



Love Potion (Last Call #5)

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Category: Romance

Description: I've been in love with my best friend for years. It's about time I do something about it.

Everyone knows I'm in love with my best friend. Except him. Jerryn and I are like peas in a pod, like peanut butter and jelly, like all things good that go together, but in spite of our bond, the romance has never sparked. At least not on his end.

I'm not exactly sure when I fell so hard for him, but it's been ages since anyone else has even caught my gaze. He thinks I'm a serial dater with a packed calendar of casual flings, and I let him believe that because it's safer than admitting the truth- there's no one but him.

As each of our friends move from single to committed, the urge to tell him how I feel grows. I have to be willing to put it all on the line, to show him that I know him better than anyone and I still want him, and that all the men who have failed him before were nothing but roadblocks to our forever.

I could be the man of his dreams. I just have to be brave enough to prove it.

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ONE

JERRYN

Hanging out with my friends is the best. It's amazing to be here in a home we built together, talking about our successful business and celebrating our resident head chef. I'm always astounded that we stayed close for so many years, and our bond is even stronger now.

I sit back in my chair, smiling and listening to the banter, occasionally glancing at Bane, the best of best friends.

I don't even know where I'd be right now without Bane.

He catches my eye and winks, squeezing my thigh under the table.

We're excited about a write-up in a national magazine about Wren, our head chef at Moby's.

It's nice to see him getting the recognition he deserves.

A loud buzzing noise breaks up the conversation, and as my pocket vibrates, I pull my phone out. I swipe the screen and when I see the source of the text, my emotions shift from surprise to confusion.

"What is it?" Bane asks.

“Um, it’s Alec.”

Bane’s face goes pale, like he just saw a ghost.

“Who’s Alec?” Lowen asks.

“This guy I knew.” I stare at my phone, chewing on my bottom lip. “He’s gonna be in New Onyx. Wants to stop by and say hi.” My stomach flutters as I look up at Bane. Why would Alec want to see me after all this time?

Bane’s jaw ticks. “Are you gonna let him?”

“I feel like we’re missing some history here, guys,” Indy says. “Care to enlighten us?”

“I went on a few dates with him,” I say. “But it wasn’t a match.”

“Why didn’t it work out?” Kit asks.

Great question. Why doesn’t it ever work out? Because I’m broken, that’s why, but the only person in this room who knows that is Bane, and I plan to keep it that way.

“We wanted different things.” I place my phone face down on the table. “Story of my life.”

Bane avoids my eyes, the way he always does when the subject of my dating debacles comes up.

“Bane?” Lowen nudges him. “You have opinions.”

“Alec is a dick,” Bane spits, then mutters, “Sorry, Jerr. I know you thought he was

cool.”

I shrug. “It’s not that. He was more understanding than most.”

“Understanding about what?” Ridley asks.

I feel myself blushing a deep crimson red and shift in my seat. “Just some stuff.”

“Do you want to see him?” Salem asks, drawing Bane’s attention back to me.

I fidget with my napkin. Do I? I suppose I’m a little curious, but what’s the point?

It’s not like I still have lingering feelings or anything, but I don’t want to be rude.

“I guess I should since he’s coming all the way from Seattle.

There’s a tech conference in the city.” I glance at Bane.

“But it’s been years. I’m sure it’s just a friendly gesture because he knows I live here now. ”

“He was jealous of me,” Bane says. “He didn’t like how close we are.”

“He was. I liked him, but it wasn’t anything major. It wouldn’t hurt to say hi, right?”

“Nope. I’m gonna get some water.” Bane stands abruptly and walks off.

I watch him go, frowning and looking down at my phone again.

“I’m just gonna ask,” Kit says. “Why aren’t you guys in a relationship by now?”

Stewart gently smacks Kit's arm, whispering, "Babe."

The question startles me. "Me and Bane?"

"Uh, yeah. I don't get it."

"Bane doesn't see me like that." I shake my head at how ridiculous the idea is. "We're not compatible in that area." Bane deserves a whole lot more than I could give him.

"Have you tried?" Indy asks, more gently than Kit did.

"No, but we know each other very well. Trust me, I'm not the one for Bane."

"I've never been so confused," Ridley says. "If you two aren't right for each other, who is?"

"It's not obvious stuff," I mutter, wishing someone would change the subject.

Oakley reaches over and pats my shoulder. "It's okay, man. You don't have to tell us. We just care 'cause we're your friends."

"I know."

Bane returns, looking deliberately casual again. "You should totally see Alec," he says, sitting in his chair. "Closure is good, and if it's not closure, then maybe it's a second chance."

"Don't want a second chance," I mumble. Bane knows better than that.

He chews an ice cube, tilting back slightly in his chair.

“We should probably get going soon if we want to find parking,” Lowen says. “You sure you guys don’t want to come?” The question is directed at Ridley and Wren, the latest of our friends to become a couple.

I smile as I notice the flirtatious body language between them. I’m really happy for them. For all the guys, and it’s only made life even more fun with a fuller house.

We carry our empty breakfast dishes to the kitchen. We’re heading into the city today for a festival, which should be fun. Even though my idea of a good Sunday is kicking back with Bane and playing video games, it’s nice to do something different for a change.

After cleaning up a bit, we walk up the stairs together. Bane pauses in front of my room.

“You know I support whatever you want to do.”

I nod. “Yeah, I know.” I playfully punch his chest. “Why did you say that about a second chance though? You know I don’t have feelings for Alec.”

Bane shrugs, dragging a hand through his soft curls. “You liked him more than the others.”

“No. I was more hopeful. That’s not the same thing.”

He nods, his jaw ticking like it does when he has something to say that he’s holding back.

I know Bane as well as I know myself—every gesture, every expression, every mood.

He’s complex, brilliant, and has the biggest heart, but I figured out back in college

that we were never going to be more than friends.

Bane is the center of attention, a gleaming light, wanted by many. Me? I'm just the guy who's always with him. His platonic sidekick. And that's fine. I'd rather have that role in his life than none at all.

But I'm holding him back and I know it. He needs to date more and find his forever person. If I could stop being selfish and hoarding all his time, that would help.

I poke his belly. "What? Just say it."

"I don't want to see you get hurt again. That's all."

I grab his hand, swinging it between us. "Alec can't hurt me anymore. We'll meet for coffee, catch up on things that don't matter, and that's it."

Bane nods, a smile tugging at his lips. "Yeah, okay."

"I'll get changed and meet you back here in a few?"

"Sure thing."

Before he can go to his room, I tug his hand and pull him into a hug. He sinks into me, wrapping his arms around me and burying his face in the crook of my neck. He gives the best hugs.

"Thanks for looking out for me," I whisper as I run my hand down his back.

Bane steps back, holding my gaze. "Always."

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TWO

BANE

It's been three hours since Jerryyn got the text from Alec, and I haven't stopped thinking about it. Even with the crowded streets and festivalgoers, the food stands and vendors, the noise and chaos, my thoughts are still stuck on my best friend and the guy who came close to taking him away from me.

Jerr downplayed it in front of the guys, but I know he really liked Alec.

He hoped he was finally the one, but like the selfish prick I am, I couldn't be happy about it.

Alec wasn't good enough for him then and I doubt he is now.

He probably figured out what he lost and now he's going to try to woo him back.

Indy bumps his arm against mine, raising an eyebrow at me. "Dude, you look like someone pissed in your cereal."

I blow out a breath, dragging a hand through my hair and watching Jerryyn pick through tacky trinkets at a street cart.

"I'm alright."

"Yeah, right. Want to talk about it?"

I shrug, shoving my hands into the front pockets of my jeans. “I don’t like Alec.”

Indy chuckles. “That’s obvious. You sure it’s not a little deeper than that?”

“What do you mean?”

“It’s about how you feel about Jerr, right?”

I know all the guys are onto me. They have been since we moved back to Willow Bay. Everyone seems to know that I’m totally stuck on Jerryn except Jerryn. He’s either oblivious or willfully ignorant, and I’m too chickenshit to find out which.

“Probably.”

Indy chuckles, wrapping his arm around me and pulling me into him until I laugh too and playfully shove him away.

“There’s an easier way to deal with this, you know. Just tell him.”

“Easy for you to say. I have my reasons.”

Indy nods. “Alright, man. You’re an adult. I guess you know what you’re doing.”

“But?”

“I didn’t say but.”

“I can sense it. Go ahead and say what you want to say.”

“Okay, I’ll say it. There’s nothing fucking better than love, man. Nothing. You guys mean the world to me, and Moby’s is awesome. I love this life we created, but having

Salem..." He shakes his head as a lovesick grin blooms on his face. "Nothing fucking better."

"I'm happy for you guys."

"I want that for you and Jerr. You belong together."

I nod, waving as Jerryn turns to show me a cheap statue of the city skyline, a childlike grin on his face.

"I don't know where to start. All these years, all the things we've shared, we've never... Not even close."

There's no way I'm telling Indy or anyone else about the things Jerryn shares with me and why it's been so hard for him to find a relationship.

"I don't think that's the kind of relationship he wants with me."

"Well I think you should talk about it instead of assuming things. Just my opinion though."

"Maybe. I want him to be happy, that's all."

"Yeah? And if Alec makes a play, you'll be cool with that?"

I glare at Indy. He knows he's poking the bear. "Yeah, no."

"Your call, man." He squeezes my shoulder. "But if I were you, I wouldn't waste any more time. You already have a whole life together. All you're missing is romance."

Which is kind of a big deal.

“Did you see this?” Jerryn says, holding out another ridiculous souvenir. “These are hilarious.”

I gently shove Indy’s arm and walk over to look at the items with my best friend. I don’t know what it will take for me to get off the fence and fess up that I want so much more with him. Maybe I’ll wake up one day and confess, but that day isn’t today.

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THREE

JERRYNN

I've ignored the text all day, but it's been hanging over me, so it's time to deal with it. After a long day at the festival, all I want to do is decompress with Bane and some video games, but before I can do that, I have to deal with Alec.

I unlock my phone screen and open the text, re-reading it for the umpteenth time before finally responding.

Me: Hey. I was out all day so apologies for the delay. It would be great to catch up. Let me know what works.

I hit send even as my stomach churns a little.

Alec showed all the signs of a potential relationship.

He was funny, smart, and seemed to like a lot of the same things I did.

I told him about my issue and he was nice about it.

Patient. Until he wasn't. Until he decided that Bane was the reason I wasn't the way normal guys are.

The jealousy and fights became too much, and the whole thing fizzled before it even really got started.

We didn't talk much after that; only briefly when our paths crossed around town or at comic conventions. That's why his text out of the blue is so confusing. Why would he want to see me after all this time?

My phone buzzes and my shoulders immediately tense. I swipe the screen, reading over the words.

Alec: Awesome. I'll be there for three days downtown at the Abella Hotel. Meet for a drink there?

Me: Sure. What time and day?

Alec: How about Monday night when I get in before the conference starts? Six?

I nod, even though he can't see me. I can do this. I can face him. It's not like I was in love and he broke my heart. He disappointed me, but that's no different from all the other guys I've dated. I just hoped a little harder with him.

Me: Sounds good. See you then.

I put my phone down and lean back in the chair. Bane was dating Greg when I met Alec, and I was so excited. I thought maybe we could double-date, and Greg and Alec could be friends and I'd have what I always wanted, but that's not what happened.

I know I should get back out there and try dating again. Not for me, but for Bane. I'm holding him back even if he won't admit it. He spends all his time with me, and while I love it, he's missing out on a potential partner.

I rub the tight spot in my chest that always pops up when I think about Bane being in a long-term relationship with someone.

It's selfish to keep him to myself, but I can't imagine my life any other way.

I gave up thinking I would find someone to love a long time ago.

Even though he's just my best friend, Bane set the bar—and my expectations—too high.

After a brief knock, my door opens and Bane pops his head in. "Okay to enter?"

"Yep."

He smiles as he walks over to where I sit on the couch. "Did you do it?"

I nod, nibbling my bottom lip for a second. "Done. We're gonna meet Monday night for a drink."

"Good. Better to know what he wants, right?"

"Right. I'm sure it's nothing though. Just being polite."

"We'll see."

Bane fidgets, picking at the cuticle on his thumbnail. It's his tell for when he has something to say but isn't sure he wants to say it.

"Just say what's on your mind, Bane."

He blows out a breath, fixing his gaze on my face. "Alec said some pretty insensitive shit to you when you ended it. You haven't forgotten that, have you?"

Forgotten it? As if I could. Alec's words are sprayed like graffiti on my psyche, along

with the dozens of other unkind labels and adjectives I've gathered up since puberty.

"Of course not. If I'm being honest, I'm more curious than interested in seeing him."

Bane nods, and as his jaw slowly relaxes, I reach over and rub his back.

"Thanks for caring so much."

He scoffs. "That's dumb to say."

"It's not. I don't take you for granted."

"I know." His expression softens as he smiles. "I don't want to have to beat someone's ass for hurting you, that's all."

I laugh softly. "It won't come to that. I'll have a drink with the guy, endure awkward conversation for a little bit, then we'll both return to our separate lives."

"Yeah."

I chew on my bottom lip for a second, a burning question on the tip of my tongue.

"What about you?"

"What do you mean?"

"Dating. You haven't dated at all since we've been back in Willow Bay. Even before that."

He waves dismissively, but I grab his hand and gently squeeze it.

"I'm serious. You're putting your life on hold for me? I don't like that. Just because I

don't want to be out there, doesn't mean you shouldn't be."

A deep crease appears between his eyebrows. "I know what I'm doing."

"Do you? We've watched all our friends find love in this town. You deserve that too, but unless you get lucky like Indy did, they probably won't walk into the bar."

Bane chuckles softly. "He hit a home run, didn't he?"

"Indy always lands on his feet, but don't change the subject."

Bane rolls his eyes as he leans back. "I'm just not into it right now, that's all. A lot's been going on since we moved back, and I've had different priorities."

"Like? Playing the latest video games with me?"

"Hell yeah." He playfully shoves my arm. "Seriously though, Jerr. I needed this time to settle into this new life, and spending time with you and the guys was part of that. I don't miss romance right now, and when I do, I'll do something about it."

"That's fair. Sometimes I think I'm holding you back."

"Not even a little bit." He smiles again, and this time it's genuine. "I've kissed plenty of frogs. They'll still be there when I'm ready."

I laugh softly. "There's a prince out there somewhere."

He nods, holding my gaze. "I know."

Sometimes I wonder silly things, like what could've been if I were normal.

Would Bane see me as an option then? If I could create the perfect boyfriend for me, it would be him.

We just fit. But Bane needs and deserves a complete relationship, one that includes the physical part of things, and I'm not sure I could live up to that.

So we stay best friends and I push him to find a love of his own so I can stop worrying so much. It's worked for twenty years, and that's good enough for me.

"Want to watch a movie instead?" Bane asks. "That new Jason Statham one just went to streaming."

I perk up. Movie watching means a cuddle sesh. "Absolutely."

Bane chuckles, grabbing the remote off the coffee table and extending one arm in invitation. I tuck my long body onto the couch and snuggle in close, rubbing my cheek on his soft shirt. Bane drags his fingers down my back in circles, soothing me as he navigates to the movie.

These are my favorite times. For years, Bane has been the source of the physical comfort I crave without the stress of things turning sexual eventually.

"Thanks, Bane," I whisper, tilting my head to kiss his cheek.

He nods, gazing at me and smiling. "You bet."

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FOUR

BANE

I glance at the wall clock again while I wait for my table's food to come up. Jerryn left over an hour ago to meet up with Alec, so it's too soon to check that everything's okay. Hell, he might not even be in the city yet. I need to slow down.

At least the bar is busy tonight. That should keep me distracted for a few hours until Jerryn's back.

While I'm waiting, Ridley comes into the kitchen, his eyes already trained on his favorite person: Wren. He notices me and gives me a nod and a smile.

"Hey, Bane."

"Hey."

"Crazy out there tonight. On a Monday. Weird."

"I was thinking that too, but university is starting up again soon. Maybe we have a lot of visitors in town."

"Could be."

Wren is calling out orders and orchestrating the chaos of a busy kitchen, and I study Ridley's face as he stares at his man with heart eyes. The ever-present jealousy stabs

my chest. I'm happy for my friends, of course, but damn, do I want that for myself.

My problem is I am in love—insanely, head over heels in love—and I have been for the better part of twenty years. I just fell for a person who has zero interest in love and romance with me.

“What’s going on with you?” Ridley asks, bumping my arm with his. “Missing your other half?”

“Basically, yeah. I’m worried. The guy he’s meeting up with isn’t my favorite person.”

“We picked up on that. What’s his deal?”

I shrug. “He seemed like he was really into Jerr at first, and that he might be different from a lot of guys Jerr went out with. He was romantic and sweet. He was understanding of some personal things.” The more I tell the story, the more annoyed I get.

