still. He had to be vigilant.

Guilt washed over him. He should've found a way to get to the game before now. Christ, this was why he sucked as a boyfriend and friend—he put his work in front of his personal life.

He left his car and locked the vehicle before he headed into the facility. The woman at the gate stopped him.

"Do you have your credentials?" she asked. She pointed to the badge she wore. "I

know you're one of the sponsoring doctors, but we have to see your credential card."

Shit. Did he have it? He looked through his wallet and finally found the identification. "Here you go."

"Thank you, Dr. Bloom." She smiled. "The game is over. We lost by five."

He walked through the turnstile. Well, shit. "It happens. We're still a young team." He paused. "I had to be at the office all day. I wish I hadn't missed the game, but maybe it's not so bad."

"We won game one by two runs. Foxy scored the winning homer and got the base runner in." She handed him a program. "If you run into Foxy, get his autograph. He'll love the attention. I made sure to have him sign mine earlier."

"I will." He could have much more at home, but he wasn't about to tell her that. "Thank you."

He headed to the upper deck and located Devlin's loge. He peeked through the privacy window and spotted Devlin with his arm around Raji. A pang of jealousy hit Dane. He would love to be cuddled up right now—not with Devlin or Raji. With Tanner. Christ, he had it bad for Tanner. He jiggled the handle then opened the door.

"Hi," Dane said. "Sorry I missed the game."

Devlin sighed. "We need to lock that door before we get close." He glanced over his shoulder. "Hi, Dane."

Raji blushed. "Nice of you to join us."

"Did you watch the game?" Dane asked. "You're the owner and one of the

sponsoring doctors. Don't you have a vested interest in winning? How about an interest in the health of the team? Shouldn't one of you be in the dugout?"

"We got one win today," Devlin said. "It's better than none and why are you so testy?" He shifted in his seat. "Too many tough cases today?"

"I missed the game. That's why I'm testy." Dane stood tall. He snagged a bottle of water from the table. "I made a promise and I blew it."

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“I didn’t think you’d get here in time,” Devlin said. “But don’t worry about that promise. He’ll live.”

Right.Dane fought the urge to roll his eyes.

“Lots of tough cases?” Raji said, repeating Devlin. “Flu?”

“Whatever this strain is going around Cedarwood, it’s nasty and everyone seems to be catching it.” Dane sat on one of the empty chairs. The players were off the field. Kids ran the bases and the mascot danced with a few of the adults. Dane downed some of the water then swallowed. “We could’ve used a few extra hands to see all the patients today.”

“I wouldn’t change this job for anyone or anything,” Raji said. He stroked Devlin’s thigh. “I’m happy right where I am and, snotty comment aside, I’m the team doctor, but everyone is fine. If something had happened, I’d be in the dugout in seconds.” He pointed to the doorway on the side of the loge. “I’ve got direct access through there.”

“I see.” Dane nodded. He doubted Raji would stick around if he and Devlin split. Dane hoped they stayed together. Raji was a decent guy and more what Devlin wanted in a partner.

“Did you see the graffiti?” Devlin asked. “The crew went right to work cleaning it up after the police did their thing.”

Did their thing?“They opened the crime scene to you?” Dane asked. “Truth be told, I didn’t look.”

“Lindsay asked a thousand questions, but he’ll get the story in the paper, so the team will get promotion. Any notice in the media is better than none.” Devlin clapped Raji on the shoulder then stood. “The game wasn’t without hiccups. An anti-gay chant was started and Tanner was pelted with hot dog wrappers and beer cups during the seventh-inning stretch.”

“Are you shitting me?” Dane blurted. He tensed. “That’s terrible.” He’d checked the app, but there hadn’t been a mention of anyone throwing things or anti-gay chants. “What did you do about it?”

“The individuals throwing things were removed from the stadium by the guards. I tried to convince Tanner to take the rest of game one off, but he refused and hit a home run—just not the winning run. He wanted to show the haters he wasn’t going to be bullied. I respect his decision, but I can’t have that kind of interruption at the game.”

“He’s an interruption?” Dane narrowed his eyes. “You said you wanted him because he garnered attention.” He liked Tanner’s pluck, but damn. Sometimes backing down wasn’t a bad thing. “I wish the coalition would stop. Tanner and the rest of the team don’t deserve to be treated that way. He and the others aren’t throwing their sexuality in anyone’s face. He and the rest of the team are living their lives. So what Tanner’s gay? Big fucking deal. I’m gay. I’m not out to convert people. I just want to be a doctor and keep people healthy. He wants them to enjoy the game of baseball.”

“Trust me, I hear you,” Devlin said. “The outbursts are bad for business. People want to come to the game to have fun and to be with family. Slurs and thrown objects aren’t helping our cause or making the coalition’s, either.”

“No.” The more Devlin talked, the more Dane wanted to see Tanner and make sure he was okay. He needed to feel Tanner in his arms. The only way he’d be happy was to have Tanner with him. He left his chair and stuffed his hands into his pockets. He

couldn't hold still. Damn it. The coalition could back the fuck off.

"For a guy who said he wanted to keep everyone at arm's length, you sure look worried about Tanner." Raji grinned. He remained seated but stared at Dane. "You're not masking your feelings well at all."

I'm not.

"Do you want to see him?" Devlin asked. "Don't throw away a good thing. The spark is there. Don't chuck it because you're afraid."

"Devlin." He couldn't believe what he'd heard. "You said there are rules. Swore it to me. You can't change your mind. Either hands off or the rules don't apply."

"You'd give up an obvious connection because of a rule?" Raji asked. "Dane. Consider what you're doing."

"Jesus." Dane raked his fingers through his hair. He needed time to think of how to shut this down with Raji and Devlin. They were pushing way too hard. "Just—how do I get to the locker room? This door?"

"Yeah," Devlin said. He left his seat and blocked the exit. "Dane, I thought you'd keep Tanner in line. I expected you to push him away like you do with everyone else who tries to get too close. You want a lover to care, but not when things go to shit. I figured you'd treat Tanner the same way—with a bubble around you. He's nothing like your usual type. He's young, rugged, tough and not needy. The moment I saw you peruse his photo, though, I knew you'd hit it off. I tried to warn you concerning the rules because I thought you'd still push him away even if you noticed the connection. I was wrong. I see the way your eyes sparkle when you talk about him and how the spring has returned to your step. The concern for Tanner is touching."

His irritation rose. Devlin knew him way too well and had pegged him. He hated his friend for being so right. “I don’t like to break rules.” Dane wasn’t lying, but who was he kidding?

“And walking away from Tanner is something you don’t want to do.” Raji stood. “I get it. I felt the same way about Devlin. I wasn’t going to give him a chance because he’s the owner and I’m the team doctor. I have things to do besides be with him. When I’m on, I’m all-in with the players. But I’m not the personal trainer. I don’t have to be down there all the time and I can have a life. Once I decided I wanted to go for Devlin and followed my heart, life turned around. I saw the world in a new light.”

“You’re going overboard with the clichés.” Dane sighed. Whatever. “Look, everyone knows I’m gay. I don’t mince words. I’m out and proud. I don’t owe the coalition a damn thing. I’m sure they hate me. Tanner is another subject. They do hate him. They want him to leave town and they won’t stop until he does. He wants to play ball and that’s what I want him to do.”

“No one’s questioning his sexuality.” Devlin shrugged. “The crowd concerned him, but you’re right. I didn’t acquire him because of his popularity alone.”

“He thinks you did,” Dane shot back. “I know he’s gay. The coalition knows. You know. He deserves better than to be treated like a freak or a problem.”

“I saw his potential and that a fresh start would do him some good. It’s already helped,” Devlin said. “I have the feeling you’ve seen it all along.”

“Maybe.” Yeah, he’d noticed Tanner’s potential. Who wouldn’t? The man had magnetism.

“Go downstairs and see him. Keep things on the down-low as long as you feel

necessary. You might realize you're keeping silent for nothing. Besides, I can't stop what nature and fate want. Don't you try to quit on it, too." Devlin winked. "Enjoy."