“But then he started showing a lot of controlling signs. He didn’t want Jerr spending so much time with me.

He told Jerr that he thought I was into him. ”

“Into who? Him or Jerr?”

“Jerr. There was a lot of tension between us for a while because of it. I backed off because I only want what’s best for Jerr, you know?”

Ridley nods. “Yeah.”

“It sucked. I wasn’t spending time with my best friend, and he was navigating this new relationship alone.”

“How did it end?”

“Jerryn decided...” I pause. This is the hard part.

It’s Jerryn’s private issue, one I promised I would never share with anyone else.

“Jerryn shared something with Alec, thinking he would be supportive and understanding, and at first, he was, but as time went on, he became less understanding and he got hurtful about it.”

Ridley nods, and I can tell from his expression he wants to ask, but he already knows I won’t answer him. “That blows.”

“It does. Jerryn eventually got tired of it and broke things off, and then Alec was a total dick. That’s the real reason I’m not excited that he reached out. All I can think is he realized what he lost and he wants another shot.”

“Or he’s being polite because he’s in the same city.”

I shrug.

“My dude, why don’t you stop torturing yourself and just fucking tell him?”

“Tell him what?”

“That you’re in love with him. He obviously doesn’t know, but what if he did?”

“You don’t think I’ve considered that? What if it makes him uncomfortable around

me and I lose what we have now? Not everything works out perfectly like it did for you and Wren.”

Ridley shakes his head, bright pink hair catching the light.

“You don’t think I had this same dilemma with Wren?”

I wasn’t supposed to fall. We agreed it was physical and nothing else.

Imagine my surprise when I realized I went and caught feelings.

You don’t think I was fucked up over that and figuring out what to do next? ”

“Okay, fair, but Wren wasn’t your best friend of twenty years.”

“No, he wasn’t. Which is why you should feel way more comfortable talking to Jerryn.”

“Moby Burger, medium-well, up,” Wren says, pushing the plate across the stainless steel counter to me. “Fries in thirty seconds.”

I grab the plate, placing it on my tray. “I don’t know where to start. I don’t think he even sees me that way.”

“Way I see it, you can keep pining away, or you can help him see you that way. Become boyfriend material, man.”

“Boyfriend material,” I repeat, almost to myself. “Like... romance him?”

“Fuck yeah. Court him. You want to be his man, show him you already are. I’m guessing you two have never talked about this?”

I shake my head. “It’s been a long time. Not since we were still in school. We decided then that there was too much at stake because I was nothing but a whore back then.”

Ridley chuckles. “Might be time to revisit the subject.” He pats my back. “Maybe—and I’m going out on a limb here—maybe Jerryn has some unexpressed feelings too. Give him a safe place to show them. Take a chance, man.”

My fries are up, so I add them to the tray too. “Thanks, man.”

“Anytime.”

As I deliver the food, the conversation bounces around in my head. Could I become the man of Jerryn’s dreams? Should I try? I know him better than I know myself. I know what his hopes and dreams are. I know his hang-ups and why dating is hard, and I accept everything about him.

I’d just have to be brave enough to step up and show him that we’ve both been looking for something we already have.

When I look up, my gaze lands on Indy and Salem at the order station, Indy hugging Salem from behind and tickling him while he giggles.

I search the restaurant for Kit, finding him at the host station, laughing and talking with Stewart.

Next I spot Oakley sitting on a stool at the bar, eating his favorite chicken wings while Lowen lingers, gazing at his man like he hung the moon.

Could Jerryn and I have what our friends do if we just took a chance on moving past friendship into something more?

The thought makes my stomach flip and my heartbeat speed up.

How many nights cuddling on the couch have I wished I could just kiss him and tell him how incredible he is?

How many times have I wanted to invite him to sleep in my bed so I could hold him?

How many times, after another failed date, have I wanted to tell him that I don't need anyone else?

It's the sex thing that's going to be hard to overcome. For him more than me. I've already been not having sex for four years, and I'm doing fine. If I could convince Jerryn that it's not an issue, maybe he could open his heart in new ways.

The idea of it, of romancing my best friend, lights me up. Is that a sign that I should take the chance? Where would I even start? I'm not exactly known for my romantic side.

I pull my phone out of my pocket and open a group text with all the guys.

Me: Mini team meeting. Five minutes in the office. It's important.

I smile as my friends all look at their phones. I need backup, and if I know anything, it's that these guys have mine and Jerryn's backs.

I head to the office and wait as everyone files in. Even Wren pops in from the kitchen.

"I've made a decision, but I need your help because I'm freaking clueless and I can't screw this up."

“What’s going on?” Indy asks.

As I take a deep breath, a sense of rightness and purpose settles in my chest. “It’s about time I step up and do the damn thing I should’ve done years ago.

I’m in love with Jerry, and I’ve decided it’s time he knew that.

I want to romance him, but I have no clue where to start. Can I count on you guys?”

Salem bounces on his toes. “Oh my god, I love this.”

Ridley grins. “Hell yeah, we’re in. Right, guys?”

I get a chorus of agreement from everyone.

“This is awesome,” Kit says, glancing at Stewart, who nods.

“Fully supportive,” Lowen says as Oakley gives me a thumbs-up.

Salem claps his hands once. “Operation Woo Jerry is on.”

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FIVE

JERRYNN

The bar inside the hotel is packed, so it takes me several minutes to locate Alec, and when I see him, my stomach does an unpleasant flip.

I haven't actually seen his face since the night I ended things, and all I can see right now is his scowl as he verbally picked me apart.

How I ended up willingly meeting him is a mystery.

He's looking down at his phone, chuckling at something on the screen, but when he notices me, he drops his phone and stands.

"Jerryyn."

"Hey, Alec."

Alec steps forward, awkwardly hugging me before letting me go and gesturing toward the empty chair across from the small round table.

"Thanks for meeting up."

"No problem." I take a seat, fidgeting a bit as I settle into my chair. "How was your flight?"

Alec shrugs, leaning back in his seat. “Long but fine.”

He looks different. Thinner, for sure, and he’s growing a beard that doesn’t quite fit his face in my opinion.

His blond hair is cut shorter than it was, but still swoops into his face to frame his blue eyes.

He was never my type, but he was nice to me when we first met, and I convinced myself I’d find him attractive over time.

I did, to some extent, just not the way he hoped. I guess the way we both hoped.

“That’s good.”

“Yeah.”

A server comes up to the table. “Welcome,” he says. “What can I get you?”

“Whatever you have on tap.”

“Be right back.”

Sitting across from Alec is surreal. I never thought I’d see him again, and now that I have, I have no idea what to say.

“I’m really glad you came out. I thought about calling a few times.” He chuckles, rubbing his scruffy chin. “More than a few times, but a phone call didn’t seem right.”

“Right for what?”

“For the apology you deserve.”

I sit back. I wasn’t expecting that.

“I’ve thought a lot about the things I said to you, and I feel bad. I was a total dick and you didn’t deserve it.”

“Um...” Before I can say more, the server returns with my drink. I stare at it, unsure what to say, but end up with “It was a long time ago.”

“Doesn’t make it okay. Maybe you don’t care or ever think about it, but I do. I guess you could say I’ve done some personal work on myself.”

“That’s good.”

Alec takes a sip of his beer, nodding. He stares at the table for a few seconds before looking up at me. “Have you and Bane...” He shakes his head. “Are you still...?”

“What? Am I still friends with him? Of course. He’s my best friend.”

“Just your best friend?”

I roll my eyes. “Oh come on, Alec. Are you still insisting there’s more between us?”

“It’s not like that. It’s not coming from a place of jealousy, I swear.” He laces his fingers together, wringing his hands before he continues. “I met a guy about a year after you and I ended things.”

I nod. I’m not really interested in his dating life, but I suppose he has a reason for bringing it up.

“I really liked him. In fact, I fell pretty hard, and then I fucked it all up. Just like I did with you.”

“Oh.”

“I was jealous and sometimes mean-spirited. I said things I didn’t mean when I felt insecure.

I learned the hard way that I had some maturing to do, so I did the work.

I went to therapy and I read books and I really worked on myself so I never had to lose someone I cared about again because of being a dumbass. ”

I nod, taking a small sip of my drink.

“During all that reflection, naturally I thought about how things went down between us. I really cared about you, Jerr. I was falling for you.”

I bite my bottom lip and stay quiet.

“And I knew you would never return my feelings.”

“How could you know that?”

He smiles at me like he’s placating a child. “Because you’re already in love with someone else. You always have been, and I couldn’t compete with that.”

I scoff. “I’m not in love with Bane.”

Alec nods, studying my face. “I honestly don’t get it. I saw it with my own eyes, so I really don’t get how you guys don’t see it. Why do you think I hated Bane so much?

Because I couldn't match up."

"It wasn't a contest. Bane and I are close, but it's not romantic."

"Why?"

I swallow hard, tracing a trickle of water down my glass. "Because it's not."

"But why? Is it the sex thing?"

The question feels like a knife in the chest. "I'm not discussing my relationship with Bane. It doesn't matter why."

"But it kind of does, Jerr." He leans closer, resting on his elbows. "I was a dick and I said some really shitty things to you, and I want you to know I'm truly sorry for that and for hurting you if I did."

I nod. "Thanks."

"But, Jerr, you have no chance of being in a relationship until you resolve your feelings for Bane."

Now I'm irritated. "Like I said, there aren't any feelings there. Not that kind."

Alec nods, searching my eyes. "Are you sure that's true for both of you? I know what it feels like to be in love with someone, and the way Bane looks at you... Man, if that's not love, I don't know what is."

"You're wrong." I wish he wasn't. I wish Bane could love me, but he knows why it would never work between us.

“Okay. I’ll let it go.”

“Thanks,” I mumble.

“But if I could leave you with this.”

I focus on him, noticing the sincerity in his expression. “Go ahead.”

“I took a chance reaching out to you because it mattered to me. I needed you to hear my apology for the way I treated you. I knew there was a good chance you’d tell me to fuck off and I accepted that.

Sometimes, when something really matters to you, you just have to take the chance.

At least then you know the outcome, instead of wondering the rest of your life. ”

His advice stings a little. I’ve often wondered what could be with Bane if I were a normal guy.

I’ve wondered if I could somehow make myself feel the things I hear and read about.

Could I find it in me to want his touch in a sexual way instead of the comfortable platonic affection we share now?

If I couldn’t, Bane would either be settling or he’d just tell me it won’t work.

Then it would be awkward. I’d hate that more than anything.

“Noted.” I offer Alec a stiff smile. “I hope you find someone again.”

Alec’s face lights up. “I have. Getting married in a few months if you can believe it.”

The news startles me, but I'm not sure why. Alec always wanted to settle down. Then I realize what it is. At almost forty-two, I gave up hoping for marriage a long time ago.

"That's wonderful. Congratulations."

"Thanks. He's well worth the journey it took to get to him, and I'm so happy. I want that for everyone I care about, you included."

"I appreciate that. All of this, actually. Thanks for reaching out."

"Thanks for accepting."

I can tell from his expression he has more to say. "What?"

He leans closer. "You know the sex thing didn't bother me, right? Because I enjoyed your company on many levels. I know I said some stuff..."

I nod. "Yeah, I know."

"Anyone who's worth a damn will understand that too. You're not less than anyone else, Jerri."

My eyes sting a little, but I blink back the emotion building there. "Thanks."

Alec squeezes my hand. "Just remember that. There's a guy out there who will love you the way you are. He might be closer than you think."

After leaving the bar, I sit in the back of my rideshare, staring at the lights and buildings as we pass and replaying the conversation.

I appreciate Alec's apology, even though the things he said hardly mattered to me anymore—they just added to the pile of unkind words I've gathered up over the years.

But at least he felt bad about it. Bad enough to reach out.

When we arrive at Moby's, I exit the car, taking a deep breath before stepping inside. It's quieter now since it's almost eight on a Monday night, but there are still quite a few tables with people eating at them.

I scan the restaurant, looking for Bane and finding him talking to a couple of guys by the dart boards. I head to the bar where Indy and Salem are folding some t-shirts for the merch wall.

"Hey, guys."

Salem smiles. "You're back. How was it?"

"It was fine."

Bane's strong hands clamp onto my shoulders from behind, massaging gently. "Hey."

I twist my neck, trying to see his face. "Hey."

Bane steps in front of me, searching my eyes. "Are you okay?"

I nod. "Yeah. I'll tell you more later, but it was fine."

"Good. I don't have to go beat anyone's ass?"

I laugh softly. "Nope."

As Bane holds my gaze, Alec's words replay in my head, but I push them away.

If Bane was in love with me, he'd tell me.

That's the kind of guy he is. He doesn't sit on the sidelines, he goes for what he wants, and he's never made a play.

So that settles it. He sees me as a close friend and that's it.

Besides, he needs an active sex life, and I can't give him that, though if I had a genie in a bottle, it would be my only wish.

If I could fix that part of my life, maybe I could be a good partner for Bane.

But there's no such thing as genies.

"Sure you're alright?" Bane asks, brushing his fingers across my cheek.

I stuff it all down like I always do. "Perfect."

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SIX

BANE

Jerryn and I enter the house a little past midnight, kicking off our shoes at the door and heading for the stairs.

It goes without saying that he'll follow me to my room, as he does most nights.

For some reason he prefers hanging out in my space over his, and that's totally fine with me.

I'm dying to know what went down with him and Alec.

Inside my room, Jerryn goes straight to the couch, curling his long body into a ball and waiting for me to join him.

"Don't you want to change?"

"Can you bring some of your pjs?"

"Sure can."

I walk to my room, tugging my t-shirt over my head and thinking about how I can shift my normal behavior towards him from caring friend to romantic option.

The trouble is, I couldn't tell the guys, but I'm not sure Jerryn even has those kinds of

feelings inside him.

I know he's hung up about sex, but if that wasn't an obstacle for him, would he even see me as boyfriend material?

I guess Ridley is right—there's only one way to find out.

After sliding out of my jeans, I open my dresser drawer and grab a pair of black pj bottoms for me and the comic strip pj's for Jerryn. He told me they're the most comfortable, so in my mind they became unofficially his.

When I enter the living room, he's got the remote in hand, flipping through channels.

“Here you go.”

His face lights up as he takes the pajamas. “I like these the most.”

I smile back even though I want to tell him I know that. Of course I know. I pay special attention to everything he likes.

“Find anything good to watch?”

He shakes his head as he gets to his feet, casually undressing in front of me. I've seen his body a million times over the years, mentally counted the freckles that dot his chest, fantasized about running my tongue around his pebbled nipples, wondered what he would feel like beneath me.

My cock plumps slightly, and I shift my weight to avoid showing it before plopping down on the couch.

He shimmies out of his jeans, draping them over the arm of the couch before

directing his attention to the pajamas.

He has no idea how appealing he is or how much I want to wrap my arms around him and hold him until the sun comes up.

Once he's got the pants on, he settles next to me on the couch. "Alec wanted to apologize."

I raise an eyebrow. "Really?"

Jerryn nods. "He said he's thought about it a lot over the years, but didn't think a call would be sufficient. He wanted to tell me to my face."

"That's... nice. How did it feel?"

"Awkward." He chuckles. "But I could tell he was sincere."

I nod, searching his face. "Did he look good?"

Jerryn shrugs. "I guess so. I actually wondered what attracted me to him. He's not my type, really."

"No, he isn't."

"He's getting married."

I notice the dip in his voice even as he tries to sound nonchalant about the news. "Oh. How did that feel to hear?"

He shrugs again, reaching up to brush his hair off his forehead. "Fine. I don't have feelings for him. I guess..." Jerryn pauses for a second.

I stay quiet, waiting for him to process his thoughts. He needs to sometimes.

“It’s weird,” he says. “You know how I feel about marriage.”

“Yeah. Did it make you sad?”

“Not sad, just wondering if...” He sighs instead of finishing his thought.

“Wondering if it’ll happen for you?”

He nods, his gaze on his hands in his lap.

I’d marry him tomorrow if I had the fucking nerve to tell him how I feel. But I need more than nerve. I know Jerryn inside and out, and he needs to see it to believe it, whatever it is. He’d think it was about pity, and that’s the last thing I ever want him believing.

“Do you remember the summer after we moved to Seattle?”

Jerryn looks up, a slight smile on his face. “Every minute. We had so much fun exploring the city.”

“We did. Remember the night we went to that little park by the apartment and we saw those two guys get engaged after the concert?”

He nods. “Oh yeah. That was sweet. What made you think of that?”

“You and I talked about romance and relationships and marriage that night.”

Jerryn nods. “We did.”

“And you told me all about what your dream partner would be like.”

He smiles. “I remember.”

“I think we should revisit that conversation.”

He tilts his head. “Why?”

“It’s been twenty years. What’s changed or evolved? Let’s put it out into the universe.”

His smile fades. “We were just kids then.”