Dane didn't say anything because the words weren't there. He left the room and headed down the staircase. His brain hurt. He'd pushed and warred with himself about being with Tanner, only to have Devlin's blessing. Would've been nice to have that okay to start with. He might not have been attracted to Tanner. Then again, Tanner was crazy handsome and hard to miss.

Chapter Seven

Dane stopped in the corridor at the bottom of the steps. Where was he? The bowels of the stadium? He'd never been to this part of the facility. He wasn't sure what he'd expected, but the lighting seemed darker and almost spooky. Maybe the odd element was the lack of people and noise. The images of the team mascot running and growling unnerved him.

He stopped at the door labeled LOCKER ROOM. Devlin and Raji were right. He liked Tanner. He'd ignored the rules and should've had his head examined when he made a play for Tanner. But he'd been given approval to do so. Would he see Tanner differently now that the rule wasn't in place?

The door opened and Paul walked out to the corridor. "Doc." He grinned and switched his bag to his left shoulder before sticking out his right hand. "How are you? I'm still so thankful you helped Delia out last year. Who knew she'd get the chicken pox at age two?"

"She's little and went to day care. It happens." He steeled himself. He liked Paul Black. The man was pleasant and had a sweet family. He'd served as a physician to both of Paul's children at one time or another. But he couldn't shake the fear that Paul would want to talk about Tanner. He wasn't sure why he'd make the connection, but still. "I'm glad your daughter is okay." Should he ask about the incidents today? Keep quiet? "I missed the game today."

"You didn't miss much. We weren't great and I don't want to talk about it." Paul clapped Dane on the shoulder. "I like Dr. Raji, but I wouldn't be upset if you were the

team doctor.”

That wasn’t going to happen. “I’m good at the practice.”

Paul paused. “Are you touring the facility? Lost?”

“I’m supposed to be meeting someone.” Did he sound lame? “And I’m a little lost.”

“Who?” Paul blushed. “Sorry. Not my business...unless you want help locating someone.”

What did he have to lose? Paul knew he was gay and still brought his family in for care at the practice. “I’m on the hunt for Tanner Fox.”

“Oh, he’s still in there,” Paul said. “He’s cute. You should make overtures toward him.”

Dane’s words were gone. He opened and closed his mouth without uttering a sound.

Paul smirked then chuckled. “Say no more. Have a good evening and I hope you find him.” He winked before he left.

Holy motherfucker. Dane fought the urge to rake his fingers through his hair. He needed to get a hold of himself and center. Paul was a smart guy. He had to know the obvious—Tanner and Dane had attraction. What could Dane do? He’d created the mess and he’d have to own it.

He pushed the door open and stepped into the locker room. The scents of body odor, sweat and leather surrounded him. He steadied himself and kept going. He spotted Tanner’s open locker. Tanner’s things were still in the cubby, but Tanner wasn’t anywhere to be seen. He wasn’t sure where to look for the baseball player. He’d

never been in the locker room before.

“Doc.” Zeppelin Starr strode up to him. He stuck his hand out. “How the hell are you?” His towel barely concealed his lower half. His sandals squeaked as he moved. “You caught me fresh out of the shower.”

“I can see that.” Did he seem scared? Because of Zeppelin? No, Tanner. “I’m good. How are you?” He shook hands with Zeppelin. “Did you have a decent game?”

“I’m great. I got two hits and one run batted in.” Zeppelin smiled, but his tone became harsh. “What brings you to the locker room?”

“A friend.” He slid his hands into his pockets to hide his trembling. He could hold his own with patients and fellow doctors, but Zeppelin unnerved him. Zeppelin was a shoestring member of the coalition and knew Dane was gay. “I’m allowed to have friends, aren’t I?” He’d only spoken to Zeppelin in professional settings, but he didn’t doubt the ballplayer would run to the coalition with any new information.

“You can.” Zeppelin swept his gaze over Dane. His chest gleamed with water and his hair dripped. “You’d better not be trolling my locker room for a quick lay.”

Good God. “No one said anything about sex—until you did.” Screw it. If Zeppelin wanted to make trouble, he’d face it head on. He refused to back down again. “Lay off.”

“Why? The Wildcats were a great team until you joined as a sponsor. We let one standard sag and we ended up with Tanner Fox. Why couldn’t he be on another team? Everything’s going downhill,” Zeppelin said. “It’s ridiculous.”

“Are you saying gay men can’t play baseball? Or they can’t in Cedarwood?” Dane asked. “I’m getting the feeling you don’t like my money as sponsorship dollars, but

you've had no problem taking the stipend—which is part of what I've helped sponsor.”

“I'm not gay,” Zeppelin snarled.

“Okay? That means nothing.” Dane shrugged. “No one expects you to be and besides, if you were, you wouldn't be able to play ball in this town—according to your rules.”

“Just get out.”

Dane rolled his eyes. “You're not in charge here, first of all. Second, I'm not leaving until I meet up with my friend. Third, I'm a sponsor and deserve respect. I've got access to the facility and it's all business-g geared, not social.” He stood tall and embraced his courage. “Fourth, whether I'm gay or anyone else is has no bearing on whether or not the guys on the team can play. You should be more worried about being a team player than anything else. If you win, you all win. If you lose, then it's losing as a team. You think you're the star, but it's a team sport.”

“I am after today. They saw the skid is still in place. He'll be traded in three games.” Zeppelin curled his lip in a sneer then walked away.

Damn.Dane scrubbed the back of his hand across his mouth. Arguing with Zeppelin was hard when the man made little sense. But Zeppelin wasn't important to him. He could bitch all day long, but Zeppelin didn't decide who was traded and who stayed. Dane turned on his heel to survey the room. Tanner stood in the doorway between the locker room and the corridor. He'd dressed. The jeans hugged his lower body in all the right places and the faded T-shirt showcased the power in his chest. His chunky boots added a touch of ruggedness to his look.

“Sexy,” Dane murmured. “Hi.”

“Hi.” Tanner didn’t move.

Dane steadied himself. He wasn’t sure what Tanner had heard. “How long have you been standing there?”

“Long enough.”

Cryptic. Wonderful. “You caught every word, didn’t you?”

“I did.”

He had nothing to be ashamed of, but he wasn’t sure how Tanner felt about the situation.

“You’re here,” Tanner said.

“I am.” Why did this exchange have to be so tense? He wanted to gather Tanner in his arms and kiss him senseless.

“You’re late.” Tanner rocked on his heels. “I thought you’d arrive earlier.”

“I tried, but I had to get through my patient load.” The excuse was the truth, but it sounded hollow in his ears. “I’m sorry.” He lowered his voice. “I’ll make it up to you.”

Tanner's eyebrows rose.

An uneasiness washed over Dane. "Don't you want me to?" Dane whispered. "Or not here?" He expected Zeppelin to appear out of nowhere at any second. "I know we haven't set boundaries or gone public."

Tanner crossed the space between them and cupped Dane's jaw. Without saying a word, he kissed Dane.

Dane couldn't help the overwhelming rush of excitement. He moved on instinct and held on to Tanner's hips. Anyone in the locker room could see him with Tanner and for the first time since he'd made a move, he didn't care if he was spotted. Tanner appeared to be unbothered as well. So much for boundaries and rules. They were meant to be broken and he was ready to shatter everything.

Tanner didn't give a shit who saw him kiss Dane. Fuck everyone else. After the bullshit at the game and the garbage from Zeppelin, he needed the stability of Dane. He tangled his tongue with Dane's and caressed Dane's cheeks with the pads of his thumbs. Dane was just who he needed.

Dane broke the kiss first. "Whoa."

"You've kissed me before." Tanner bumped noses with Dane and kept him close. "Kind of nice to know I still blow your mind."

"It's new."

"Feels like it's been forever," Tanner said. The weeks since he'd come to Cedarwood had both flown and gone so slow. "Or I'm finally home." That's what he'd guess was the answer.