“Exactly why we should revisit it.” I take his hand in mine, gently squeezing it. “It’s never too late, Jerr. You never know what might be around the corner. Look at what’s happened with our friends.”

He searches my eyes, and after a few seconds, he nods. “Okay. I’ll play along, but you have to do the same. Back then your idea of a perfect relationship was not having one.”

Chuckling, I nod. “Fair. I was such a player, wasn’t I?”

“No reason not to be. Maybe I would’ve been one too if... you know.”

“Nah, it’s not your nature.” I play with his fingers. “You have a soft heart, which is a compliment, in case you didn’t get it.”

He smiles softly. “Thanks. You go first.”

“Okay.” I take a deep breath, searching for words instead of just blurting out that it

would be him. “Ideally, we’d be friends first.”

Jerryn looks slightly surprised for a second, but he nods.

“So we’d have things in common. We’d like the same types of movies and we’d play video games together.”

“Yeah.”

“And over time, we’d see that there was so much more there than just friendship. We’d cuddle on the couch and spend lazy mornings in bed wrapped around each other and talking about life.”

His cheeks turn slightly pink, but he just nods.

“We’d be so in sync that we’d always know what the other was thinking. We could finish each other’s sentences if we wanted to.”

A crease appears between his brows, but I push on before I chicken out.

“And I’d be the guy who showed him that love is real and bold and accepting.

Neither of us would be perfect, because there’s no such thing, but we’d be perfect for each other.

We’d balance each other and we’d understand each other’s struggles and quirks.

I’d prove to him that he’s just right for me. ”

“How would you do that?”

“By my actions. I’d wake up every morning with the intention of showing him how I feel, and when I slip up, because I will, I’ll make it right again.”

“You’d make an amazing partner for someone.”

For you.

The words sit like a weight on my tongue, but I hold them back.

“I’d do my best.”

“What about...” He shakes his head. “This is make believe.”

“No, Jerr, it’s not.”

“Not make believe. Hypothetical.”

“What were you gonna ask?”

He drops his gaze. “Nothing.”

“Come on, Jerr.” I lift his chin with my finger so he has to look at me. “You can ask me anything. You know that.”

He nods as his teeth graze his bottom lip. “I guess I wondered where I would fit in if you met someone like that, but that’s selfish. Of course I want you to be happy.”

He really doesn’t get it. Not even a little bit. This is gonna be harder than I thought.

“You know you’re my person, Jerr. I’ll always have room in my life for you, and anyone I’m with would have to understand that or they wouldn’t be right for me.”

He continues chewing on his bottom lip for a second. “But that’s not fair, is it? To the other person, I mean. If we were them, would we be okay with the closeness of our friendship? Would you expect any normal person to accept the way we are together?”

I narrow my eyes. “This is about Alec, isn’t it?”

“Not directly, but kind of. If you look at it from his perspective, I bet it was hard. You’re a good-looking guy and we’re closer than most friends.” He squeezes my knee. “I would get out of your way, Bane. I would do that so you could find love and be happy.”

“First of all, you’re not in my way. You’re never in my way.”

“You know what I mean.”

I have to get this train back on the tracks. “Your turn. Tell me your updated dream.”

He huffs but nods. “Like you, I would hope for friendship first. I would like?—”

“Describe him in present tense. Like he already exists.”

Jerryn searches my eyes for a second as a soft smile tugs at his lips. “Okay. Um, he’s very kind and even a little doting.”

“Doting? Like what?”

“He knows how I like my coffee and he brings it to me in bed after waking me up slowly with kisses on my neck and face.”

Oh hell yeah. I can do that. “What else?”

“He likes to take bubble baths with me. We just soak and talk about the future.”

Bubble baths. Check.

“He does little things, always making sure I’m comfortable or fed or happy.”

“As he should.”

“And of course he likes the same movies I do. He’s a gamer too, but he doesn’t always let me win. Just sometimes.”

I laugh softly. “Good guy.”

“He is. He’s also funny and loyal. He’d give you his shirt if you needed it. He’s a hard worker, but he knows the importance of balance and enjoying life, and he helps me enjoy life too.”

Jerryn’s cheeks are bright pink now.

“And he’s patient. So patient. He knows my struggles with the physical stuff and he doesn’t push me or make me feel broken.

He encourages me to find my own way. I try really hard because I want to be his perfect man too.

I want to want—” His voice cracks and he clears his throat.

“I want to feel desire and passion and somehow he found the key that unlocks that part of me.”

Jerryn ducks his head, tucking his hair behind his ears.

“Hey.”

When he meets my gaze, his eyes are watery. “I don’t think there’s a key. I just wish there was.”

“Sex isn’t everything, Jerr. I’ve had amazing sex with people who were really bad for me. It can’t save the world.”

“I know, but it’s important to most people.”

“Maybe not the way you think. I admit, when I was young, it was all I thought about, but that had nothing to do with love and commitment.”

His gaze hardens as he purses his lips. “Come on, Bane. I’m not naive. Could you be in a sexless relationship? Could most people?”

“You’re looking at it wrong. Every relationship is different and has its own flavor.

The guy you’re describing wants to be with you and everything you are.

He accepts you, and like you said, he’s patient, and he’ll be by your side as you figure it out.

Maybe your sex life looks different from what we hear and see in movies and stuff, but that doesn’t make it not good. ”

Jerryn nods, his gaze trained on me. “Maybe I could just clone you and fill the world with men like you.” He tries to laugh off the weight of his words.

“You don’t have to clone me, Jerr. The guy you want is out there.” Right in front of you if I have anything to do with it. “You just have to believe.”

He shrugs. “Maybe. Guess I’ll believe it when I see it.”

Challenge accepted, my friend.

“You deserve the best. Any guy worthy of you will want you just the way you are. Don’t you dare settle for less than that.”

“Maybe we’ll just grow old together, playing video games and watching action movies and building our weird life together. That wouldn’t be so bad, would it?”

That’s exactly what we’re going to do, except little does he know, he’s gonna be loved the whole damn time.

“Not bad at all, but we have quite a few years before we check into the retirement home, so let’s not give up on the dream just yet.”

“You’re right. I guess I just can’t imagine meeting someone who’s like—” He snaps his mouth shut.

“Like what?”

“Um, like the guy of my dreams. How would I even find him?”

“Maybe he’ll find you, Jerr.”

“Maybe.” He smiles, shaking his shoulders out. “I guess I should keep an open mind.”

“That’s the spirit.” I reach over to pick up the remote and turn the TV off. “I’m pretty tired. How about a cuddle sesh in bed? Wanna stay over?”

Jerryn's face lights up. "Really?"

"I think we could both use it tonight."

He playfully shoves my arm. "Even though you're just doing it for me, I accept."

Damn, he really is clueless. For some reason he doesn't think there's any way I could be into him, and that's exactly why I have to play my cards just right.

If I blurt it out, he'll take it as pity or desperation because he has no idea how amazing he is.

It's up to me to show him he's the guy of my dreams and has been for twenty freaking years.

He wants a guy who's doting and patient? I'm all over that. He wants to clone me? I can do even better.

As we get up and head to my bedroom, my heart literally flutters.

For once in my dating life, I'm excited.

I've spent my entire adult life pining for my best friend because I didn't think I was good enough for him, but I'm a better man now.

I've got my priorities straight, and I know without a doubt that Jerryn is the one for me.

I'll take as much time as I need to show him the same.

It's so on.

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SEVEN

JERRYYN

How the hell am I supposed to find someone to date when cuddling next to my best friend feels this damn good?

I hold in a long, dramatic sigh and instead tuck his arm closer to my chest. I don't know why he indulges me and my cuddle sessions, but he always has, ever since we were still barely adults in college and I told him how all I really wanted was to be held while I fell asleep.

He offered that very night, and even though it was awkward at first, it quickly became my favorite thing.

I can't count the number of times I've slept in his bed or he's slept in mine, but it's more than anyone I've ever actually been dating. Bane is... the perfect man. Not only is he insanely gorgeous, but he's sweet and thoughtful and the best friend a guy could ask for.

And he's pushing me to find love.

On some level I know it's because he wants me to be happy, but it also confirms what I believe—I'm holding him back. He can't find love if he's spending all his nights with me. So just for tonight, I'm going to enjoy this, and tomorrow I'm going to do whatever it takes to get out of his way.

My chest tightens at the mere thought of losing Bane to someone else, but that's selfish, and I need to step up and truly be his best friend. I need to look out for his best interests too, not just my own.

"Jerr," Bane mumbles as his lips brush against the back of my neck. "You're thinking too much."

I chuckle softly. "How do you always know when I'm in my head?"

"Twenty years of experience. Something wrong?"

"No."

"Liar." He pulls me onto my back so I'm gazing up at him. His big brown eyes search mine with only the soft glow of his sound machine illuminating the darkness between us. "Talk to me."

"I promise nothing's wrong. I was just thinking about the stuff we talked about." Up close like this, I'm reminded of how incredibly gorgeous my bestie is, and how thoughtful.

He reaches over and brushes my hair from my forehead. "Nothing has to be solved tonight. We should get some sleep."

"Definitely."

Bane bends and kisses my forehead. Every time he does that, my breath catches in my throat.

Maybe I wish he'd kiss me somewhere else, just to see what it feels like, or maybe I wish his soft affection meant more than it does.

He knows I need touch, and he provides it under his umbrella of friendship, but I've seen how he touches a lover.

I've watched him kiss men he's dating and it's not at all the way he kisses me.

In fact, I'm pretty sure he doesn't find me physically attractive at all.

How could he sleep cuddled around me if he did?

I might be his perfect match in friendship, but I'm not what he wants romantically.

"You're still thinking." He smiles, brushing his fingers over my cheek. "We can talk it out if you need to."

I shake my head. "I'm good. We should sleep."

"Sweet dreams, Jerr."

"You too."

I turn to my side, curling up again, and as Bane scoots closer, draping his arm over me, I resolve to toughen up by morning. Bane deserves to find the love of his life, and I'm going to help him do it.

"I don't think this is the right order." I flip through the invoice pages to verify the order, but it doesn't make sense. "The invoice says it's for twenty highball glasses, but these look like water glasses."

Lowen comes over and peers into the box, huffing as he pulls out a glass. "This is the second time this company has sent us the wrong order."

“Seriously?” Salem complains, taking the invoice from me. “They’ve got the best prices, but I’m wondering if it’s worth it with all the problems we have with them.”

“It’s not,” Lowen says. “I’m calling this time.”

Salem scrunches his nose. “The wrath of Lowen.”

Lowen takes the invoice and marches toward the office, leaving me and Salem alone. “We’re keeping the glasses,” he announces. “The price they pay for yet another mistake.”

“Okay.” I continue unpacking the glasses from the box, setting them on the bar top as Florian comes around the corner with a cart full of liquor bottles to restock the shelves.

“Jerryn.” Florian’s eyes light up. “Where’s your partner in crime?”

“He had a dentist appointment. He should be here soon. Why?”

“I’ve been trying to think of a drink special to kick off the new school year. I wanted something fun and flirty, and I have yet to pick a drink inspired by you or Bane.”

I shrug. “I’m not really up on that kind of stuff.”

“What kinds of things light you up?” He adds a bottle of tequila to the shelf. “Foods, flavors, that kind of thing.”

“Hmm. I have a wicked sweet tooth. I love fruity things like raspberries or strawberries.”

Florian nods before restocking the vodka. “Fruity is good. End of summer. I can work

with that.”

A few minutes later, the front door opens and Bane comes sauntering in. My stomach does a little flip every time I see him, even after all these years, and I know that means I spend way too much time with my bestie. I almost feel incomplete when he’s not with me.

“How was the dentist?”

“Easy,” Bane says. “Perfect report card.”

“Do you actually floss?” Salem raises an eyebrow.

“Most of the time, but I think I’m just blessed with good teeth genes.”

“Lucky,” Salem replies.

Florian leans on the bar, grinning. “Just in time. I need to know your favorite flavors.”

“For what?” Bane asks.

“I’m coming up with a drink special and using the two of you as inspo.”

Bane glances at me, a smile tugging at his lips. “I like tart drinks.”

“Fruity?” Florian asks while I frown.

Why is he developing a drink based on both of us? Are we considered one person even by the bartender?

“Fruit is nice,” Bane says. “Tart and sweet, goes down easy but packs a punch. Reminds me of the college days and those fruit juice tasting shots we would knock back. Remember those, Jerr?”

“Sex on the beach. I remember. Surprisingly.”

Bane chuckles. “Lucky for us, we had a good crew who always made sure we got back to the dorms safely.”

Florian is grinning as he reaches under the register to grab a notebook. He scrawls something down then grabs his phone and starts scrolling. I go back to unpacking the glasses, quickly forgetting about the drink discussion as the other guys filter into the space.

Oakley went out earlier to get us donuts, and he walks in with those while Kit comes in after walking Stewart to the university. Ridley and Wren are next, hand in hand and gazing at each other with loopy expressions. Indy appears, having finished up some report he was working on in the office.

I smile as I flatten the box. Having all my friends in the same place after all these years feels surreal at times. I count myself lucky. In all the ways we’ve grown and changed, our bond remains tight.

Bane is leaning over the notebook with Florian, the two of them talking softly amid the chorus of other voices. I’m the softest spoken of all of us, but I love the chaos of mixed voices, laughter, people talking over each other, and friendly teasing we share.

As I gather up the empty boxes, I feel Bane’s hand on my shoulder, gently squeezing.

I turn my head to look at him, my stomach fluttering with the knowledge that I have to let him go.

At least partially. Hopefully, whoever he finds will be okay with our friendship.

I couldn't stand to lose that, though I'm pretty sure I'll have to give up the cuddle sessions.

"What are your plans after work?" Bane asks.

"That's a really weird question. What are your plans?"

Bane chuckles. "That exhibit at the museum you talked about a few weeks ago, the one on the Titanic? It's leaving in a week. I figured we could head down and check it out. Maybe grab some dinner at Tutto."

My jaw drops. "Really?"

He nods. "We've been working our asses off, and our video games will be there next week, but this exhibit won't." He shrugs. "I felt like doing something different too. Wanna go?"

"Do I want to go to the museum and then eat at my favorite Italian restaurant? Uh, yeah."

Bane laughs as he squeezes my shoulder again. "Good. I think it'll be fun."

He walks off, leaving me in stunned silence. Yes, he's gone along with me to a few museums before, but I know it's not his favorite way to spend a few hours. He didn't exactly light up when I told him about the exhibit, so his willingness to go is surprising, but I'll take it.

Maybe tonight at dinner I can encourage him to get back on the dating apps too, even though the idea kind of makes me sick. But if he's the kind of friend who will go to a

museum for me, then I can be the kind of friend who encourages him to find the love he deserves.

I chew on my bottom lip for a second before pulling my phone out of my pocket. I unlock the screen and navigate to a site I've had bookmarked for months but haven't had the nerve to really dig into. I click on the link for workshops and scroll through the list.

Oh. The next one is three days from now. I should go. I really should. It could help me.

"Why the face?" Ridley asks, bumping his arm against mine. I almost fumble my phone but catch it in time. "Sorry, man. You okay? You look upset."

"Oh, no. I'm not upset." I close out the screen so he can't see what it says. "I was just thinking."

Ridley nods. "You're sure?"

I nod. "Yes."

"Cool."

He pats my arm and walks off while I pull my phone out again and open the registration page. I've had questions about myself for a long time, and stumbling on this workshop a while back feels like the lifeline I need right now.

Maybe sitting through a discussion about natural ways to increase my sex drive will help me find the confidence to start dating again. My dream man might be out there somewhere, waiting for me to show up, but I have to at least try to see if there's anything I can do to have a normal sex life.

I enter my details, and just before I close out, another screen pops up highlighting a different workshop.

This one is about the spectrum of sexuality.

I read the description, my eyes snagging on words I haven't delved into before.

Demisexual. Asexual. Gray-asexual. It's a few nights after the other workshop.

My stomach tightens, and that's my sign. The nagging feeling in the back of my brain that my sexuality isn't as simple as gay rises up, poking at me as I stare at my screen. Maybe my drive isn't low. Maybe it's something else altogether. There's only one way to find out.

With my hands shaking, I complete the registration for the second workshop.

If I'm going to find a partner, I need to be secure in who I am and what I can offer.

If it's medical, I'll handle it. If it's something else, I'll learn about it.

The tension in my belly eases and my shoulders relax.

It's about time I faced this part of my life head on, and if I'm lucky, by the time Bane finds a partner, I'll be well on my way too.

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EIGHT

BANE

Date night: check.

Granted, Jerryn doesn't know it's a date, but that's kind of the point. He'll be comfortable with me and we can just enjoy the evening. I still haven't quite figured out how to work the romance in without freaking him out, but I will.

Now it's just a matter of counting down the hours until we can head out. I already booked us a car to get to the city, made reservations at Tutto, and bought the museum tickets online, so the evening should go nice and smooth.