“You’re at the stadium,” Dane murmured.

Tanner bit back his amusement. He liked having Dane so mixed up. “With you.”

Dane’s breath caught. He said nothing and stayed tight to Tanner.

Did Dane understand? Today hadn’t been Tanner’s idea of fun. He’d hated being pelted with wrappers and wasn’t thrilled about the nasty things shouted at him, but he’d seen children in the stands. The boy who’d caught his homerun ball had sought him out after the game for an autograph. The excitement in the child’s eyes gave him hope and reminded him why he loved the game of baseball. Being with Dane, in a solid home with him, completed his life. He had everything he wanted—save for love, but that would come eventually. He had faith. They were still feeling each other out, but the start of what they shared was strong.

“Get a room,” Andy Keene shouted. He laughed. “Hey, Doc. Tanner, is this the guy?”

Tanner tensed but didn’t let go. He slid his hands to Dane’s chest. He wanted to introduce Dane to the team as his boyfriend, but not in this exact moment. “Hi.” He wanted to shout, yes, this is the guy, but he wanted to be sure Dane was okay with going public first.

Dane sighed. “Hi, Andy.”

“Did you see the game?” Andy asked. “Were you in the stands?”

“I missed it. Had to work,” Dane said. “I wish I could’ve been here.”

“Next time.” Andy grinned again and shook his head. He lingered a moment. “See you at the next game. Oh, and Tanner? Bring him along.” He waved before leaving Tanner and Dane alone again.

Dane met Tanner's gaze.

Tanner braced for Dane's questions. He doubted Dane would let this go without asking something.

Dane didn't speak right away. "What did he mean?" He shrugged away from Tanner, putting space between them. "Tanner?"

He glanced about, ensuring he and Dane were alone in the locker room. He didn't want to have an argument with witnesses around. "Why don't we go?"

Dane massaged his forehead. "Yeah."

Tanner scurried over to his locker to get his bag. He checked he had his phone, wallet and keys, then chased after Dane. He'd rather not have someone overhear the conversation. Did he care if the team knew he was gay? No, but he wanted things with Dane to come out when Dane was prepared, not before. "I'm ready."

"Sure." Dane left the locker room. The tension and anger in his body were visible from a mile away. He didn't stop until he reached the car and slid behind the wheel.

Tanner's stomach lurched. He'd help create this mess and he hadn't given Dane a chance to ask any questions. "I was invited to a barbecue. The guys said to bring my boyfriend and they know I'm homosexual."

"Everyone knows," Dane said. "I heard about the game. They threw things at you." He faced Tanner. "You could've been hurt."

“I’ve got a doctor who can heal me,” Tanner said. He half grinned. When Dane didn’t relax, Tanner’s smile fell.

“That’s not the point.” A frown marred Dane’s handsome face. “You were in danger.”

“I’m not going to hide who I am.” He reached for Dane. “You’re the reason I’m not backing down.” He had to say something to make Dane understand and save the situation. “I have everything I want right here.”

“You’re being attacked.”

“So what? Bigoted people are everywhere. The Cedarwood group is no different. I won’t give them the honor of letting them see me break. Fuck ’em. I like where I am—even after one game and a couple of weeks here, I’m happy. I’ll take a few wrappers in my direction if that means I don’t have to hide.”

“But—”

He slid his fingers across Dane’s mouth. “But nothing.” He caressed Dane’s bottom lip. “Unless you’re worried. Are you?”

“I am.”

“About?” He’d pushed and forced. Despite his heart sinking, he needed to give Dane a chance to speak. “I’m listening.”

Dane spoke around Tanner’s fingers. “I’m concerned about how they’re targeting you. The fliers they’ve been sending are pieces of paper but can be ignored. The stadium being defaced isn’t cool but could be chalked up to silly juvenile graffiti. But you having things thrown at you... It wasn’t just wrappers. They threw plastic cups.

What if that escalates?"

"To what? They assaulted me already and I stood up," Tanner said. He could caress Dane forever. "I can handle myself, but I like knowing I've got you in my corner."

"I am," Dane whispered.

Had his voice cracked? "Then what? Are you afraid they'll damage your house? Car? Practice?" Or his heart?

"Not those things."

"Your reputation?"

"No."

"I don't understand." Tanner dropped his hands to his lap.

Dane held on to Tanner's wrist. "There are haters everywhere. I realize it doesn't go away because you tell it to. I've tried to keep things positive, but that hate finds me."

"It's life." He tipped his head but didn't pull away from Dane, his lifeline. "But?"

"What you and I have is new. Super new."

Tanner hated awkward pauses, but he couldn't believe Dane had used the word super. His stomach soured even more. "Are you rethinking us?" Or us being in the same house? Damn it. His thoughts shouldn't have gone to the negative or even being thrown out, but he'd been down this road before. He couldn't handle being abandoned again.

“No.”

Then what? He tried to process what was happening. “You’re worried you won’t be able to handle the baggage I’ve got?” His anger bubbled within him. “Or you don’t want me to mess up your ordered life?” He needed to keep his frustration in check. “Tell me.”

“I never said that. Any of it.”

“I don’t understand.” Tanner sighed. “Help me.”

Dane sagged in his seat. “I don’t open up to many people. If Devlin hadn’t conned me into sponsoring you, I’d still be in my little self-imposed prison.”

“We haven’t done much.” But his fears quieted and hope blossomed in his chest. Dane sure seemed to be melting. “Go on.”

“But I want to do more. I haven’t gone out since I split from Phillip.” Dane paused. “I want to do a lot of things and most involve you.”

“Sounds good to me.” The hope grew bigger. Giddiness swarmed him. “I’m home when I’m with you.” He had to get his mood swings in check, though. “I am.”

“What’re you going to do when you get traded?”

Tanner shrugged. “I just got here. I’d like to stay.” With the way the sport progressed and his age being a factor, he’d probably end up being with Cedarwood for another

year before being forced to retire.

“What about next season? Don’t you get new sponsors every year?” Dane asked.

“I guess.” He’d never been with a team long enough to find out what happened with his sponsorship from one year to the next. “What does it matter?”

“You might find someone hotter and better than me,” Dane said. His voice cracked and pain resonated in his eyes.

Fuck. Now he understood and had come to the wrong conclusions. He hated himself for being wrong. “That’s what Phillip did, isn’t it?” He wanted to hold Dane. Jesus. The man was handsome, strong, sweet and a doctor, too. He was a bona fide catch. Tanner would’ve fallen for him, no matter what Dane did for a living. The connection between them was deep, even after a short time. He cared more than he’d ever imagined. He wanted to kick Phillip for his callousness. “I’m not like him.”

“No, you’re not.” Dane drew into himself. “You’re young, handsome, popular and I’m lucky to know you.”

“I only want one guy,” Tanner said.

“For now.”

Tanner scooted as close as possible until he was a whisper away from Dane’s mouth. He didn’t want Dane to misunderstand him. “I don’t care about being popular. Handsome fades and strength goes away when you stop working out. Stop trying to push me away. You think you’re safer when you’re alone. You might be insulated from the world, but you’re not happy.”

“Tanner.” His breath warmed Tanner’s cheeks.

“I understand. I’ve been in your shoes. I tried to keep anyone who wasn’t part of the team out of my life so I could focus on the game. I thought if I had a force field around me, letting only a few fans in, I’d be okay. I wasn’t. I came off as a big jerk. Yeah, the fans liked me because I was cute, but the team hated me. I couldn’t get a guy and I wasn’t playing for shit. I’d lost my sponsorship situation and was being traded. I thought, fuck me, this is low. Then I came here. Trust me. On the road to Cedarwood, I thought I’d hate it here. Then I met you and I couldn’t help but open up. You brought me out of myself.”

Dane’s eyes widened. He toyed with the front of Tanner’s shirt.