It's been ages since I've been on anything even resembling a real date.

I gave that up right about the time that I decided I didn't want to pursue a relationship if it wasn't with Jerryn.

I came to loathe the dating game—the awkward getting to know each other talk, the false behavior, the whole dance of it—but with Jerr, it's totally different.

I'm excited to show him what we could have.

Actually, what we already do have. I just need to reframe it for him.

When he joins me at the bar where I'm talking with Florian, I can tell he's excited

from the gorgeous pink blush on his cheeks and the sweet smile on his lips.

“Ready to get out of here?” I ask.

He nods happily. “Yeah.”

“What are you guys doing tonight?” Florian asks.

Jerryn’s face lights up. “We’re going to the museum. There’s an exhibit I’m excited to see.”

“Oh yeah? Which one?”

“Titanic. I was really into the movie for a while and I watched all the documentaries. It’s gonna be so cool to see what they have on display.”

“Sounds like a fun date.”

Jerryn’s smile falters slightly. “It’s really nice of Bane to go with me. He’s a true best friend.”

Jerr’s response irks me, but I pat his shoulder. “It’s not a hardship to spend time with you, whatever we’re doing.”

Jerr turns and searches my eyes as his bright smile slowly returns. “Thanks.”

“Have fun,” Florian says as he turns to greet a customer.

With my hand still on his shoulder, I guide Jerryn out the front door and down the sidewalk toward home.

“Quick shower and change? The car will be here in about an hour to get us.”

He nods, glancing at me as we walk. “Thanks for doing this.”

“I’m happy to do it.”

At the house we go our separate ways to our bedroom suites.

I hop into the shower, running through how I want the night’s events to go in my head.

My plan is definitely to treat this like a date, but I gotta play it cool too.

If I go too hard, he’ll ask questions, and if he figures out what I’m up to, who knows how he’ll react.

After my shower, I gaze at my reflection while I run gel through my hair. I can’t believe it’s taken me twenty years to get up the nerve to romance my best friend, but I guess it’s better late than never, right?

If everything goes the way I hope it does, we’ll end the night in my bed, his body curled up next to mine.

Is it hard to keep my hands in safe places when he’s wrapped around me?

Yep, but I’m an adult who can handle myself, and I’d rather have him in my arms than not. I can jack off in the shower later.

I dress in dark slacks and a light blue button-down shirt. Date appropriate attire complete. After fastening my watch to my wrist, I glance at my reflection one last time, then exit my room to go right next door to Jer’s.

I knock and then let myself in. “Jerr?”

“One sec.” He appears a moment later in the doorway to his bedroom, wearing nothing but navy blue briefs and one sock. He’s holding a shirt in one hand and a pair of pants in the other. “Is this okay to wear?”

I look down at the clothes again, smiling when I see it’s a baby blue shirt and dark pants. “We’ll look like twins, but I’m okay with that if you are.”

He blinks, looking at my outfit, then chuckles. “Okay. Be right out.”

“I’ll be here.”

While I wait, I look around his space at the shelves full of video games he’s collected over the years.

He’s got an impressive movie collection too.

On another bookcase, books he’s been amassing since he was still a kid are neatly lined up, organized by title so he can always find the one he’s looking for.

There are touches of Lowen’s designer influence in the space, from the super comfortable couch to some of the decor, but mostly I just see Jerry.

All the things he enjoys are on display.

“Okay, I’m ready,” he says from behind me. He’s still tucking his shirt in when I twist to face him. “Been awhile since we dressed up.”

“It has.” I glance at my watch. “Good timing. The car should be here in a few minutes.”

Jerryn nods, walking over to me and straight into my arms. “I’m really excited.”

“It’s gonna be fun.”

With my hand on his lower back, I guide him out of his room and downstairs. It’s still nice out, so we don’t need jackets just yet. I finish locking up just as the car arrives.

Now it’s time for me to move into date mode. I skip ahead a few beats so I can open the back door for Jerryn, and when he doesn’t react to that, I realize with some amusement that I always grab the door for him.

I join him, greeting the driver as we confirm our destination.

Jerryn practically vibrates with excitement.

Dang. I should have figured this one out sooner.

He really wanted to go but played it off to me, afraid I wouldn’t want to.

I wonder if there are other things he’s keeping from me because he thinks I wouldn’t like them.

That’s okay though. I’ll just pay even more attention to the things he says. I got this.

I put my hand on his thigh and squeeze gently. “Excited?”

He nods, smiling sheepishly. “It might be lame.”

“Probably not though. This exhibit has been touring the world, so it must be pretty impressive.”

“Maybe.” He bites his bottom lips for a second. “It’s nice that I can totally geek out with you.”

“Always.”

He turns to me, his pretty hazel eyes illuminated by the setting sun and city lights as we pass.

Jerryn is by far the best looking person I’ve ever met, and that’s saying something.

His attractiveness is so real and simple.

He’s completely unaware that he’s so gorgeous too.

He never catches the head turns or the way customers fawn over him.

As close as we are, he has zero clue that he’s the center of my universe. It’s kind of sweet.

But I can tell something is on his mind. I know his body language well, and as he fidgets, chews on his bottom lip, and exhales loudly every few seconds, I just know.

“Something else on your mind, Jerr?”

He startles slightly, like he forgot I was next to him. “No, not really.”

“Okay.” That’s a lie, but he’ll tell me when he’s ready.

About thirty minutes later, we pull up in front of the New Onyx History Museum. Jerryn exits the car and waits on the sidewalk for me to join him.

“Let me pull up our tickets.”

Jerryn nods, gazing up at the massive feature covering the front of the building with the famous ship on it while I open the email with our tickets.

A few minutes later, we enter the museum and follow the signs to the exhibit. We’ve got three full hours before dinner to make sure he isn’t rushed at all. I know how he likes to read all the plaques and spend time looking at the details.

When we get to the spot, I’m surprised to find a bridge that looks like one you’d used to board a ship. Jerryn giggles, gripping my arm.

“This is so cool.”

“It is.”

We walk onto the bridge and pass through red velvet curtains that take us into a darkened room. Other people join us, and as we wait, the sound of dripping water fills the space. As the lighting brightens, the projection on the walls makes it look like we’re surrounded by water.

Then the narration begins, telling us about what happened that fateful night before more curtains open and we begin an immersive experience that starts with the grandeur of the ship, leads us through the lower levels, and shows the stark differences between the classes.

“In real life, I don’t think Jack could’ve gotten close enough to Rose to romance her,” Jerryn whispers.

“Probably not.”

We continue the tour, traveling through rooms with projected images that feel so real, I'm tempted to reach out and touch the items around me. Jerryn is a kid in a candy store, whispering facts to me in between the narration.

We end in a room where we take seats and watch how the ship met its doom, but it's done in such a way that it feels like we're there too. Voices scream around us, calling out for help. Children cry, the waves smash against the ship, and I even flinch once or twice, expecting to get wet.

Jerryn grabs my hand, squeezing it in anticipation of the moment the boat splits in half and sinks below the water, taking all those souls with it.

I have to admit, as many times as I've watched something about the Titanic with Jerr, this experience makes it feel new again.

In front of us on the screen, the massive ship slips below the water, and the screams become splashes and gurgles until we're left with nothing but eerie silence and softly sloshing water.

The narrator comes back on, telling us how many people were lost, how many were rescued, and ending with real footage of the ship sitting on the ocean floor.

We file out silently into the next part of the exhibit where there are more details, photographs, and artifacts from the wreckage and survivors.

We walk through each display, reading the plaques and viewing the items. Jerryn keeps a tight hold on my hand the whole time, completely immersed in this experience.

When we reach the end of the exhibit, he sighs happily.

“That was way more than I expected.”

“Me too, actually. The interactive part was really cool.”

“Did you think so?”

“Definitely. You enjoyed it?”

“It was incredible. I’m glad I didn’t miss it.”

“Me too.” Date mode. “Let’s go see what the gift shop has.”

His face lights up. “Really?”

“Yes, really.”

Still holding hands, we navigate through the crowds to the gift store and find the section on the Titanic. It’s pretty picked over, unfortunately, but on a bottom shelf I spot something I think might make Jerryn happy.

I bend over and grab the box. “Hey, look at this.”

Jerryn turns and peers at the box in my hand, his lips moving as he reads what it is, then gazes up at me. “Do you think it’s hard?”

“Maybe, but I’ll do it with you.”

The smile on his face right now is everything. Building a model of the Titanic with Jerryn sounds like a perfect way to spend my free time.

“Okay,” he says. “It might be fun.”

“We can make it fun.”

I head to the register, playfully shoving Jerryn’s hand away when he tries to pay for it.

“I got it.”

He tilts his head, but nods, waiting for the cashier to put the box in a bag and hand it to him. Once we’re done, I glance at my watch.

“We have thirty minutes before we need to go to the restaurant. Want to walk around a little more?”

Jerryn nods, searching my eyes. “That sounds good.”

I offer my hand and he takes it, smiling sweetly at me as we head back into the museum. So far, romancing Jerryn is going just as planned.

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NINE

JERRY

Sitting across from Bane at my favorite restaurant, pretending to look at the menu even though I always order the same thing, feels different from most of our nights out, but I can't put my finger on why.

Maybe it's just the leftover excitement from the exhibit that has me feeling that way. Whatever it is, it's nice.

Bane studies his menu, glancing up at me. "Are you getting the parmesan crusted chicken and fettuccine?"

I nod happily. "Of course. You?"

"Might get the pasta special. Sounds good."

"Can I have a bite?"

"Dumb question." He winks at me as he sets his menu down. "Not gonna lie, the exhibit was fun. I'm really glad we did it."

"Me too. It was great."

"Did you learn anything you didn't know?"

“No.”

Bane chuckles. “I guess it was just a different way to see it all.”

“Exactly. I always get something out of the various ways the information is presented, you know? Tonight was really cool. It felt like we were there.”

Bane nods, fiddling with his napkin. “It did. It must have been so scary.”

“Definitely.” I glance around for a second. “You know, if you and I were on the Titanic and I found a door to lay on, I would make room for you.”

Bane grins. “I would do the same for you.”

“And if there wasn’t room, I would make you find a place where you could live too.”

Bane tilts his head. “Yeah?”

“You have to survive. We both do.”

“You’re still really mad at Rose about that, aren’t you?”

“I’m mad at both of them.”

“You’re Team She Dies at the End, right?”

“I just like that ending. Maybe it was a dream, but I’d like to think that reliving the whole experience was a sort of closure for her and that Jack was waiting in the place they met before tragedy struck.”

“Let’s go with that.”

Our server appears and Bane orders for us, choosing a bottle of wine to go with the food.

“Ooh, we’re having wine. Fancy.”

Bane just smiles, leaning back in his chair. He is, hands down, the most attractive man I’ve ever seen, and I can’t count how many times I’ve wondered what it would feel like to run my hands over his lean body just to see if a different kind of spark could ignite.

I never do it though, because it’s unfair to him. He doesn’t deserve a guy who has to wonder whether he could be excited about sex. With a man who looks like Bane, that should be a no brainer.

It’s not that I never feel desire. I do. I’ve even had moments of it around Bane. I’m curious about it too. I often wonder what it would be like to be physical with a man like him, but I don’t do anything about it.

The funny thing is, if I asked Bane to help me experiment, he’d do it, regardless of how awkward it would be for him. He’d do anything for me.

“What’s on your mind?” he asks.

I start to answer with my default “nothing,” but this is Bane, and I don’t keep secrets from him. Not often, anyway.

“I found this workshop online about the spectrum of sexuality.”

He raises an eyebrow. “Oh yeah?”

“They talk about some terms I’ve heard before but don’t really understand. Maybe

I'll learn something."

Bane nods. "Yeah, maybe. When is it?"

"Next week."

"Do you want company?"

I shake my head. "Not for this one, but thanks."

Bane studies me for a second before asking, "What kind of terms are they covering?"

I feel my cheeks warming, but if I can't open up to Bane, who can I talk to? "Demisexual was one. Asexual. Something called gray-asexual. There were some others too. I guess I wonder if I might be on some kind of spectrum that I'm not aware of."

"I thought you looked into asexuality before and it didn't resonate."

"True, but those other ones are new to me. I figure it doesn't hurt to check it out."

"No, of course not." He reaches across the table to hold my hand. "Just remember, it doesn't matter where you fall. There's nothing wrong with you."

I nod, chewing on my bottom lip. I want to believe him, but it's hard after the dating experiences I've had.

"Thanks, Bane."

"Is this because of seeing Alec again?"

“No, not at all. I just want...” I pause as the server appears with our wine, waiting while he opens it and fills our glasses.

“Go on,” Bane says once the server is gone.

“I’ve been thinking.” I take a sip of my wine, if anything just to stall what I’m about to say. “Have you thought about going back on the apps?”

“Apps?”

“Dating apps.”

Bane’s expression falls before a deep crease appears across his forehead. “What? Why would you ask me that?”

“I guess I feel like maybe you’re not dating to keep me company.”

He literally rolls his eyes. “Come on, Jerr. You know me better than that.”

“It’s been on my mind a lot lately. We’ve seen every one of our friends fall in love recently, and I think you deserve that kind of happiness too.”

He levels me with his signature glare, the one that comes closest to causing a flutter in my stomach.

“Jerr, spending time with you, doing the things we enjoy does make me happy. If I wanted more or different, I would go get it. I have to ask... is this about you wanting to get back out there and date?”

I almost choke on my own breath. “No.”

“So you’re just worried about me?”

I nod, staring at my wine.

“Look at me.”

I lift my gaze.

“Trust me, I’m happy. I’m very content with my life. You’re not in my way in the slightest, and there’s no one else I’d rather spend my free time with. If that changes, I’ll handle it.”

I know him well enough to hear the authenticity in his voice. “Okay.”

“And I’m trusting you to be honest with me too,” Bane continues. “If you want to get out there and see who’s available, then you should do that.”

I can’t tell him that the only reason I would ever do that is so he doesn’t worry about me after he finds his own partner.

“I don’t want to. I’m going to the workshop to understand myself better, that’s all.”

“Then we’re good, right?” He squeezes my hand, smiling sweetly at me. “This works for us?”

I nod, feeling my mood lift. It’s probably wrong that I want all his time and attention, but if he wants it this way too, that’s okay, right?

“Yeah, we’re good.”

“Perfect. Let’s enjoy dinner, then later we can hang out and maybe find a movie or

something.”

“Okay.”

“Actually, we should rewatch Titanic . That would be fitting for tonight.”

“You would do that?”

“Hell yeah, I would. I think it’ll be fun to see how different it is after seeing the exhibit tonight.”

“That sounds great.”

Our food is delivered and we dig in, but as I swirl pasta around my fork, I meet his eyes.

“You’re amazing, Bane.”

“So are you, Jerr.”

Maybe if I figure out how I work and what makes me tick, I could find a way to be the kind of guy Bane could be romantically interested in.

We have all the other aspects of a great relationship, we just need the physical.

I have to give it a shot, because I don’t see how there could be another guy out in the world better for me than my best friend.

TEN

BANE

After dinner, Jerryn and I walk up and down the boulevard, gazing into the closed shops. The weather is mild tonight, and lots of people are out.

“The city is so different from Willow Bay.”

Jerryn nods. “Very. I like the city for an occasional night out, but I prefer our quiet town. Does that mean I’m getting old?”

I chuckle. “No, because that would mean I’m getting old too.” I wrap my arm around his shoulders, pulling him close. “I think it just means we like where we live.”

He smiles happily. “Right.” We’re quiet for a few more minutes until Jerryn says, “Remember when Indy called with his crazy idea?”

“Sure do. It was like a shelter in the storm.”

“Not even a week before that we were talking about making some major changes. Then he called.”

“Meant to be, right?”

Jerryn nods. “I think so. Look at everything that’s happened since we moved back. Moby’s is booming and the house is amazing. All our friends found love too.”

“You’re happy here?”

“I am, but I’m glad we did it together. I don’t think I’d be happy if you weren’t here too.”

“I can guarantee I wouldn’t be happy if you weren’t here with me.”

Jerryn stops walking abruptly, turning to lean on the metal fence that borders the sidewalk and look out at the ocean.

“Something wrong, Jerr?”

He shakes his head. “Not at all. This has been a really good night.”

“I’m glad you enjoyed it. I did too, for the record.”

He smiles, but keeps his gaze on the softly rolling waves. “I feel like something’s in the air. Something new.”

I lean on the fence as well, facing him. “What do you mean?”

“Kind of like right before Indy called us about Moby’s. Remember?”

“Oh yeah. For a couple of weeks you said you felt like something was coming.”

“It’s not like I’m a psychic or something, but it’s as if the energy around me changes or something. Maybe it’s my own vibe.”

“Like going to the workshop?”

He nods, smiling. “Like that.”

Or maybe it's the fact that after all this time, I'm finally stepping up to be the guy you deserve.

"I agree."

His eyes light up. "You do?"

"Yeah. I can totally feel it. There is a change coming—a good one. I'm excited."

"Should I be excited too? You really think it's good?"

"I think it's gonna be amazing if we stay open to the possibilities."

"Okay then. Color me excited."

I reach over and grab his hand, squeezing gently. "Ready to head home?"

"Yeah."

I pull my phone out of my pocket and order a rideshare, then we walk to the corner so we're easier to spot.

While we wait, I study Jerry as he looks at all the people walking past us.

At this time of night, it should only take us thirty minutes to get home, and in that thirty minutes, I have to figure out how to transition from date mode back to best friend mode.

It's not like I can kiss him goodnight on the doorstep.

Wish I could. I can't count how many times I've imagined what kissing him would be

like.

Are his lips as soft as they look? Would his breath catch as my tongue explored his mouth? Would he ever even want that? He's told me before that kissing was one of the few physical activities he found himself craving. Could he crave it with me?

The car arrives just minutes later, and I hurry over to open the door for Jerr.

We get settled in the back seat, and Jerryn looks at the model kit we got while we ride.

It's pretty small, but with a lot of details.

That could be something fun to do together.

Anything that makes his face light up works for me.

"Did you have fun tonight, Jerr?"

He nods, searching my eyes. "It was awesome. Thank you."

"Date night?" the driver asks, glancing in his rear view mirror.

"Yes." I answer before Jerryn can object. "We went to the museum and a great restaurant we both love."

"Nice. I need to plan my next one with the missus. Maybe I'll take a page out of your playbook."

"Have at it, my friend."

“How long have you been together?” the driver asks.

“Twenty years.”

Jerryn makes a weird choking noise and pokes me in the side, but I just wink and squeeze his knee.

“We met in college. Inseparable ever since.”

“That’s amazing, man. Congrats. Are you married?”

“No.” I glance at Jerr. “Maybe one of these days.”

“It’s nice, you know. I’ve only been married three years, but it’s great. My wife, she’s a treasure.”

“That’s nice to hear.”

“We’re saving up to buy a house, so I’ve been grabbing a few shifts at night just for some extra cash.”

“Smart.”

We chat about little things until the driver pulls up in front of the house. He peers out the window and whistles. “Now that’s a house.”

I chuckle, adding a tip through the app. “We share it with a group of friends. Thanks for the ride and good luck with everything.”

“You too.”

When we exit the car and walk up the sidewalk, I glance over at Jerr, who's been quiet for a while.

"Anything wrong?"

"No. I was just wondering why you went along with his questions."

"Why not? Besides, it's pretty nice that someone treated us like any other couple, isn't it? He assumed we were a couple instead of making it awkward."

Jerryn nods, smiling. "Good point."

"Did I make you uncomfortable?"

"No." He shakes his head. "Not at all."

"Good."

I open the door to the quiet house. I guess most of the guys are still at the bar or up in their suites. Now to pull out my secret weapon.

"I grabbed a dessert from Wren earlier today."

His eyes widen. "Not the Brownie Decadence?"

I waggle my eyebrows. "The Brownie Decadence."

He gasps. "It's not even my birthday."

I laugh. "It doesn't have to be. Want to meet in my room after you change?"

“Heck yeah.”

We walk up the stairs together then split up to go to our rooms. While he’s gone, I grab the dessert from the fridge, following the directions Wren gave me to heat it up in the microwave and then pour the caramel sauce over it.

It’s Jerryn’s favorite dessert, but he’ll only have it once or twice a month.

I set the plate on the coffee table then head to my bedroom to change into sweats. I hear my front door click and my stomach flutters. When I step into the living room, I find him already on the couch, wearing a t-shirt and yellow pajama pants, and dragging a finger through the caramel sauce.

Smiling, I join him and grab the remote to find the movie. Before I can start it, Jerryn puts his hand on my thigh, drawing my attention to him. He doesn’t say anything, so I jump in.

“Something on your mind?”

He exhales softly. “No. Yes, but not really.”

“Huh?”

Jerryn chuckles. “Nothing. Thanks for tonight.”

“My pleasure. We should do more stuff. We spend too much time in the house.”

His teeth graze his bottom lip. “That sounds fun.”

I could kiss him right now, just lean in and taste his lips, but I’d never do something like that without a conversation first. I would need to know without a doubt that he

wanted that kiss as much as I do.

In this moment, the two of us simply gazing into each other's eyes, I can see the future I've pined for. I want this life with him, and I'm willing to do whatever I have to to convince him we have what it takes to be a real couple.

“Titanic?”

He nods slowly, dragging his tongue over his bottom lip. “Yes.”

I click the remote and settle back as Jerryn puts the dessert plate on his lap and we both dig in. In a little while, he'll get sleepy and I'll suggest we cuddle, and then he'll fall asleep in my arms, exactly where he belongs.

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ELEVEN

JERRY

Standing on the sidewalk in front of the community center where the seminar is being held fills me with nerves. I'm not the best at engaging with people I don't know, especially if Bane isn't with me, but this isn't a happy hour, it's a learning experience.

The other people I've seen go in are all men, which makes sense, but I didn't notice that in the description. With a deep breath for courage, I walk through the door, following the signs down the tiled hallway to the room.

An instructor stands at the front, arranging different stacks of papers while others take seats around the room. I find a spot towards the middle of an unoccupied row and sit down, pulling my phone out to text Bane and let him know I'm here.

I knew he'd offer to come once I told him, but I feel like this is a thing I have to do on my own.

Especially after the evening out we had a few nights ago.

It felt weirdly like a date at times, but Bane was just being Bane.

Maybe I wanted it to be a date. All these years we've been best friends, and except for a brief talk when we were twenty, there's never been a move on his part.

His affection towards me feels good though, it always has, and it's been enough for me.

So much that it's kept me out of the dating pool for the last however many years. Four? Has it been that long?

"Welcome, everyone. I'm Tom, your presenter for tonight."

I tuck my phone away and direct my attention to Tom.

"Tonight we're going to talk about the male sex drive, how it ebbs and flows, and some natural therapies that may help. My caveat is that this is not medical or psychological advice or any kind of diagnosis, so if you have concerns in those areas, I recommend seeking out a professional."

I already know there's nothing physically wrong with me, and as far as I can tell, I'm not dealing with any emotional issues getting in the way. My dick works when I want it to, I just don't want it to very often.

Tom starts off a slide presentation about male hormones, then launches into all the advice I've read or heard a thousand times: diet, exercise, supplements. I find myself getting frustrated as the talk goes on. I've tried all those things.

A man two seats over huffs in what sounds like frustration, crossing his arms over his chest. He looks to be in his fifties, and in good shape with only a slight belly pooch. He glances at me, offers a half smile, then returns his attention to Tom.

Maybe he's tried all those recommendations too. It is kind of nice to know I'm not alone. There must be twenty guys here, maybe more.

An hour passes, and as we reach the end, Tom points out all the flyers on the table

with more information. Well, that's time I'll never get back. Oh well. At least I was brave enough to try. Maybe the talk on sexuality will be more enlightening.

The man who was sitting a few seats down stands and walks over to me, offering his hand. "Marcus."

I stand and shake his offered hand. "Hi. Jerryn."

"Cool name."

"Thanks."

"I couldn't help but notice that you seemed like you weren't getting much out of the presentation. Sorry if I'm assuming, but I felt the same way."

"It's okay. Yeah, it's all stuff I've heard before."

He nods as he strokes his beard. "If you don't mind me asking, are you in a relationship?"

"No. Took a break for a while. You?"

"I am." He chuckles. "Ended up in a triad. Got two younger boyfriends keeping me on my toes."

"Two? Wow."

"Just turned fifty-six a couple of weeks ago, and I'm noticing things, you know?"

Fifty-six? He's got fourteen years on me. "Um, if it's not personal, is this a new thing for you or did you notice it in your forties?"

“Oh, it’s new. Pretty sure it’s age related.”

“Oh.” I chew on my bottom lip. “I’m only forty-two.”

“It hits at different times, like Tom said.”

“Right.” Except it’s always been this way.

“Once I get going, I’m fine,” Marcus says. “Just takes a little while to get going.”

I nod, still considering his words. “I think I’m different.”

“Yeah?”

“It’s always been like this for me.”

“Oh.” His tone has more understanding than pity in it, which is nice. “Then it’s normal for you. Nothing wrong with that. The important thing is having a partner who understands.”

“Does that exist?”

He smiles. “Course it does. Maybe you have to look a little harder, but you should anyway. A good partner is worth the effort. I was single for years before Clark and Antonio walked into my life. They make me feel different than I have in the past.”

“It’s probably a little easier because they have each other too, right? I guess I shouldn’t assume.”

“No, you’re right, but they want me there too. The focus isn’t always on the intimate part. It’s about companionship. It’s about learning things and discovering new ways

to be happy together.”

His explanation immediately makes me think of Bane. “I have an amazing best friend,” I blurt. “He’s exactly the kind of man I would want to date but…” I blow out a breath, unsure why I’m confessing all of this to a stranger.

“But?” Marcus prods.

Eh, why not? I’ll never see Marcus again, and maybe he has some insight. “But he’s always had a very active sex life, and I just think it wouldn’t work if we tried something romantic.”

“He’s your best friend?”

“Yeah, for twenty years.”

“And you don’t think that’s something you can talk to him about?”

“We have in the past. I mean, it’s been a while, but we decided it was better to stay friends.”

“Been a while. How long?”

“Uh, well, almost twenty years.”

Marcus raises an eyebrow. “I don’t think I need to point out the obvious here.”

I laugh softly. “Fair enough. I’m afraid of ruining everything because of this, you know? What if he needs more than I can give him?”

“What if he doesn’t? Or what if you both find different ways to deal with it? What if

you're missing out on something great because of fear? If he's been your friend for twenty years, that has to mean something. You should talk."

"Good advice." I'm not gonna take it though. He doesn't know me or Bane, and there's way too much at stake. What if we decided to try and it didn't work? My heart would be broken. It could make things super awkward. It could ruin everything.

Marcus pats my arm. "I hope it works out for you."

"Thanks. You too."

Marcus says goodbye, goes to the table and picks up a few flyers, then turns to leave.

He's greeted at the door by two absolutely gorgeous younger men.

I think I expected a big age gap, but they look close to my age as they hug and kiss Marcus like he's been gone for years. A smile tugs at my lips. That's sweet.

As I walk out the door, I pull my phone out of my pocket to order a ride, then I open my text thread to Bane.

Me: Apparently I need more magnesium.

Three dots appear quickly.

Bane: Is that all you got from it?

Me: Yep. Same shit.

Bane: Sorry. At least you tried. You coming to Moby's now?

Me: Sure. See you in a bit.

My mood perks up. At least I have Bane in some capacity. That's good enough for now.

Forty minutes later, I walk into Moby's. It's decently busy, and as I look around, I spot most of the guys but not Bane. I head to the bar and tap Salem on the shoulder.

"Hey, Jerr." He looks up from the stack of t-shirts he's digging through.

"Hey. Do you know where Bane is?"

"Saw him on the patio a few minutes ago."

"Thanks."

I head in that direction, but before I get there, I feel his arms around my waist from behind, lifting me briefly off my feet as I laugh in surprise. Turning around, I put my hand on his chest to catch my balance.

"What are you doing?"

"Greeting my bestie. What are you doing?"

"Just getting here."

"Got you something. Follow me."

Bane takes my hand, leading me through the bar to the patio. In the corner of the space there's a table with a cloche sitting on it.

“What’s this?”

“Dinner. I know you didn’t eat before you went.”

I smile as I sit down, and Bane sits across from me, lifting the cloche lid to reveal a delicious looking bowl of pasta.

“It’s tonight’s special and Wren killed it,” Bane says. “It’s so good.”

“Yum.”

I unwrap my utensils as my stomach growls. Bane does the same, scooting closer so we can share.

“I hope you’re not too disappointed about tonight,” he says, rubbing his pinky against my hand.

“Not really. There was a guy there who talked to me afterward. He was fifty-six.”

Bane’s face tenses. “Did he hit on you?”

“Oh, no, nothing like that. He was just being friendly.”

“Ah.”

“But he was telling me his libido changed with age.”

Bane nods.

“Mine isn’t age related.”

“No.” He twirls pasta around his fork, offering the bite to me. I take it, chewing slowly as the flavor of tomatoes and something herby explodes on my tongue. “You’re just you, Jerr. Nothing’s wrong. You don’t need magnesium. It’s just the way you’re built.”

After I swallow my bite, I sit back in my chair. “But that sucks.”

“Maybe not. You just haven’t found the right person yet. A person who truly understands and can work with it.”

“And how am I supposed to do that? Do I put it in my dating profile?”

Bane smiles, brushing his fingers under my chin. “Be patient. It’ll happen.”

“How are you so sure? I’m in my forties, Bane. If it hasn’t happened by now?—”

“That’s exactly my point. We’re not kids anymore. We’re not dating men who make decisions with their dicks and nothing else. You have a lot to offer.”

I want to believe him, but it’s hard. “I think you’re biased.”

He laughs softly, offering me another bite. “I am biased, but I’m also not lying.”

I take the bite, gazing into sweet brown eyes the color of milk chocolate, and I’m reminded of what Marcus said. Could Bane be the patient man who understands and can work with me the way I am? I wish I could ask, but the idea scares the hell out of me.

“Here you go, guys.” Florian startles me from my thoughts as he appears next to our table. “It’s called Love Potion and it’s the newest signature drink, inspired by you guys.”

My jaw drops as he sets the pretty pink drinks down in front of us. “Inspired by us?”

Florian nods. “Yeah. You both said you like fruity, sweet drinks, and I needed a new special to kick off the school year. I hope you like it.”

He walks off, but I’m still working it out in my head. “Why do you think he made a drink based on both of us?”

Bane shrugs, lifting his glass. “We gave him similar answers for what we like.”

“I guess so.”

Bane takes a sip and his face lights up. “Oh, it’s so good. Try yours.”

I lift my glass and take a tentative sip, but the flavor makes me smile too. “It’s good. Really good.”

“Love Potion.” Bane looks at his glass. “Cute name.”

“It is.”

He sets his glass down, smiling at me. “Eat up before it gets cold.”

“Help me?”

“Of course.”

We eat together like we have a million times before, and the comfort I feel with him is exactly what makes dating so unappealing.

A cute guy with blond hair, big blue eyes lined with eyeliner, and a glossy smile

appears at our table. His eyes are firmly set on Bane, not even glancing in my direction. He doesn't say a word, just slides a napkin in front of Bane before giving him one hell of a smoldering look and darting off.

I watch him disappear inside the bar again, giggling with friends as they exit.

“What was that about?”

Bane chuckles, pushing the napkin in my direction. “He was flirting up a storm with me earlier.”

The napkin has his name, Erich, with a heart over the I and a phone number along with the very salacious sentence, Anything you want, I can be .

“Well, he certainly goes after what he wants.”

Bane chuckles again, ignoring the napkin and taking another bite of pasta.

“Are you interested?”

“In what?” Bane's voice is muffled through the food in his mouth.

“Erich with a heart.”

Bane scoffs. “My days of hooking up with the college crowd are far behind me.”

“He's cute though. You used to be really into guys who looked like him.”

“I've matured. Nothing about him appeals to me.”

The knot in my stomach loosens. I want Bane to be happy, but watching him pick

someone up doesn't sound fun at all.

"Can I ask you something, Bane?"

"You know you can." He sets the fork down and leans back in his chair, lifting his glass to take a sip of the cocktail.

"What are you doing to take care of, you know, your needs?"

"My needs? Do you mean sex?"

I nod, even as I feel my cheeks burning with heat.

"You really want to know?"

I swallow hard. "Yes."

"I have a very active fantasy life," he says, his voice dropping low. "I have lube and a hand and plenty of time in the shower. Sometimes in bed if you're not with me."

Visions of Bane naked and stroking himself pop into my mind, making me choke on my own spit as a flutter of heat washes over me. Am I turned on? Or just startled? I clear my throat, laughing it off. "Oh."

He smiles, searching my face. "It's enough for me."

"Is it?"

Bane nods, leaning across the table closer to me. "I like my life. I have everything I need."

My stomach flutters, and for a second I think I feel a twinge of interest in my dick. That's... interesting. "Good."

The expression on Bane's face is new to me. It's intense and sexy. Why is he looking at me like that?

"Are you still gonna go to the other workshop?" he asks.

I nod, blinking slowly. "I think so. Couldn't hurt."

"No, not at all." He reaches across the table and takes my hand in his. "Just remember, there's nothing wrong with you."

"I remember."

"Good." He sits back, releasing my hand. "We should finish up and help the guys out."

"Yeah." I nod, happy for the distraction of eating.

Bane might be the perfect guy, but I'm not the perfect guy for him, and I have to remember that before I do something stupid and mess everything up.