“Let’s go home. I’ll show you how I feel and how much I want to stay open. I don’t want to go back to how I was. I’m truly happy.” He kissed Dane. Passion ignited within him. His dick hardened behind his zipper and he slid his palm over Dane’s thigh. He’d thought the adrenaline from the game had dissipated, but he’d been wrong. Every cell in his body screamed to go back to the house and fuck until they both collapsed. “I want you inside me.”

“Yeah?” Dane panted.

“Yes.” He caressed the bulge in Dane’s pants. “I want to see you out of those clothes, naked and perfect in my bed. I want to lick you everywhere, then feel you stretch me. Maybe a nice shower together and to nibble whipped cream off your abs.”

Dane groaned. “Then what are we talking for?”

“My sentiments exactly. Drive.” He squeezed Dane’s thigh. “Take me home.”

Dane drove across town, and any thoughts of the coalition disappeared. The only thing on his mind was Tanner. He barely remembered speeding through Cedarwood or pulling into the driveway. He’d parked and shut down the engine, despite not

realizing how he'd gotten there. The second he stood in the kitchen with Tanner, he knew where he was and what he wanted to do. He threw his bag on the counter and abandoned his jacket. Tanner left his duffel on the floor then laced his arms around Dane.

Dane grunted. His back connected with the counter and dug into his skin. The momentary pain didn't bother him. He'd rather have Tanner. He feasted on Tanner's mouth, tangling his tongue with his lover's. Heat shimmered within him.

Tanner slid his hands along Dane's chest, then sides. Within seconds, he opened Dane's shirt. Buttons from the garment shot across the room and landed on the tile floor. The sound of tearing fabric seemed more like a roar. Cool air kissed Dane's chest.

Dane panted. "Fuck."

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“Yes.” Tanner nibbled along Dane’s throat and palmed his chest. He caressed Dane, bringing a moan from within him. He scraped his teeth along Dane’s neck. “Love what I see.”

He stuffed his hands into Tanner’s back pockets and squeezed. “Do you?” He’d fallen hard for Tanner. No other man affected him this way. He wasn’t sure what to think, but he’d go along for the ride. He rubbed the bulge in his trousers against the one in Tanner’s jeans.

“Nice.” Tanner bit the soft spot on Dane’s shoulder where it connected to his neck.

Dane almost stopped him. He hated having marks on his body. It wasn’t professional to show up with a hickey. Yet, he wore collared shirts. If Tanner had to leave a blemish, it could be covered. He tipped his head back, giving Tanner more access.

“God, you’re pretty.” Tanner opened Dane’s shirt. He dragged his fingers down Dane’s chest until he caressed Dane’s belly button. “I thought about you today. I imagined you were in the stands. You watched me play and cheered me on. Knowing you were there made me want to do better.” He dropped to his knees. “To please you.”

“I wish I had been.” Dane gasped. He held on to the back of Tanner’s head. “Tanner.”

“You doubt me?” Tanner grinned. “I played like you were there—even if you watched the app.” He opened Dane’s trousers. Within seconds, he’d parted the fabric and shoved both the pants and Dane’s boxer briefs down his thighs, exposing Dane’s cock.

“I did watch you,” Dane managed. He couldn’t think straight. “On the app.” Had he just repeated what Tanner had said? He wasn’t sure.

“Yeah? Like I thought?” Tanner curled his fingers around Dane’s shaft and stroked. He moved slow, then picked up speed. “Did you ogle my ass?”

Jesus. Tanner wanted coherent answers. “Yeah. Your ass is hard to miss in those pants.”

Tanner brushed the blunt head of Dane’s erection across his lips, teasing Dane. He continued the slow strokes. “You like a guy in uniform?”

“Just you.” He couldn’t form the rest of his sentence. He widened his stance and pushed his cock in Tanner’s direction.

“I knew it.” Tanner chuckled then swallowed Dane to the root.

Dane caressed Tanner’s head. The man was pretty on his knees. He felt good around Dane’s dick, too. Dane blew out a ragged breath. Tanner consumed him—he took everything Dane had and forced him to be stronger. Tanner’s eyes shimmered as he bobbed his head. He met Dane’s gaze. Was he humming? Dane tried to listen, but he felt the vibrations to his core. He slid his fingers into Tanner’s hair and guided him. The thrill of being with Tanner combined with the freedom to be himself. The power surged within him. His nerve endings buzzed. He needed the counter for support.

Tanner fondled Dane’s balls while setting a steady cadence. He flattened his tongue along the underside of Dane’s shaft, sending a fresh wave of excitement through Dane. The humming continued.

Dane whimpered. He tipped his head back. “Fuck.”

Tanner moved to Dane's balls. His hair tickled Dane's thigh. He rubbed his nose along Dane's shaft. The combination of sensations turned Dane's thoughts to mush. He couldn't concentrate on anything besides Tanner and what he did to his body.

Christ, he was sensitive. He gritted his teeth and pumped his hips. Dane moved on instinct. The need to be inside Tanner—after he came—overwhelmed him. The pressure of the day had been at the highest level, but Tanner had figured out how to relax Dane. He panted, trying to catch the breath Tanner kept stealing.

Tanner sucked both of Dane's balls into his mouth. He glanced up at Dane. Longing and want sparkled in his eyes.

“Jesus.” Everything within Dane tensed. The climax built low in his belly. The intensity within him increased. His instincts took over and he lost himself in the act of being with Tanner.

Tanner let go long enough to gasp. “Yes.” He sucked Dane's cock once more and with abandon. He pushed to the root then pulled most of the way out before going deep again.

Dane's resistance shattered. He groaned and the sound seemed so loud in the room. He jammed his dick between Tanner's lips. There was no more holding back the heat in his body or the orgasm. He drove hard and filled Tanner's mouth. A shiver ran the length of his spine. His knees weakened.

Tanner remained tight to Dane. He swallowed everything Dane gave him and bobbed a few more times before finally sitting back on his heels. He grinned. Without a word, he stood and kissed Dane.

The taste of his orgasm exploded on Dane's tongue. The saltiness was odd but good. He clung to Tanner. “We should go upstairs.”

“To your room?” Tanner’s eyes flashed. “Dane?”

“Why not?”

Tanner cupped his jaw. “I want to be an us. I know it’s fast, but I don’t do casual.”

“I don’t do casual, either.” Dane paused. “Aren’t we already a couple?” He’d decided they were after the first time they’d fucked.

“In public?” Tanner asked. “We’ll figure something out with the team. I don’t want to let go of what we’ve got.”

Dane kept his forehead against Tanner’s. “Devlin gave us his blessing.” Not that they needed it. Fuck anyone who wanted to keep them apart.

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“What a guy,” Tanner murmured. He kissed Dane. “Yes.”

“Devlin’s an asshole, but I won’t complain.” He brushed his nose along Tanner’s. He kept thinking about the barbecue. Going public didn’t worry him. The chance Tanner could be hurt at the stadium or anywhere else doing events around town did. Then again, he hoped the teammates understood. “What about the guys on the team?”

“They don’t mind what I do.” He kissed Dane again. “And those who do can kiss my ass. The guys who invited me to their get-together knew I’m gay before they invited me.”

“It’s my job to kiss your ass.”

“It is,” Tanner said, his voice low.

“You’re not worried about...” Dane couldn’t say the group’s name. “At all?”

Tanner shrugged. “I’m worried—I won’t lie. I don’t want to be attacked or have my property defaced, but I’m tired of backing down. Besides, you and I are stronger together. Hell, the gay community needs to pull together. We’re like everyone else and should start acting the part. Stop being scared.”

“You’re right,” Dane said. “But you’re not like everyone else.”

“I’m not?”

“You’re hotter.” And his.

“Thank you.” Tanner blushed. “You’re pretty sexy, too.”

“Now, let’s go upstairs.” He tugged his pants up with one hand and grabbed Tanner’s hand with the other. He led his lover upstairs to his bedroom. Life had leveled out for a change and he wasn’t about to let this moment pass him by. He had a hot man in his bed and peace.