When I glance up, Bane is watching me. He smiles, his eyes filled with things he doesn't say.

"Thanks for taking care of me," I say softly.

"Always, Jerr. Always."

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TWELVE

BANE

I'd say courting Jerryn is going pretty well. He's a little suspicious, but that's okay. He'll get used to this new version of me, and when he does, I'll finally be able to tell him that it's been him all along.

You'd think after being as close as we are for as long as we have been I could tell him directly that I'm into him and we can work around the sex thing, but it's our closeness that makes it clear that's exactly what I can't do.

His insecurity runs deep, and there's no way he'd believe I wasn't acting out of some misguided loneliness.

Thing is, I'm not lonely. I never have been.

I have the man of my dreams in my life all day, every day, and sometimes at night.

The early days I spent rotating in and out of new beds weekly don't do much to prove that I'm not some sex hungry fuckboi, but I would think the recent celibacy should be proof.

I guess I'll have to tell Jerr that all those other men were nothing but an attempt to get over what I believed was a useless crush on him. I almost laugh out loud at the ridiculousness of my plight, but before I can dive deeper into my musings, Florian shows up with a grin.

“How are the drinks? Do you guys approve?”

Jerryn smiles at him. “Really good. I approve.”

“Me too,” I say, though Florian already knows.

I arranged the whole drink presentation before Jerryn got here.

We put our heads together to come up with a suitable drink and a suggestive name, and one of these days, I’ll tell Jerryn the whole plan I concocted to woo him off his feet no matter what I had to do, even naming a drink after my goals.

I stand and gather the nearly empty plate of pasta. “Ready to do some work?”

Jerryn nods, standing too. “I’m ready. Running to the bathroom real quick, then I’ll be out.”

“Cool.” He walks off, and I watch him for a second before turning back to Florian. “Thanks for the assist.”

“Did it go well?”

“Well enough.”

Florian grabs the empty glasses as I scoop up our silverware. “It’s about time you made the move.”

“Yeah, yeah.” I grin. “Better late than never, right?”

“That’s what they say.”

“What about you? Dating anyone?”

He shakes his head. “Nah. Still sowing my oats. I’m only thirty. I’ve got time.”

“Plenty.”

We walk back inside the bar and go our separate ways, him to the bar and me to the kitchen. After I drop off the plate at the dishwasher, I go back to the counter to see if there are any orders that need running, finding a basket of wings for a bar customer.

“I got the bar order,” I call out.

When I exit the bar, Jerryn is talking to a couple sitting at a table. The guy says something and Jerryn laughs while the woman with him smiles and shakes her head. Jerryn says something in reply, then shakes the guy’s hand before turning to come over to the bar.

“What was that about?” I ask, after delivering the wing order.

“What?” Jerryn asks.

“You were laughing with that customer.”

“Oh.” He looks over his shoulder. “He told me that he and his girl were convinced I was her cousin and pissed off I was in town without telling them. I caught them both staring at me. It was weird, so I went over to see if everything was okay. They figured out I wasn’t her cousin and then told me the story. ”

“That’s kind of funny.”

“Yeah.”

Florian drops two drinks on the bar top in front of us. “Gin and Tonic and a Moscow Mule for table seven.”

“Got it.” Jerr picks up both drinks. “See you later?”

“You bet.”

I watch him deliver the drinks, thinking about my next move.

I have to step it up just a little so he knows it’s different from our normal friendship dynamic.

Maybe I could try... As the thought passes through my head, an excited shiver spreads through me.

I could try a massage. A nice one. Maybe his neck or his feet.

Nothing too sexual—I’m not a creep. Just a little more touch.

He asked for one once a while ago, but he hasn’t asked again, so I can offer.

Yes, that’s a good plan. While we watch a movie, I’ll offer to get some knots out of his shoulders to show him I’m always thinking about him. That’ll work.

Ridley nudges me with his arm. “How’s it going?”

“So far, so good.”

“He liked dinner?”

“He did. He liked Flor’s drink too.”

Ridley chuckles. “Love Potion. It’s kind of sweet how incredibly clueless he is.”

It’s not sweet. It’s because he’s so insecure that he would never assume I was actually interested in him. I plan to fix that though. “Yeah.”

“I can’t wait until he figures it out.” Ridley does a little shoulder shimmy. “You two are gonna be incredible.”

“I think so too. We already are, it’s just another level up.”

“Exactly.” He pats my shoulder. “I’m so here for this.”

“Glad I can entertain you.”

Ridley laughs. “I guess it is entertaining waiting to see two of my closest friends finally fall completely in love with each other.”

His response warms my chest. “I can’t wait to tell him, but I gotta play the long game. I know him well enough to know that I need to pace myself.”

“You do you, man. I’m just here for the show.”

He grabs his drink order, leaving me alone with my thoughts. I know what I’m doing with Jerr, and I’ve waited twenty years for this. A few more months is nothing.

THIRTEEN

JERRYYN

Sitting in the same room I was in three days ago feels just as awkward as it did the first time. There are a lot more people here for this presentation, of mixed genders and ages, and that knowledge is weirdly comforting. I'm not alone in questioning my sexuality or how I identify. Not at all.

Bane has been so sweet the past couple of days, providing much needed emotional support as I navigate this stuff and offering to come with me again if I needed it, but I want to hear this information and process it without thinking about my best friend.

He's been doling out extra physical touches, from massages to cuddles, and while he's always been like this with me, I'm especially appreciative of it this week.

My thoughts drift back to the first time we cuddled on the beat-up couch in our shared dorm room.

I'd had a rough week in my calc class and he asked me what he could do to help.

I very bravely told him I needed a hug, and Bane, being the amazing guy he is, took it up a notch and played the big spoon to my little one until I fell asleep.

I woke up with his body still wrapped around mine, his cock soft, then not so soft as it rubbed against my ass.

It was at that moment that I wished I was wired differently.

I wished I wanted to twist around and kiss him, explore his body, bring him pleasure, but not only did I not have a clue of what to do, my dick wasn't hard.

Not even kind of. All I really wanted was to keep cuddling with him.

Even in the few fleeting moments when I felt some kind of physical urge, I didn't have the guts to pursue it or even bring it up, knowing it would be gone too soon.

My sexual attraction is infrequent, but I was and am very much attracted to everything else about Bane.

A younger guy chooses the seat next to me, offering a smile as he gets comfortable.

He reminds me of Ridley back in college—tall and lanky, with a casual, laid-back vibe.

His hair is shaved on the sides and bright green down the center, with the longer section hanging in his face.

His bottom lip has a silver hoop through it, and he tugs it with his teeth for a second before glancing at me again.

“I'm Dylan.”

“Hey. I'm Jerry.”

Dylan nods, looking around the space. The room we're in has various sexuality flags hanging up around the perimeter, and there's a rainbow drawn on the whiteboard.

“Hey, man, can I ask you a personal question?” Dylan fidgets with the hem of his light jacket.

“Okay.”

“You’re, like, in your thirties?”

“Forties, actually.”

Dylan’s eyes go wide. “Dude. You look awesome.”

“Thanks. Why are you asking?”

“I’m twenty-three, and I’m seeing that I’m not like other guys my age. Never have been. You know, when it comes to the sex stuff.”

I nod. Obviously we have that in common considering where we’re at.

“I figured I was too old to still be figuring this shit out, but you’re older than me.”

“I don’t think there’s an age requirement. I’ve seen a few things online in forums, and sometimes people are even older than me when they finally connect the dots.”

Dylan nods. “I guess it was weird because, like, I knew at a young age that I was into guys and not girls at all. Like, middle school probably.”

“Yeah, same.”

“But...” He leans forward, balancing his elbows on his knees. “I didn’t want to do physical stuff with them. I just wanted to look, touch, smell.” He laughs softly. “I love the way men smell.”

I smile, nodding to show I'm listening.

"As I got older, it didn't really change. I experimented a little, and it was cool, but it wasn't the way it should've been."

"Yeah."

"I met this guy two years ago. Rick. I was in an online forum about sexuality and he messaged me because he liked the things I said. He said he was asexual, so his need for sex was limited. I felt really safe with him, you know? Like he would get it."

"Did he?"

Dylan nods, but I see the slight sadness in his expression. "Unfortunately, we didn't connect in other areas. There was no spark. We even tried being intimate once, but it was a mess." He laughs again. "Sorry, I'm just dumping everything on you."

"It's okay. I like hearing about other people's experiences."

"After we broke up, I felt so lost, you know? Like, if I date someone like me, then maybe there's no spark. It made me feel like a relationship needs sex to be exciting, but then I can't keep up with allosexual people."

"I can relate. What led you here?"

"A search for answers. I want to understand myself more. I haven't been dating at all in the past eight months, because I think I need to dig deeper so I know what I'm looking for and what I can offer."

"That's why I'm here too." Since Dylan is a stranger, it feels safe to open up to him. "I have a best friend who is everything to me."

Dylan nods, smiling. “What’s his name?”

“Bane.”

“Ooh, sexy.”

“He is that. Women and men fawn all over him.” I pull my phone from my jacket pocket and show him the screensaver—a picture of me and Bane at the beach last summer.

“Damn. He’s hot.”

“I know. He’s not just hot either. He’s an incredible person. I’d be lost without him.”

“But?”

“I think I’m holding him back from finding a relationship. We spend all our time together.”

“Okay. Why are you here tonight?”

Blowing out a breath, I drag my hand through my hair. “Like you said, I want to understand myself better so I know what I have to offer someone.”

“Bane?”

“No. As much as I wish our connection was romantic, it’s not. We’ve known each other forever, and he’s never shown that kind of interest.”

“Oh.”

“Plus, he’s very active in the sexual sense. At least he has been in the past.”

“In the past?”

“We’ve both been single a long time, and he’s not actively dating either.”

“For how long?”

“Years.” I shake my head. “Can’t remember really.”

“Let me get this straight—and by straight, I mean gay.”

I laugh.

“Your very hot best friend spends all his time with you, doesn’t date, and is a great guy.”

“Yep.”

“But you’re not interested in more?”

“It’s not that. He’s not, and I don’t want to make it awkward.”

“Have you asked him?”

“Asked him what?”

“If he’s interested in more?” Dylan gently smacks my thigh as he sits back in his seat.

“My sister had a crush on her guy friend for years. She said the same thing. He never made a move so he wasn’t interested, but one night at a friend’s wedding, she got

some liquid courage in her and she kissed him.

He kissed her back and told her he'd been in love with her for ages, but he didn't want to make her uncomfortable. They're married now and have a kid."

"That's cool."

"Cool, yeah, but who knows what would've happened if neither of them ever stepped up. All I'm saying is that you should check to make sure before you write it off."

"I appreciate the advice, but I know him. If he wanted more, he would tell me. He's not the kind of guy who doesn't go after what he wants."

Dylan shrugs. "I guess you know best. I'd just rather know for sure than miss out on something awesome."

Easy for him to say.

"Good luck though," he adds. "You seem like a good dude."

"Same to you."

Two people enter the room and stand at the front, so we quiet down to begin the conversation.

One person introduces themselves as Jae, gives us their pronouns, she/they, and offers a welcoming smile.

Jae has naturally tan skin and luminous brown eyes.

Their shoulder length hair is dyed pink and in a twisted style, and their arms are

covered in colorful ink.

They're wearing baggy jeans and a tight-fitting tank top with chunky black shoes.

The other person, Toni with an I, uses she/her and is wearing a black dress with bright teal flowers on it and knee high black boots.

Her head is shaved on one side, with long red hair hanging straight down on the other side.

She also has a lot of tattoos, but she might have more piercings than ink.

Toni and Jae launch into the presentation, starting with simple definitions of terms. I listen intently, waiting for something to resonate. Then Jae writes a term on the board that's new to me—gray-ace.

I perk up as I listen. A person who experiences sexual attraction inconsistently, at a low intensity, or rarely. That sounds like me. It's not that I never feel sexual attraction, it's just random and short-lived. I tuck that away in my head as I listen to the other terms and definitions.

When we get to demisexual, things start to slot into place in my head.

Only feeling sexual attraction after an emotional bond is formed.

I've never been able to get into something casual, even recoiling when a guy kissed me while we were dancing back in college.

I need the tangible relationship to feel anything at all, and when I do, it's like a simmering pot, far from a hard boil.

Could I be a gray-ace demisexual?

Toni discusses the spectrum of sexuality and how things can shift and slide over time. She explains that while choosing an identity can be helpful, it's okay if it doesn't align at certain points in our lives and we identify with something else.

The more I listen, the more my eyes sting and my throat tightens around a lump of emotion. For the first time, I feel like I might actually understand my sexuality. I never felt that asexual completely fit, and I wasn't sure about demisexual, but gray-ace demi? I think that's me. Holy shit.

I listen to the other topics, waiting to see if anything feels more accurate, but by the end of the presentation, I'm very much settled.

Jae and Toni start answering questions from the group. A man who looks older than me raises his hand, and Jae calls on him.

"Uh, yeah, so I was wondering about something you said earlier. About how things can shift on the spectrum during our lives."

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“Yes,” Jae says. “It’s more common than people think. We’re not fixed in one state. Just like our interests and tastes can change, so can our attractions and how we identify.”

The man nods, rubbing the back of his neck like he’s nervous, but he continues.

“I was married for sixteen years to a woman. We have three kids, and until two years ago, I would’ve told you I was just an average straight guy, but I always felt like something wasn’t right.

My friends were obsessed with women’s body parts, and I just didn’t feel that way.

Sex for me wasn’t about the physical side.

It was...” He shrugs as his cheeks turn red. “Just the thing you did.”

Jae nods. “What changed?”

“I was on a business trip and went to the hotel bar by myself to have a drink before bed. There was this guy at a table scrolling on his phone and ignoring the world around him, but I couldn’t take my eyes off him.

My marriage at that point was fine, but it was dull.

Bland. We didn’t have sex anymore, but I was okay with that.

I didn’t stray or cheat or even think about it.

I approached the guy and asked if I could join him, and he said yes. ”

The whole room is silent, listening intently.

“We talked until three in the morning,” the man says.

“We sat on the rooftop deck and gazed at the stars and talked about everything. We held hands, and for the first time in my whole life, I had butterflies in my stomach. I wanted to touch him, kiss him. I was experiencing real attraction.” He drops his head for a second. “At fifty-two years old.”

Jae and Toni listen with kind expressions.

“I freaked out,” he continues. “I never saw myself as being attracted to men, and I didn’t understand how I never realized it until then.”

“It’s more common than you think,” Toni says.

He nods, briefly glancing around. “I went home and told my wife about it. She didn’t take it well even though all I did was hold hands with him.

She kicked me out, and I went to a hotel and I called him.

He flew out to see me and we spent the weekend—” His voice cracks and he clears his throat.

“I learned a lot about myself that weekend.” The man slides his hands into his front pockets.

“The problem is I haven’t felt that since.

That kind of attraction to a person. So I guess my question is was it just something about that guy, and if it's not, why am I not attracted to other men? Or women?"

"That's a complex question," Jae says. "There's any number of reasons. I'm attracted to women sexually, but not all women. I still have preferences. Those don't go away regardless of your sexuality."

"Right." He nods. "That makes sense."

"You could also fall into the gray-ace category," Jae continues. "Where maybe your attraction lies more with men than women, but it's still inconsistent."

"What happened with the hotel guy?" Dylan asks.

"He lives in another state, but we're still friends."

"Cool," Dylan says.

"How do I decide?" the man asks Jae and Toni. "How do I know?"

"Experience is helpful," Toni says. "You may find your attraction is more specific. Like there was something about the man you met that was appealing, but since you don't know what that is, you're still waiting to feel it again. That's okay."

"Everything is okay." Jae nods as he glances around the room. "As long as everyone is consenting, then however your sexuality defines itself is okay."

"And also," Toni says, "you don't have to choose a label. Some people find it helpful in understanding their identity, while others don't need it, and are more open to whatever."

“And if you choose a label,” Jae continues, “It doesn’t have to be fixed.

Five years ago I would’ve told you I was a masc lesbian, but that’s not where I’m at anymore.

My gender shifted, and my sexuality shifted too.

I’m gender-fluid, and while I’m primarily attracted to female presenting people, I don’t use the term lesbian anymore as I’ve had experiences with people who are not female presenting or assigned female at birth. ”

“What term do you use?” another person asks.

“Queer,” Jae answers. “It works for me.”

The man nods.

“I’m a bisexual woman,” Toni says. “It took me a long time to get there because while I always felt the term woman applied to my gender, my sexuality was very confusing to me for a long time. I’m aesthetically attracted to men and masculinity, but for physical and romantic relationships, I’m drawn to women and female presenting people. ”

“Can you explain more?” a woman asks.

Toni nods. “Of course. I grew up believing I was straight because I dated men and wasn’t repulsed by them or their parts, even though I knew I was very attracted to women and feminine presentations. I didn’t know I could be something besides very straight or very gay.”