Chapter Eight

Bringing a lover to his inner sanctum at home wasn’t Dane’s style, but Tanner kept encouraging him to break the rules. Why had the rules been there in the first place? To keep Tanner out? Fat lot of good that had done. Hell, pushing him away seemed to force Dane to admit he wanted the man. Now he wasn’t ready to ever let him go.

Dane pinned Tanner to the bedpost, drawing a gasp from deep within him. He smashed his mouth on Tanner’s. Sweet and slow could wait for another day. He needed his man. Without breaking the kiss, he opened Tanner’s pants.

Tanner wrenched his mouth free and panted. “Fuck. Love when you’re in control.”

He cupped Tanner’s face in both hands and kissed him. “Can’t get enough of you.” He let go long enough to shove Tanner’s shirt up to expose his belly. No matter where he touched, he found raw muscle and lean strength in Tanner.

Tanner yanked the garment over his head, then tossed the shirt out of the way. “Better.”

“Much.” He wrapped his hand around the back of Tanner’s neck as he kissed him again. He’d never get enough of tasting his lover. His groin bumped against Tanner’s, sending heat through Dane’s body.

“Take your shirt off.” Tanner fumbled with the hem of Dane’s shirt.

Dane backed away and wriggled free of the garment. The cool air in the room did little to reduce his fever. But he preferred being with Tanner without barriers.

“Damn.” Tanner leaned forward and sucked on one of Dane’s nipples.

“Yes, baby.” Dane caressed Tanner’s head and basked in the painful pleasure each time Tanner raked his teeth across his nipple.

With deft movements, Tanner fondled Dane and got him hard. He tugged and stroked, pushing Dane toward release.

Dane groaned. They should slow down, but how? He knew only one speed—Mach five. He dropped to his knees. Tanner had blown him before and this was his turn. Besides, he couldn’t wait to taste Tanner. He removed his lover’s dick from behind his jeans.

“Shit.” Tanner threaded his fingers in Dane’s hair. “Mark yourself. Show me you belong to me.”

He drew a line across his lips with the blunt head of Tanner’s erection. Precum slickened his path. He glanced up at Tanner. The hunger in his boyfriend’s eyes spurred him on. He gave in to the desire to lick, suck and nibble all over Tanner’s cock. He traced the lines of the veins with his tongue, then smeared precum across his mouth before going deep. He swallowed Tanner to the back of his throat. Freedom bubbled within him. He could be himself with this man.

“Jesus God.” Tanner guided him and rocked his hips. “We need to be bare.” He tipped his head back. “Fuck. I want you inside me.” He pushed harder. “Can’t think straight.”

“That’s the point,” Dane said between thrusts.

“No.” Tanner nudged Dane away. “Naked now.” He stripped out of the rest of his clothes in seconds then flopped onto the bed. “I can’t wait.”

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“You want everything.” Dane took more time disrobing but only because he wanted to keep Tanner on the edge.

“You’re teasing me,” Tanner said.

He tossed his discarded clothing into the hamper then rounded the bed. He said nothing as he crawled on top of Tanner. He settled between Tanner’s legs and wriggled his ass. He loved dual cock sucking. Hopefully Tanner did, too.

“Yes.” Tanner guided Dane’s erection into his mouth. He bobbed his head in time with Dane’s touch.

Pleasure rolled through Dane in waves. He panted before going deep again. He punctuated his licks with taps against Tanner’s asshole.

Tanner grunted and said something Dane couldn’t understand. Dane didn’t care. All he wanted to do was please Tanner. The man sure knew how to please him, too. He rolled his hips, fucking Tanner’s mouth. They moved in perfect rhythm and pushed Dane closer to coming apart. He scratched his fingernail across Tanner’s pucker of skin.

Tanner let go of his dick with a pop. “Fuck. That’s... I... Wait.”

“For what?” Dane braced on his forearms and knees. He glanced back at Tanner. “Why?”

“Need a rubber and lube,” Tanner bit out.

“You’re right.” Dane left Tanner long enough to retrieve the needed supplies. “We’ll go without rubbers eventually.” Right now, they had to be safe.

“I know.” Tanner stroked himself. “You make waiting hard.”

Dane kept the lube in hand but tossed the condom onto the bed. He knelt at the edge of the mattress and folded Tanner in half. “Have I ever told you how much I like your asshole?”

“No, you haven’t.” Tanner held on to his knees. “Open me.”

Dane dribbled lube between his lover’s ass cheeks. He preferred to go slowly for this. If he nudged too hard or went too fast, he could hurt Tanner. He splayed his right hand on Tanner’s belly and speared the index finger of his left hand into Tanner.

“Aw, fuck.” Tanner grunted. “Dane.”

He pushed to the hilt then began working his digit in and out of Tanner.

“Yes.” Tanner rocked on Dane’s finger. “More.”

He added more lube and a second digit. Slowly, he opened Tanner. “Relax. I’m here. I won’t hurt you.”

“I know,” Tanner whimpered. “Need more. Yes, yes. Dane, fuck me.” He tensed around Dane’s fingers. “Please?”

“I will.” He continued the rhythm, in and out. Going deep then pulling most of the way back. He wanted to be sure Tanner was ready.

Tanner wrapped his hand around his erection. “I’m so close. I want to come.”

“Not until I do.” Dane pushed a couple more times before he withdrew his fingers. “You’re ahead of me.”

“Hurry up.” Tanner groaned again. He planted his feet on the mattress.

Dane stood. He wiped his slick fingers on his thigh before he opened the condom wrapper. He kept his gaze fixed on Tanner’s as he sheathed himself.

“Yes.” Tanner reached for Dane.

He lined his dick up with Tanner’s hole and folded Tanner in half again. He needed to look his lover in the eye while they made love. He wanted to drown in the desire in Tanner’s gaze. As he leaned over and drove to the hilt into Tanner, he kissed him.

“Yes,” Tanner whispered between kisses. “Need this...need you.” He palmed the back of Dane’s neck. Forehead to forehead, groin to groin—they moved as one being. Dane kissed him again.

Any words Dane might have wanted to say evaporated. All he could do was experience Tanner. They fit together, but damn, Tanner was tight. He pushed deep again and paused.

“Fuck. I’m full.” Bliss shimmered on Tanner’s face. He offered Dane a lazy smile and gazed up at him from heavy-lidded eyes. He held on to Dane’s wrists.

Dane moved on instinct. He set the pace in seconds and lost himself in the thrill of fucking this beautiful man. He couldn’t think straight. His knees wobbled and he trembled. The whole world melted away except for Tanner. He gave in to the feral need to claim him. Skin slapped skin and the sound of their grunts filled the room.

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Tanner panted. His brow furrowed. “Dane.”

“Stroke yourself,” Dane shouted. He hadn’t intended to be so loud, but his own heartbeat thundered in his ears. “Come with me.”

Tanner nodded and used both hands to masturbate himself. He caught Dane’s rhythm. Once again, they were like one body.

The heat overwhelmed Dane. His skin sizzled and he couldn’t breathe. He moved faster and his actions turned feral. He collided with Tanner. Despite his attempts to be gentle, he dug his fingers into Tanner’s hips. He gritted his teeth.

Tanner’s skin reddened from his forehead to his chest. His nipples beaded and the cords stuck out in his neck. He arched his back. “God damn it.” A shiver wracked his body as he came. Cum shot across Dane’s chest. He tensed. “Dane.”

Dane smothered the grin. He liked Tanner being reduced to one-word sentences. He pistoned into Tanner. The orgasm overwhelmed him. He moaned and slammed into his lover. Within seconds, he filled the condom. He slumped forward. Tanner offered a lazy smile. The heat in Tanner’s touch and longing in his eyes were too much for Dane. “You’re dangerous.”

“I am?” Tanner batted his lashes. “Not me.”

“You’re addictive, too.”

Tanner kept his hands around Dane’s wrists. “I try.”

“You succeed.” He basked in the post-sex glow and kept his dick in Tanner a bit longer.

“So we’re doing this?” Tanner asked.

Dane nodded. He had no doubts. Plus, he was still in Tanner’s ass.

“Good. I hate sleeping alone and you’re too sexy not to touch.” Tanner writhed beneath Dane. “I’m so staying here tonight.”

Dane pulled out of Tanner and removed the condom. He was at ease with his decision to pursue Tanner. He’d found his heart. Tanner was the best thing to happen to him. Yes, things were new, but he trusted Tanner and, most of all, his gut. “You’d better stay with me.”

“I kind of have to... You’re my sponsor.” Tanner raked his nails down Dane’s chest. “And I’d like you to fuck me again.”

“I will.” He tossed the used rubber in the waste bin then stretched out beside Tanner. He liked the newfound confidence but worried he’d overstep. “You don’t have to move into my room—if you don’t want to.”

Tanner rolled onto his side and placed his finger over Dane’s mouth. “I’m staying tonight and won’t go until I have to get to the stadium for the game tomorrow. As for my room, you’re making a mess of what you want to say, but I understand. I’m welcome here, but you’re giving me space, too.”

“Yes.” Good thing someone understood him. He breathed in the scent of Tanner. Sleepiness hit him hard, despite the desire to shower. Instead, he relaxed with his boyfriend.

“Night, Doctor.”

He kissed Tanner’s shoulder then wrapped his arms around him. “Good night.” Now that he had a good person in his life and bed, he looked forward to the future.

* * * *

Throughout the next day, Tanner mused over Dane’s decision to be a couple and the way Dane spoke to him. The Foxy persona didn’t matter. Dane accepted him on his own merits. Dane had insisted on driving him to the stadium that morning. Being protected and cherished worked for Tanner. He finally felt insulated. Let the coalition attack. He was ready.

He changed into his jersey. Early afternoon games were his favorite and the ones he hated the most. He had the rest of the day to ice his muscles and be with family—if the game went well. If the score wasn’t in their favor, then he had the rest of the day to mull over what he might have done better or done instead. Mistakes could last a long time when replayed over and over in his mind.

“Ready?” Paul strode past him. “I’ve got a good feeling about today.”

“Do you?” He closed his locker. “Me too. My gut says we’re going to win. It’ll be close, but a win.”

“Awesome.” Paul grinned then walked away.

How could the day not be a positive one? Tanner had Dane in his life, a solid team and his confidence had come back. What could go wrong?

He trotted out to the field for stretches and warm-ups. The sunshine heated his shoulders. He breathed in the scent of hot dogs and burgers cooking.

“Get off the field,” someone shouted.

Tanner frowned. He didn’t see who’d offered the demand, but no one on the team or opponent seemed to be talking to him. Paul tossed the baseball in his direction. Tanner caught it then lobbed the ball at Andy. “Catch.”

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Andy snagged the baseball. “I don’t know who shouted, but ignore them. If they know you’re upset, they’ll continue and you’re better than that.”

Did his irritation show? He caught the ball tossed in his direction. “Right.”

“Get off the field, homo.”

“No fags in baseball.”

“Keep the sport pure.”

Tanner still wasn’t sure who kept heckling him, but now they had company. Damn it.

“Get out.”

“Wildcats aren’t pussies.”

Tanner straightened his spine and focused on his warm-ups. The trainer joined him for stretches. He’d rather scream or fight with the persons shouting at him, but instead, he allowed the trainer to twist him into position to loosen his muscles.

A sign caught Tanner’s eye.

No Gays in Cedarwood.

Jesus. If he’d fucked a guy on home plate or made everyone watch him kiss another man, then he could’ve understood the anger. But no. Him existing was enough to whip

up the crowd.

A man stood by the railing. For a split-second, Tanner thought the man had a baseball he wanted signed. The man's face flushed. "Foxy?"

Tanner kept his distance. There were too many spectators and something didn't feel right. He wasn't sure where Dane was, but he hoped his boyfriend was a witness. This could be just another autograph request, but he wasn't sure. "Yes?"

The man sneered. "Drop dead, fag." He tossed something in Tanner's direction.

Tanner sprinted out of the way and collided with Andy. Both men left the area. Tanner refused to look back. Whatever had been thrown was there for a reason and not because the guy wanted an autograph.

"We don't want you here," the man shouted. "Go home."

A security guard and a cop bolted across the field in Tanner's direction. Tanner hurried with Andy to the dugout. Guilt washed over him. This shit wouldn't be happening if he were straight. Hell, if he weren't gay, he could've gotten away with a lot of things. But he wasn't and now he'd put the rest of the team in danger. He'd put the spectators in danger, too.

"We get weirdos all the time," Andy said. "Everyone is okay and the security team has this under control."

The words didn't make Tanner feel much better. He shook his head. "I can't believe this is happening. Jesus, this could've been worse."

"It could've been, but it's not," Andy replied. He grasped Tanner by the shoulders. "You're smart to have run away and smart to be yourself. You can't change people,

but you also can't be something you're not."

Paul joined them and nodded. "The security team removed that spectator and are taking up position in the crowd."

He'd had enough and wasn't sure what else to do.

"But it wouldn't be so bad if you'd just retire," Zeppelin said. "Get the hell out of Cedarwood and be a gross old gay man somewhere else." He notched his chin. "Face it. Foxy drew chicks in, but now that they know you're gay, they don't want you. You aren't playing for shit, so we don't want you either."

"I have skills," Tanner snapped.

Zeppelin rolled his eyes. "With Dr. Bloom? Please. He likes you because you live with him. Move out and see how long the relationship lasts. He'll lose interest before you're down the driveway."

"Shut up. This isn't the major leagues. It's a small-town baseball club. We might get to the big time one of these days, but most of us won't. So what if I'm gay? So what if I'm in a relationship with someone? Why do those things make you feel so superior?" Tanner fought the urge to lunge at Zeppelin. "Never mind. I'm done with you."

"Are you done with the team, too?" Zeppelin grinned. "Can't take the heat, can you? When it's really tough, you want to run."

"I've been taking the bullshit you're dishing out and doing so without complaining." Tanner gritted his teeth. He remembered what he'd been told—not to let Zeppelin or anyone else see him crumble. But damn it, the desire grew tougher by the minute. "I care about Dr. Bloom."

“Enough to pick him over baseball?” Zeppelin asked. “You can stay with your sugar daddy and play house or you can play baseball. Which is it?”

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“Why choose?” He had the best of both worlds.

“Because you can’t concentrate on baseball if you’re focusing on Dane. You’re a fucking distraction and you’re bringing people to the game who want to hurt us.” Zeppelin curled his lip again. “Or am I making that up?”

“What’s that got to do with Dr. Bloom?” Andy asked. “This guy was an isolated incident. Not everyone in Cedarwood is anti-gay.”

“We’ve got a gay cop, the bookstore owners, at least one teacher and now Dr. Bloom and Tanner. Big deal,” Paul said. “We’re a diverse town.”

“So they can form a singing group,” Zeppelin replied. “Or move.”

“Enough,” Tanner snarled. He appreciated Andy and Paul standing up for him, but this was his fight. “I’ve put up with your bullshit, Zeppelin, since I arrived and I even fended off your attempt to come on to me. You helped out me. I know you’re part of the coalition, so it wouldn’t shock me if you knew about the assaults or had some idea the protesters would show up at the game.” He lowered his voice. “I don’t want to sleep with you. Never have. I want to play baseball. Got it? I’m here for the team. Nothing else.”

Zeppelin snorted. “Want to repeat that last part? Your boyfriend missed your declaration.”

He turned and came face to face with the doctor. Oh God. Tanner’s blood chilled. He hadn’t said anything wrong, but maybe he could’ve chosen his words better. “Dane.”

Dane stared at him and said nothing.

“Dane.” Tanner tensed. He had no words.

Zeppelin grabbed the door to the corridor under the stadium. “We don’t accept gays here. Sponsor or not, you can leave and both go to hell.”