I see a few people nod in agreement around the room.

“And then I had my first sexual experience with an AFAB person. Assigned female at birth. It changed my whole world. I dated women after that, and the experience was just mind-blowingly different. I came to understand that men and masculinity have a certain appeal for me. I describe it as aesthetic, nice to look at, but that’s all.

So lesbian doesn’t fit for me, but someone with the exact same experience might choose it. It’s individual.”

The man who asked the initial question thanks them and sits down while Toni and Jae answer more questions.

It’s very validating to know so many people have had similar experiences to mine.

Maybe Bane is right, and there’s really nothing wrong with me.

I’m just wired a little differently than most. I’m in a different spot on the spectrum.

I get the nerve up to ask the question bouncing around my head, slowly raising my hand.

“Yes?” Jae says, pointing at me.

“Let’s say a person is gray-ace and demi.”

Jae nods.

“How would they know if the way they feel about a person is romantic attraction or just...” I shrug. “Friendship?”

Jae’s expression softens like she knows exactly what I’m talking about.

“It’s hard to answer without knowing all the details, but I would say it’s important to note the difference in those feelings with one person versus with other people.

If you have a friend, and think you may have some physical or romantic interest but you’re unsure, then pay attention to how you feel around other friends. ”

I never feel things with the guys. “That makes sense. One more question?”

“Of course.”

“If you’re demisexual, could it take twenty years for the emotional bond to morph into something else?”

“There’s no time limit,” Jae says. “Of course, it’s possible there were always feelings, but maybe they weren’t understood before, or the person experiencing them wasn’t in a place to embrace it yet.”

“I’ve certainly been surprised by romantic feelings for a friend in the past,” Toni says.

A few people chuckle in agreement.

“Thank you.” I sit down slowly, replaying the conversations in my head. I want to go home and see Bane. I want to tell him that I think I might finally understand myself. It only took forty-two years.

After the presentation ends, Dylan puts his hand on my arm. “Good luck with your friend.”

I start to brush off the implication, but I can’t. Maybe I really should tell Bane all the things in my head, not just about my sexuality.

The idea sends a surge of panic through me.

Bane means too much to me to risk what we have, and even if I told him that sometimes I feel hints of sexual attraction towards him, how lame is that?

Asking a guy like Bane to settle for a lackluster sex life is ridiculous.

I'd rather keep things just like they are than blow up the most important relationship in my life.

"Take care," is what I say back to Dylan as I pull my phone out to order a ride home. There's a text waiting for me from Bane.

Bane: Slow tonight. I'm already at home. Ridley, Salem, and Indy are closing up. Come to my room when you get home. I want to hear all about tonight.

Smiling, I type back a response.

Me: Class just ended. Be there soon.

I'll figure out what to tell him on the way home. He'll be happy for me, like he always is, then we'll pick a video game to play and cuddle on his couch, like so many nights before. Maybe that's good enough for now.

Maybe it has to be.

FOURTEEN

BANE

My stomach flutters when the door to my room opens and I hear Jerry'n shrugging off his coat before he steps completely into the living room. He smiles, but I can already tell there's something major on his mind. He doesn't have much of a poker face.

"Hey."

I smile back at him, patting the couch beside me. "Hey."

He shuffles over, plopping down and dragging his hand through his hair to get it off his forehead. I keep quiet, giving him space to talk, but when he's silent for too long, I prod a bit.

"Are you okay?"

Jerry'n nods. "Yeah. I think, um, I think I finally understand what's going on with me."

My eyes widen. I wasn't expecting that from a community seminar. "Yeah? Tell me more."

"It was really cool," Jerr says, holding my gaze. "The instructors were great and the questions people asked helped too. This guy who sat next to me shared some of his experiences, and I felt normal for a change."

“Normal? Jerr, that’s huge.”

“I know.” He smiles softly. “You’ve been telling me for years that there’s nothing wrong with me, but when you’re the only person you know who experiences things the way I do, it doesn’t feel okay.”

I nod, reaching over to hold his hand.

“Being in a room with people who get it was eye-opening. I’m not broken, I’m just in a different spot on the sexuality spectrum than other people are.”

“That’s amazing to hear. I’m so glad you see that you’re not less than anyone else.”

He shrugs. “Well, I wouldn’t go that far. I’m not broken, but I am different.”

“Different isn’t bad though.”

“Maybe.” He bites his bottom lip for a second. “They talked about this term... gray-ace demi. It resonated with me.”

“Explain it to me?”

Jerr nods. “Demisexual is when a person experiences attraction only after an emotional bond has been made. They wouldn’t be into one-night stands and never feel love at first sight.”

“Got it.”

“Ace is short for asexual, but combined with gray, it’s basically like a person can feel sexual attraction but it’s inconsistent, or not as intense, or over quickly. So a gray-ace demi person experiences infrequent or inconsistent sexual attraction after an

emotional connection has been made.”

I nod, taking that all in. “That does sound like you.”

“I know.” He smiles. “When I heard it, it felt like I was meeting myself for the first time.”

“Mind blown. I’m so happy for you.”

“Thanks. I’m happy too. Just knowing that what I experience is something other people do too is really helpful. I can’t fix it, because it’s not broken. It’s just how I’m wired.”

“Right. I’m glad you see it now. You were never broken.”

He nods, but I still see the hesitation in his eyes. He’s holding something back.

“How do you feel now?”

“Different. Less burdened, I guess. But I want to research it more, see if I can understand what triggers that desire in me sometimes.”

“It might not be something you can put your finger on. Attraction is chemical.”

“But what if I—” He shakes his head, abruptly cutting himself off.

“Hey.” I put my hand on his thigh. “You know you can say anything to me.”

“I know.” He’s quiet for several moments, picking at the cuticle on his thumb. “I don’t want to be the only one who’s alone.”

“What?”

Jerr lifts his gaze. “Someday you’ll find someone. The other guys already have. I don’t want to be the weird single guy hanging around all the couples. I want to understand what makes me tick so I know what I have to offer someone.”

My jaw almost drops. He really doesn’t see me as an option at all, and I’m not sure how to get us there without blurting it out, which, again, I know how he’ll react.

He’ll think it’s in response to this conversation we’re having right now, and that I feel sorry for him.

He can’t see that my whole world revolves around him.

“I don’t see that happening. I don’t even date, Jerr.”

“But you should.”

I blow out a breath, trying to think my way through this, but all I’ve got is the truth.

“What if I don’t want to?”

Jerr tilts his head.

“What if I’m perfectly happy right now?”

“Well, that’s fine, but you might not be forever.”

“Why are we worried about the future and what may or may not happen?”

“You have a lot to offer someone, Bane.”

At least he can see that. “So do you.”

He shifts, half shrugging. “I want to tell you something, but I’m not sure how to say it or how you’ll take it.”

“Come on, Jerr. You know me. You can say whatever.”

He nods, staring at his hands folded in his lap. I can’t imagine what he could have to say that’s got him so twisted up.

He sucks in a breath and blows it out slowly. “Sometimes, rarely... I mean, just a few times, but it’s definitely happened...”

“Huh?”

Jerryn huffs. “Sorry. Give me a second.”

“Take your time.”

Jerryn shakes out his shoulders and twists his neck back and forth. “Okay. Remember what I said about the gray part of asexuality?”

“Um, yeah, infrequent or short-lived sexual attraction?”

He nods. “Sometimes I do get turned on.” Bright pink splotches burst onto his cheeks and neck as soon as the words are out of his mouth.

I nod, knowing he’s had a few sexual experiences in his life. “Yeah. Of course.”

I can tell from the way he fidgets and avoids eye contact that he has more to say, so I wait.

“What I mean to say is, um, when it happens, it’s gone quickly, and I wonder sometimes if I were more, um, open about it I guess, if it would stay longer.”

“Open about it?”

“Like, if I acknowledged it when it was happening. If I told the person causing it, would it help?”

“Oh, okay. That’s not what you do?”

He shakes his head. “I think I’m afraid to bring it up, and then it’s gone and I’ve disappointed the person.”

“If you’re with the right person that won’t happen.” I can promise him that.

“I’ve never been with the right person. I thought Alec...” His words trail off as he shakes his head. “You know.”

“He wasn’t the guy, Jerr. That’s all.”

“I know, but it’s scary because the only way I’ll know is by telling them.”

“I get that it’s scary, but isn’t it better to know sooner than later if the guy’s not the one?”

“Yeah.” He smiles, but it’s a sad one. “Still scary.”

“I know.”

“You don’t though, not really. You can empathize, but you’ve got everything going for you. You’ve never had to tell someone you’re into that you might disappoint

them.”

“Fair, but I stick by what I said. If they don’t want you as you are, they aren’t the right person. Full stop.”

“Maybe.”

“Jerr.” I scoot a little closer, putting my hand on his cheek so he has to look at me.

“You’re not a disappointment, and it pisses me off to hear you say that about yourself.

You’re amazing. So kind and funny and smart.

You’re generous with your heart and you give it to your friends freely. You’re my best friend for a reason.”

Jerr’s eyes turn glassy as he reaches up and grabs my wrist. “I wish...” He clears his throat, blinking rapidly. “Thank you.”

“I mean every word.”

“I know. I guess I should find it comforting that there are other people like me. Maybe I could date someone like that. Someone who understands, you know?”

I feel my heart sink, but I push it back to ask, “Is that what you want to do? You want to go out there looking for someone?”

If that’s what he wants, then I have to get out of his way.

“No.” He laughs softly. “Not really, but I don’t want to be the reason you don’t.”

“Jerr, I’m a grown man. You’re not keeping me from doing anything I want to do.

Have you ever considered that I’ve had more than my share of dating experiences?

I’m damn near forty-three years old, my first girlfriend was Ashley Elizabeth in the third grade.

My twenties are a blur of faces and people who came and went.

My thirties weren’t much better than that.

I know what’s out there, and I choose to be here at home with you. ”

He nods, his teeth digging into his bottom lip. “That’s fair.”

“You need to get that out of your head. I don’t want you out there dating because of some fear that I’ll abandon you. I would never.” He bites his thumbnail until I gently pull it away. “It’s you and me, Jerr. Always has been, always will be. No matter what.”

He holds my gaze, his eyes full of emotions I can’t quite sort out.

Then he totally shocks me, leaning in and pressing a kiss to my lips.

I freeze, unsure what’s causing this. The first and only time we kissed was nearly twenty years ago, shortly after we met when we were hanging out at a party.

We were drunk and dancing and other people were making out around us.

I let the mood get to me and went in for the kiss, only for Jerryn to panic and run off.

I didn't know why then, but I promised him I wouldn't do that again without his consent, and it was a drunken move.

This time, he most definitely initiated it, but given our charged conversation tonight, I'm not sure what's behind it.

He moves back as quickly as he leaned in, his eyes wide. He opens his mouth to say something, but instead, he gets to his feet and he's heading for the door before I can process everything.

Oh hell no. I get up and hurry across the room, grabbing his arm before he can leave.

"Wait."

"Sorry, sorry." He shakes his head, his eyes squeezed closed. "Sorry."

"Stop saying that. Look at me."

"No. Please, Bane."

"Jerr." I caress his cheek. "Open your eyes."

He exhales in a huff, slowly peeling his eyelids open. "Sorr?—"

I put my fingers over his lips to stop him. "You have nothing to be sorry for. Want to tell me what's going on though? 'Cause I'm really damn confused."

He swallows hard, his expression completely wrecked. "I just wondered what it..."
He huffs again.

"You wondered what it would be like to kiss me?"

He nods, avoiding my eyes again, but my heart flutters in my chest. He's curious about kissing me? Fuck yeah.

“We can try again. I wasn't expecting it, but if you want to know, it's okay with me.”

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He meets my gaze, his expression softening. “Really?”

“Really.” I brush my thumb across his cheek. “I want to know the answer too.”

He looks nervous, but there’s a glimmer of happiness there now. “You want to kiss me?”

I nod, deciding to be brave with my next statement. “Always have.”

Surprise registers on his face, but he smiles. “I’d like to try. I don’t know if I’ll react the right way.”

“Your way is the right way, Jerr.”

He searches my eyes and his expression softens. “I’ll try to remember that.”

“Do you want to sit down again?”

“Sure.”

Taking his hand in mine, I lead him back to the sofa and sit across from him. His nerves pour off of him, but I know him well enough to recognize it when he’s doing something he doesn’t want to do, and I can tell he definitely wants to do this.

“Want me to take the lead?” I ask and he nods readily.

“Please.”

My nerves kick in finally. I have permission to do the thing I've wanted to do a million times over the years. I want to make it good for him, comfortable, so maybe if I'm lucky, he'll want to do it again.

I start with my hand on his neck, gently pulling him toward me to close the space between us.

He shuts his eyes and parts his lips, inviting me without words, and I press our lips together.

As much as I want to explore his mouth, I keep it pretty chill, dotting his soft lips with sweet kisses, noting his reaction and body language.

Then the moment happens when he lets go and relaxes into me, his hands moving to my thighs as he opens his mouth slightly. I flick my tongue over his lips and his breath hitches as his fingers scratch against my pajama pants.

I slide my hand from his neck into his hair, smiling into the kiss. His hair is soft, just like his skin, and his kiss, though tentative, is the sweetest there is.

He pulls back abruptly, gazing at me with flushed cheeks. Is he about to freak out?

"Kiss me the way you kiss other people," he says, surprising me. "You're being gentle."

"Who says I'm not always gentle?"

"I've seen you kiss." He licks his lips, the action drawing my eyes. "Kiss me like that."

"Say less."

I pull him close again, claiming his mouth without the brakes in place. Jerryn drapes his arms over my shoulders, scooting in until his chest almost touches mine, so I bravely put my hands on his ass and tug him up until he's on my lap.

He makes a whimpering noise but doesn't try to get away. No, instead he relaxes into me, opening his mouth. I seek out his tongue and lick it, finally tasting the man I've dreamed about most of my adult life.

My dick comes to life, and as much as I want to grind against him, I keep enough space between us to avoid that. I'm not pursuing sexual release, and I don't want him to think for even a second that I am. I'm simply enjoying his kiss and the feeling of his body in my arms.

But then he shifts, grinding against me for a second, and his breath hitches again as he tangles his fingers in my hair. I don't know where he's taking us, but I'm damn sure along for the ride.

His hands roam down my back and up again until he moves them to my chest where he squeezes my pec muscles.

"Bane," he whispers into the kiss.

"Yeah, babe?"

He tilts his head back, breaking the kiss but silently offering his neck to me. I kiss along the column of his throat, sucking briefly on his prominent Adam's apple before nipping the edge of his jaw.

"Oh," he moans. "Wow."

"What's going on?"

He shakes his head, burying his face in the crook of my neck.

I hold him close, rubbing his back and letting him process what just happened.

My dick is so fucking hard right now, but I don't want him to know that.

Unfortunately, he wraps himself around me like an octopus, so there's no way he can't feel it.

He doesn't move away though. Doesn't panic.

Just lies against me, letting me hold him.

We stay like that for several minutes, just breathing and holding on to each other. I don't know what he's thinking or how I'll get him to tell me, but this is the best night ever. How we got here is a mystery to me, but I'll take it.

He lifts his head a few moments later, smiling sweetly at me as he searches my eyes. "That felt good."

I nod. "Hell yeah, it did."

"You liked it." It's not a question. "I felt you."

"Yep. Kissing you was hot."

He looks surprised by my statement, but he's still smiling. "I wondered if we had that kind of chemistry between us. I needed to know."

"How did it feel for you?"

His smile fades as his cheeks bloom pink once more. “Really nice. I can’t remember the last time I kissed anyone, but I’m sure it was never like that. Maybe because you know me so well. You were careful and respectful.”

“You deserve that.”

His teeth find his bottom lip again, but only briefly. “I have some stuff on my mind that I’m not ready to talk about yet.”

“Okay. I’m here when you’re ready.”

He nods, exhaling slowly. “One thing though.”

“Sure.”

He clears his throat. “Would you, um, ever...” He scrunches his nose and blinks a few times.

“What?”

“Would you do it again? I mean, did you like it enough to do more of it?”

“Would I kiss you again?”

Jerryn nods.

“Anytime you want, Jerr. I’d happily kiss you again.”

My answer doesn’t seem to make him happy.

“Even if it doesn’t lead to more? I don’t want to leave you hanging all the time, but I

don't know if I can?—”

“Hey. I don't have any expectations of anything. I certainly didn't see a kiss coming tonight, and you know I would never push you.”

“I know. That's my concern.”

“I don't get it.”

“I'm worried you'll put my needs before yours and eventually resent me for that. Which I totally get. Kissing without anything else is probably annoying after a while.”

While I listen to him, I decide the only good response is a truthful one. “I'm not gonna lie and say I wasn't turned on. I was. You turn me on, Jerr.”