Dane sighed. “Why are you such an asshole?”

Tanner stared at Dane. He hadn’t expected Dane to be so confident, but he loved it.

“He’s talking to you, Fox,” Zeppelin growled.

“No,” Tanner said. “You can hate me all you want. Trust me, you’re not the first person to dislike me. You can criticize my playing ability and insult my person, but leave Dane alone.”

“Please.” Zeppelin groaned. “Just quit already.”

“No.” Tanner stood tall. “Keep sending the rotten letters. Let people throw shit. I’m in charge of me and I’m tired of being scared. I’m not leaving Cedarwood or Dane. Call him my sugar daddy or whatever. I don’t care. Without him, I wouldn’t have a place to live—it’s true. But I also respect and care for him more than you know. He’s not just a body and a home—he’s my home. So fuck you and the coalition. I’m not going anywhere.” His head ached and he wanted to punch someone.

Andy, Paul, Dane and the rest of the team applauded. Tanner bit back the whimper. He hadn’t realized everyone was listening in, but how could they not?

Coach strolled down the steps from the dugout. “Zeppelin, hit the showers.”

“Coach,” Zeppelin protested. “Why?”

“You’re tired and the heat’s getting to you,” Coach said. “Go.”

“I’m fine.” Zeppelin didn’t move. “Really.”

Tanner folded his arms. He’d had more than enough. “Are you?”

“Yes.” Zeppelin’s glare intensified.

“We are a team. If you can’t accept the differences of each player and insist on running men off the roster, then I don’t have a place for you,” Coach said. “I’m here to win games and I need the right pieces to do that. You don’t seem to fit. If you can sort yourself out and get your head on straight, I might reconsider, but right now, no.”

Tanner breathed a sigh of relief. Coach had his back.

“Do you understand?” Coach asked. “Showers. Now.”

Zeppelin stormed toward the other end of the room. Coach signaled to the guards then turned to the rest of the team. “I don’t give a fuck about who you fuck. I want to win games. If you can’t accept one another, then tell me now. Otherwise, it’s time to warm up. Chillicothe looks tough this time around.”

The team surged onto the field. Coach stopped Tanner. “The man who threw the ball at you has been escorted off the property by the police.”

“It was a ball?” Tanner asked. “Not something else?”

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“He had a softball, which he threw, and a rosin bag filled with an unknown substance. The police have both and are testing them. Any other interruptions, which I don’t expect to happen, will be handled post haste. Now, talk to your guy and get out there for warm-ups.” Coach massaged his temples. “I’m getting too old for this shit. I hate drama.”

Tanner nodded. He wasn’t fond of drama either. Once Coach left them alone, Tanner inched over to Dane. “I’m sorry you had to see that.”

“You were strong and brave,” Dane said. “Nothing to be ashamed of.”

“You’re not my sugar daddy.” He hated the way Zeppelin had thrown the words around.

“I’m your sponsor and that’s a lot like a sugar daddy. I pay for your room and board. All you have to do is play ball.” Dane shrugged. “It’s a good deal.”

“But...” He didn’t like that name for Dane.

“I’m fine with our roles. You need to focus on your game and I can help with your dream. It works out,” Dane said. “I’m happy to be your sponsor.”

“But I care about you and it’s a lot to want.” He wasn’t sure he deserved it all. He wobbled on his feet and held his breath. If Dane said he’d had enough, Tanner wouldn’t argue. Many other people would’ve left him long ago.

“You’ve got everything you desire.”

“Dane?” He’d heard Dane right. He knew it. Dane wasn’t backing down. No quitting or demanding Tanner leave. Still, he needed to know Dane wasn’t bullshitting him. “Are you sure?”

“We’re still finding our way, but I’m happy with our decisions. You play ball, be famous and get everyone to love the game of baseball. I’ll take care of the illnesses and injuries. We’re a good team. No coalition can take that away from us.”

“You’re right,” Tanner said. He’d fallen hard for Dane, but now, even more so.

“Oh, and Tanner?” I know it’s early, but I trust my heart. I’m in love with you.” Dane’s eyes flashed and he smiled. “No doubts.”

“Good thing, because I’m in deep for you, too.” He crossed the space and kissed Dane hard. “I’m in over my head and I don’t care.”

Dane patted Tanner’s ass. “Get out there and warm up. You’ve got a game.”

He’d heated up more than any practice would offer. Blood surged to his dick. It was good that his athletic supporter hid the erection. He’d hate to have to explain his predicament to the team. “Will do.”

“Good luck, Foxy.”

Tanner didn’t move. “I don’t need it. I’ve got you. That’s the best luck in the world.” He trotted out of the dugout. “I’m already a winner.”

Luck had nothing to do with his situation. His life and playing career were finally in balance. Tanner caught the first ball lobbed his way. Bring on any obstacle. With Dane in his corner, he could handle anything.

Chapter Nine

Dane stretched then sipped his coffee. He praised his forethought in having scheduled a break. After the day he'd had, he needed a few moments to think. So many things had changed since June. The temperature had dropped, being as it was September, and the leaves had started turning. But he and Tanner were still together. They'd gone to many barbecues, get-togethers and other gatherings. He liked to tease Tanner as to who was on whose arm at the events.

Being in public didn't bother him and the baseball community seemed to have embraced him and Tanner. He and his boyfriend had created a solid relationship built on equality and mutual admiration.

"Dr. Bloom?" Sandra opened the door to his office. "You've got visitors."

"Me?" He placed his coffee cup on his desk. "Patients?" Sandra knew better than to send patients to his office. That was his personal sanctum away from everyone else.

"No." She shook her head. "I don't mix work and pleasure. These are visitors. Not patients."

"Is it urgent?" He'd only penciled in half an hour for his break. "Tanner?" He wasn't sure what to think and couldn't help but jump to conclusions. Back in July, Tanner had moved from his bedroom suite downstairs to Dane's bed, making it their room. They shared everything, but Tanner kept some boundaries—mainly, he never visited Dane at work.

"It's kind of urgent." Sandra stepped out of the way.

Devlin strode into the office. "Dr. Bloom."

“Devlin.” He worked hard to hide his confusion. “You’re here.” He sank onto the edge of his desk. “What’s going on?”

“First, thank you to you and the entire practice for your sponsorship this year and for your commitment to next season.”

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Dane frowned. “It’s, like, nine months until the next season. We could have a baby in that time.” Why did it matter that Devlin thanked him for something that hadn’t happened yet? “Has the coalition made a scene?”

“Not yet. I hear there’ll be a community fair soon and we’re trying to get a space to promote the team. According to one source, the coalition is putting the fair on. Another source claims it’s not them. But they have tentacles everywhere, so my guess is they know.” Devlin shrugged. “But don’t worry about them.”

“Sure.” The coalition might have retreated a bit in the last three months, but that didn’t put him any less on edge. He didn’t trust many people beyond his circle of friends and kept an eye out for anything the coalition might be doing. He swore something big was in the works. The fair? He wasn’t sure.

“So second, thank you for being a player sponsor this year. Tanner Fox couldn’t have had such a breakout season and set records without your support.” Devlin beamed. “I know he’s pleased.”

“I’m happy to support him and the team.” Dane folded his arms. “Tanner had the talent all along. I simply gave him a place to stay.”

“And it made all the difference.”

“Well, you’re welcome.” But he still wasn’t sure where Devlin was going with this.

Devlin rocked on his heels. His smile widened. “Ticket sales increased through the season, we’ve gotten exposure and the next season will be even brighter.”

“That’s great. How’s Raji taking the news? He’s going to be very busy, isn’t he?” Dane asked. “Or is the rumor true that you’ve split?”

“We moved in together.” Devlin sobered. “We had one fight—like everyone does—and people saw it. But we’re good.”

“Then wonderful.” He tipped his head. He knew Devlin too well. The man was leading up to something. “Okay, you’ve stalled long enough. What’s going on?”

“Nothing,” Devlin said. “Well, not nothing. I thought you’d be pissed.”

“Why should I be? I’m with Tanner. You gave us your blessing.” He leveled his gaze at Devlin. “Or is there something else?”

“There isn’t anything else.” Devlin paused. “Okay. I’ll go. I just wanted to thank you in person for being so generous.”

“You’re welcome.” Dane checked his phone. He had a few more minutes until his next appointment, but he hadn’t looked at the charts yet. “Anything else?”

“No, not with me.” Devlin winked then left the office.

Dane stared at the empty space Devlin had just occupied. “I wish I understood what was happening. The man doesn’t stop moving,” he muttered.

“It’ll all make sense in a second.” Tanner stepped into the doorway. “Hi, babe.”

“Hi.” Ever since Tanner had come to town, Dane’s senses had been heightened. He ached for Tanner’s touch. He longed to have Tanner in his bed again and was thrilled to see him. If he had a few more minutes, he’d stretch Tanner across his desk for a quickie. “What brings you here today?”

“You.”

Dane paused. “Are you sick?” He stood and brushed his hand across Tanner’s forehead. He didn’t detect a fever. “You don’t appear hurt.” He stepped back and swept his gaze over his lover. Everything seemed to be in working order. “What’s wrong?”

“I needed to see you.” Tanner ventured into the office and closed the door. “We need to talk.”

His confusion rose again. Things were going well between him and Tanner. “Are you unhappy?”

“Me? No,” Tanner said. The corner of his mouth quirked in the beginning of a smile.

Dane’s stomach tightened. “Okay?”

Tanner tipped his head. “You’re going to jump out of your skin. Are you okay?”

“I’d be lying if I said I was fine. I’m happy when I’m with you. I crave you when you’re not around,” Dane blurted. He had to be honest. He trusted Tanner, but he couldn’t deny the feeling he was on the edge of something terrible.

“Good. I feel the same way.”

“But you look like you’re going to leave,” Dane said. The others had. He believed Tanner was different, but his luck with men wasn’t great.

“I got an offer from a team,” Tanner said. “A lucrative one. I’ll have the chance to move up.”

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“You will?” He wanted to be happy for Tanner. To whoop and holler his appreciation and thrill. But he couldn’t forget the realization Tanner didn’t need him any longer.

“I’ll have the opportunity to go to the next level.”

“You’re taking it, I assume.” Dane braced himself for the inevitable. “When do you report to the team?”

“Tomorrow.”

So soon? Dane tried to swallow his shock. “Ah.”

“Meetings, tours, promotion...that kind of thing,” Tanner said. “Routine stuff.”

“Good. I’m proud.” Damn it. He’d be strong, even if it killed him. “Will you need help packing?”

“What for?” Tanner frowned.

“New team, new sponsor, new home,” Dane said. “I can’t sponsor you if you’re in a different city.”

“Who said I’m leaving Cedarwood?”

Dane blinked. “You’ll commute? Is that permitted? You said a new team and promotion...tours.”

“I never said new.” A wicked gleam shone in Tanner’s eye. “Or leaving.”

He could’ve sworn Tanner said both things.

“I said team with the possibility of going to the next level.” Tanner bridged the gap between them. He snared Dane in his arms. “I got my contract with the Wildcats extended. Devlin’s happy with my hitting streak and ticket sales are up. Kids are enrolling in the little ‘Cats program. People are coming to the games for the game—not the personalities or gimmicks. We’re making a difference.”

Dane pieced through the new information. “You’re not going?”

“Nope.”

“Who will sponsor you?”

“You.”

“I will?” He’d insist on it, but hadn’t been asked—even during Devlin’s rambling.

“Devlin never mentioned it.”

“He wouldn’t.”

“Why?”

“The contract allows me to be paid more than a stipend after next year. I have to play one more year with the Wildcats, but I’m good with the team and coaching. At the end of next season, I’m moving into a coaching position. That’s why I got a tour of the facility. I got to see the offices and places only the coaching staff and internal folks get to see.”

“How’s that possible?” He shook his head. “I mean, I’m proud of you, but what prompted you to consider coaching?”

“Clark’s retiring and even though I’ve got the ability to keep playing, I don’t want to try to break into the majors at twenty-six. Even if I did get called up, it’s more than halfway through the season. If I got to stay in the majors, it would only be for a few months at best and I’d end up back here because whoever I was replacing would be off the injured list as soon as possible. Think about it. Most of the guys my age that are in the majors have been there for three or four years. I’m not getting to be too old, but I’d like to not have my body worn-out by the time I hang up my playing glove.” He grinned. “Meaning, I’ll be the first base coach. I’ll still be with the Wildcats and I’ll be getting paid, but I won’t be killing myself to keep my stats up.”

“But your decision to play in the majors...it’s your dream.” Dane couldn’t believe what he’d heard, even if he loved the idea of having Tanner around all year. There was a chance for them after all.

“I don’t want to screw with it. My knees are shot and I’ve broken my fingers a couple times. Too many more and I’ll have gnarly hands no one will want to see, much less touch.” Tanner brushed his nose along Dane’s. “I was never meant to go to the next level and play for a professional team. I came to Cedarwood for a reason—even if I didn’t know it right away. I’m good right where I am and I’ll have a steady job. I’ll be better as a coach because I can inspire people.”

“You already do.”

“And because I’ll be a coach, there’s no chance I’ll be traded, so I don’t have to use you as my sugar daddy. You’re my boyfriend, lover and other half. I’m staying in Cedarwood with the man I love.”

Dane blinked again. Tanner had him at a loss for words. He couldn’t contain his joy

and embraced Tanner.

“A hug won’t do. I want this sealed with a kiss.” Tanner feasted on Dane’s mouth.

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He stole Dane's breath. Dane stuffed his hands into Tanner's back pockets. If he weren't at the office, they'd be fucking by now.

Tanner broke the kiss. "Once I'm a coach, we're getting married. I love you and I need a physician in my life for good. Who else will take care of me when my body goes to shit?"

"A physician."

"I need you in my life. No questions."

"I love you, too." Dane didn't have to wait. He'd marry Tanner right now if he could. "Should we shop for rings?"

"We should. A set of fancy ones and a pair of that squishy kind so I can wear mine while I'm on the field." Tanner kissed him again. "I never thought I'd find my other half in Cedarwood. I thought this was another dead end. I'm glad I pressed on and drove the rest of the way to town. I can't see myself anywhere else, with anyone but you. You're mine."

"Now we've got forever to enjoy each other." Dane rested his forehead against Tanner's. "Our forever."

"Yes." Tanner groaned. He brushed the bulge in his jeans against the one in Dane's trousers. "I wish you were home. I'm going to have to do the walk of shame out of here with this hard-on."

“I’ll need more time to compose myself before I meet with the next patient.” Dane settled on his desk again, but kept Tanner in the curve of his legs. “One question. You’re not worried about the coalition? Not any longer?”

“I hear they’ve got a new and bigger target. There’s a story going around that there’s a real celebrity living in the town of Cedarwood and this celeb is gay. If they can run him out of town, it’s a bigger deal than some mid-level ballplayer.” Tanner shrugged. “If I knew who he was, trust me, I’d let him know and tell him to get the hell out of this town. He’s got enough to worry about without the coalition getting involved.”

“True.”

“I’m heading out. I love you and I can’t wait for you to come home.” Tanner let go of him. “Oh, and I’ll be waiting for you...in your bed...naked...with the lube...” He winked. “Might even be watching a dirty movie, too.”

Dane shivered. Tanner knew him well. He’d never get through the rest of the afternoon this way. He suppressed a groan. “You’re mean.”

“Just making sure you know you’re mine.” Tanner kissed him once more then left the office.

Dane shook his head. Life with Tanner would never be boring. He had the stability, passion and love he’d always craved. Who knew he’d find his happiness with an athlete? At first sight, he hadn’t guessed Tanner was his forever, but now he knew the truth. Tanner was his for all time and he belonged to the baseball player.