His breath hitches as he listens.

“But I respect you and where you're at. I can handle myself.”

Jerryn nods, looking down at his hands. “I liked it too. A lot.”

“Good.”

“And if it's okay, I think I want to try it again.”

“Ball's in your court, Jerr.”

“Okay.”

“Okay.”

He exhales slowly, glancing around the room. "I think I'll go to bed now."

"Do you want to stay? We can cuddle."

"I want to, but I think it's better if I don't. I have a lot of things going on in my head now."

"I get it." I pull his hand into mine. "But remember something: I'm your best friend, first and foremost. If you wake up and decide kissing me is a bad idea, you can tell me. We can handle that together."

"Thanks."

He climbs off my lap, smiling as he runs a hand through his hair. I'm waiting for him to say something, but instead he bends down and kisses my cheek.

"See you in the morning."

"Night, Jerr."

Once he's gone, I fall back against the couch cushions.

I don't know what was happening in his head that led him to kiss me, but I'm sure not mad about it.

Maybe he can see me as an option, and all I have to do is keep proving to him that I'm the guy.

I can play the long game. I've already been at it for years, and now that I know Jerryn is the only one for me, I'm motivated to show him the same.

I click the TV off and head to bed, even though it's far earlier than I normally hit the sheets. I'll scroll on my phone until I get tired, even though my thoughts are stuck on Jerr and what he's feeling just across the hall from me.

I hope he liked the kiss as much as he said he did, and I really hope he wants to do it again.

It felt so damn nice to have him in my arms like that.

I could definitely get used to it. All I can do now is hope Jerryn wakes up tomorrow without regrets and is still interested in pursuing more kisses with me.

Then I can woo him, get him to see I'm the one he's been waiting for, and level up our relationship.

If that happens, I'll be the luckiest man alive.

FIFTEEN

JERRYYN

I can't believe what just happened.

As I slowly undress, I replay the moment my brain decided that kissing Bane was a good idea. I panicked, of course, but Bane, being the amazing person he is, talked me down, and then... A smile tugs at my lips. And then he kissed me again. A real kiss. My favorite kind of kiss.

I climb into bed, aware of my still tingling lips. Kissing is the one intimate activity that has always been nice for me, but unfortunately, it generally leads to other things I wasn't ready for. But not with Bane. He even said he'd kiss me again.

“ Always have .”

Did he really say that or is my brain making up scenarios I wish were true? Is there a chance Bane could want me the way I am? I shake my head, blowing out a breath. I need to not get ahead of myself. Just because he was willing to kiss me doesn't mean he'd like a life with a lukewarm partner.

Except there was that moment, albeit brief, when I felt things I haven't in a very long time.

My stomach fluttered and my dick took notice.

It was gone too quickly, but it was there—the twinge of desire.

I wish I knew how to get it to stick around so I could see what happens next.

I don't want to have sex feeling nothing ever again.

Letting a guy touch me, even fuck me, without really feeling attraction isn't something I'm willing to keep doing. I'd rather stay celibate.

But the desire was there. I've learned to take note of those fleeting moments, desperate to hold on to them, but they elude me, like fireflies in the wind.

Part of me really wanted to stay in Bane's room and cuddle and kiss him, but I needed to process my emotions. He's my best friend, and if we do anything we regret it could make things hard. I know I'd never lose him, and we'd figure things out, but who the hell wants to go through that?

I roll onto my side, clutching a pillow to my chest, and grab my phone. I search a popular forum for information on being gray-ace and demi, and actually find a very active one. As I scroll, reading through questions and situations, one in particular grabs my attention.

My crush is gray-ace. I'm allosexual. Can we make it work?

I click to expand and read the full situation. A guy has a budding crush on a coworker who seems to return interest, but they've opened up and told him about their sexuality and how difficult dating can be. Sounds familiar.

There are hundreds of responses, and I read through them all. The advice varies from "it depends" to "talk about it with them" but there's a longer response that catches my eye.

The person commenting says it can work because it's their life.

They've been happily married to an ace person for six years and their life together is amazing.

The person lists all the intimate ways they show love and affection outside of the bedroom, but then they elaborate, discussing how they found a happy place that works for both of them sexually.

They go on to say that being ace or on that spectrum doesn't mean it's impossible. It's just different, and when you love someone, different is still good.

My throat tightens as I read that last part again. Could Bane ever feel that way about me romantically? I know he accepts me completely as friends, but could there be more, or am I just setting us both up for a huge letdown?

I'm pretty sure there's only one way to find out, but I don't know if I'm brave enough to explore it.

I can either find out or wonder for the rest of my life.

I put my phone on the nightstand and close my eyes, but my thoughts are still swirling.

I have a decision to make: Play it safe or take a chance with my best friend.

If he liked kissing me once, could he like it for good?

I know he'd be patient with me if we decided to try for more, but could he be happy if the sex was infrequent?

I shake my head. Just thinking about the possibility of sex with Bane is startling for me.

It's not that I've never imagined what he's like in bed, I've just never imagined what he'd be like with me.

Maybe I've never let myself, or maybe I just wasn't interested in that possibility until now.

I still don't know what made me decide to kiss him.

Maybe it was talking to Dylan, or maybe I just needed to know how it would feel and if I would like it or want more.

Or maybe it's because Bane is the safest person I know.

He's the only person who knows about my struggles with dating and sex.

Our friends wonder why we're not romantic, but I never felt I could open up and tell them because I didn't quite understand it myself.

I take a deep breath and think about Bane being my boyfriend.

How would things change? He's already so sweet to me.

We already spend all our time together and we cuddle.

He makes coffee for me and lets me pick the movies we watch.

He makes my birthday special, and he even set up a night out at a museum for me.

I guess that's why neither of us feel like we're missing out by not dating.

What guy would treat me better than Bane does?

And if he says he's happy not having sex with other people, I should believe him.

So the unanswered question is, could he be happy with me long term?

Could I make him happy and show him how incredible he is without feeling constantly horny?

How many times I've wished I had Indy's libido.

He's all over Salem all the time, and doesn't show any signs of slowing down.

But I'm not Indy. I'm me, and that's the reality I need to deal with.

My phone buzzes on the nightstand, and I grab it, smiling when I see a text from Bane. It's a link to an article about the release of a video game we've been waiting eight months for.

Bane: The article says it's releasing next month!

Me: Finally!

Bane: Can't wait.

I smile at my phone.

Me: Same.

Bane: You good?

Me: I am. Just thinking.

Bane: Here if you need me. Always.

Me: I always need you, but not right now. I'm good.

Bane: Cool. Sweet dreams, Jerr.

Me: Night, Bane.

I set my phone down and close my eyes again as thoughts of Bane kissing me dance in my head.

After my shower, I throw on a pair of sweats and a t-shirt and head next door to Bane's room.

I rap on the door before opening it, just to announce my presence.

His room is still quiet and dark, with the drapes in his bedroom drawn.

I walk down the hall and find him tangled in his bedding, still asleep.

I've often admired Bane's physique and his stunning features, and when he's sleeping, he looks like he could be a painting.

His wild curls are splayed across his pillow, his broad chest rising and falling softly with his breathing, and his face...

that incredible face. Even with his soulful brown eyes closed, he's still impressive.

His features fit his face perfectly, creating a nice symmetry.

I've watched people trip over themselves for years to get his attention.

I reach out and very lightly dot my fingers down his chest. He doesn't stir at all, so I tug the blanket down just a little to reveal his belly and the trail of hair that runs down from his belly button.

As I gaze at his sleeping form, I focus on my own thoughts.

Do I want to see more of his body? Drag the blankets off and really look at him? Do I want to touch him?

Yes .

The thought is very clear. What isn't clear is what my motives are. Am I just curious, or do I actually want to touch Bane in an intimate way?

I huff out a breath, which does get a response from Bane.

"Are you just gonna stand there or are you getting in?" he asks without opening his eyes.

I laugh softly. "Getting in bed?"

"Yeah." He stirs, stretching slightly. "What time is it?"

"Almost ten."

"Shit." He peels one eye open. "I guess that means I should get up."

“If you want to.”

Bane scrubs a hand down his face before running it through his hair. “I could eat.”

“I could make you a bagel.”

He opens both eyes and smiles. “Let’s go to the coffee shop down the block from Moby’s. You like their raspberry Danish.”

“I do.”

Bane sits up, whipping the blankets off, revealing that not only is he naked, but he has an erection.

“Whoops.” He grabs the blanket again, laughing. “Forgot I got hot last night.”

I’m aware of my cheeks heating, and I swallow hard. It’s not that I haven’t seen Bane naked before. I have. Lots of times, but I’ve never seen him hard. I know a lot of guys wake up with hard-ons, and it’s completely normal, but it was quite a sight.

“You okay?” Bane asks.

“Yes.” I chew on my bottom lip. “Um, maybe it’s weird, but can I—” I stop myself, shaking my head. No. That’s definitely weird.

“Can you what?” Bane’s tone softens. “Do you want to see me?”

I barely nod, hoping he notices and doesn’t make me say the word.

“It’s okay with me.” He kicks the blankets off, revealing his body again.

My breath hitches as my eyes roam from his face, down his torso, and between his legs.

His cock is still hard, almost completely straight, but it leans toward his belly.

His pubic hair is trimmed short, which makes it easy for my eyes to focus on what he's got.

It's not huge, which is nice, but it's got a thickness to it that has me wondering funny things. It bounces as I stare at it.

"Whatcha thinking, Jerr?"

"I'm not sure yet."

Bane reaches for my hand, and I give it to him, letting him pull me closer. "That's okay."

I sit on the edge of the bed, close enough that I can smell his lingering cologne and the familiar scent of his detergent clinging to his skin.

I let my eyes roam across his body again, from his feet back to his face, but they keep going to his dick.

When I focus on my body's response, I realize I feel... warm. Curious. Interested.

But not horny.

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“Can I...” My stomach reacts to the question before I ask it, sending a little flutter rippling through me.

“Whatever you want, Jerr.”

I nod, tentatively touching his chest. I brush my hand over his soft skin and the light hair he has.

It feels nice. He’s lean but not too muscular.

That’s why his hugs are so good. When I venture a glance at his face, he’s watching me with a soft smile, but there’s something in his eyes I haven’t seen before and couldn’t begin to define.

Something that makes my breath hitch and my stomach flutter again.

“Touch anything you want,” he says. “If you’re curious, it’s okay with me.”

I could touch his dick if I wanted to. He’s giving me permission. But then what? I’m not a virgin—it’s not like I’ve never touched one—but I’ve never touched Bane’s .

I move my hand lower, waiting to see if I’ll be bold enough to do it, but I stop at his hip bone. He’s still watching me, his eyes half-closed.

“I kind of want to,” I admit.

“If you’re not ready, that’s okay.” He rubs my arm. “I got time.” He sits up and leans

in to kiss my cheek. “Did you sleep well?”

I nod, removing my hand from his body. “Mostly. You?”

“I did.”

“Can I ask you something?”

“You already know the answer to that.”

I laugh softly. “Do you always have that when you wake up?”

He nods. “Yeah. It’s just a reaction. You never do?”

“I used to more often when I was younger, but not often nowadays. I wasn’t horny when it would happen though. It just did.”

“Yeah. Same.”

“So you weren’t horny just now?”

His brow creases for a second. “Not at first.”

I blink, searching for the meaning of his reply. “But then...?”

“But then you looked at me and touched me.”

“Oh.”

“Does that make you uncomfortable?”

I shake my head. “No. Confused, but not uncomfortable.”

“Confused about what?”

I shrug, avoiding his eyes.

“Come on, Jerr. I’ve told you a thousand times that you’re hot.

You know you are from how other guys react to you.

I might be your best friend, but I still have eyes.

Plus, I have the added bonus of knowing how amazing you are as a person in addition to your face.

Of course I’d be turned on with you touching me. ”

I nod, soaking his words in. I’ve never been insecure about my looks, just what I have to offer, but Bane telling me I turn him on, that that’s even possible, is new.

“You said something last night.”

“What did I say?” he asks, rubbing my arm.

“When I asked if you wanted to kiss me, you said?—”

“Always have.” His voice is strong and confident as he finishes my sentence. “I kissed you once before. We were still kids, but I wanted to then, and I still want to now.”

“How come you never have?”

“You know why, Jerr.”

I shake my head. “No, I don’t. Can you tell me?”

He scoots a little closer, until his knee is touching my thigh. “Because the last thing you needed was your best friend pressuring you or making you feel the way other guys do. I didn’t think you’d ever want that from me, so I buried it.”

His answer bounces around my head. I try to find a way that it makes sense, but it doesn’t. “That can’t be true.”

“Yeah, it can.” Bane takes my hand in his, pressing it to his chest. “I think you’re hot, Jerr. I find you attractive, and it goes far beyond your looks. I didn’t kiss you last night for any reason other than because I wanted to. I don’t lie to you, and I won’t start now.”

“But...” I stop talking, reeling from his admission. “You never...” I look up at him. “Is that true?”

He nods. “I wanted to tell you, but it never seemed like the right time. Eventually, I tucked it away and focused on being the best friend I could be to you, but every time you came home disappointed by some douche who didn’t understand you, I wanted to pull you into my arms and kiss it away.”

It takes me a second to process that as another question bubbles up. “Did you want more than kissing?”

Bane frowns, shrugging.

“Tell me the truth.”

He bites his bottom lip for a second before nodding. “Yeah. I used to when we were younger and I was a horndog all the time.”

“And now?”

He searches my eyes for so long I wonder if he’s about to tell me he doesn’t see me that way. Or he doesn’t want to go there, knowing my limitations. I get it.

“It’s okay if you don’t. I totally understand.”

“Don’t put words in my mouth, Jerr.” He tickles my palm with his index finger. “I hesitated because I don’t want you to feel weird around me. I’d hate it if you felt pressured.”

“What are you saying, Bane?”

“I’m still attracted to you.”

His voice is soft when he says it, like he’s worried I’ll freak out.

“Even knowing how I am?”

He nods. “There’s nothing about you that isn’t good.”

My eyes sting a little. “But what if I can’t...” I can’t bring myself to finish the sentence.

“You have a lot to offer. More than you give yourself credit for.” He scoots even closer. “Jerr, I know you can’t see it, because so many people have said shitty things, but I’m not them. I’ve known you your whole adult life, and I think you’re amazing.”

He squeezes my hand, and I can tell from the tension in his expression that he's about to say something big.

"I stopped dating because I didn't need to anymore. You're the only person I want to spend my free time with."

"Bane..."

"And honestly, what we have is better than anything I've had with anyone I've dated before. Jerr..." He exhales slowly. "I want to date you."

"What?"

"I can be the guy, Jerr. I know I can. If you gave me a chance, you'd see that what we have is incredible."

You could stop looking for a guy who understands you, because you already have him.

If you don't feel that way about me, it's okay.

I can handle it, but after last night, I figured I'd better get around to telling you."

His words don't make any damn sense to me. Am I dreaming? Or is this some kind of pity move on his part? Has he got so desperate that I seem like a good idea? There's just no way a guy as incredible as Bane would want me. Not really.

"Jerr?"

"I don't know what to say."

Bane nods, his brow creased. "Because you don't see me that way?"

I choke out a laugh. "Are you serious right now?" I get to my feet, pacing a circle in front of the bed. "Bane... My head is swimming."

"Come here."

I shake my head, crossing my arms over my chest. "I'm confused."

"Jerr, come here." He extends his arm. "Let's talk it out."

Nodding, I take his hand and let him pull me back onto his bed.

"Which part is messing with you?"

"All of it. You're telling me, with a straight face, that you're attracted to me and romantically interested? Is this real life?"

Bane smiles. "I should have said something sooner, but I was afraid."

"Afraid of me?"

"No. Afraid of ruining what we have. I know dating has been hard for you, and I never wanted you to feel weird around me." He brushes his fingers over my cheek. "But a couple of weeks ago, I had a wake-up call."

"Huh?"

"When Alec called you, I got scared. What if he wanted a second chance and you gave him one? Ridley had a Come to Jesus talk with me, and I realized he was right. If I wanted a shot with you, I had to take it."

“When were you going to?”

He chuckles. “I did. The museum and dinner. Dinner after you got back from your seminar. I have more plans too. Farmer’s market on Sunday before it closes for the season so we can get those oatmeal cookies you love.

Driving up the coast in a few weeks to see the leaves changing colors.

I thought we’d try that pottery painting place you always talk about. ”

I don’t say anything, I just listen to his words.

“But you didn’t see it as a date because we always do stuff like that, don’t we? I hold the doors open for you. I pay attention to the things you like because it matters to me, and it always has. I’ve been trying to figure out how to romance you, Jerr, and make you see me in a different light.”

I scoff, almost in disbelief.

“I’ll still be your best friend, but I want to be so much more.”

“You... you really want to date me?”

“I do, yeah.”

“But you know about me.”

He nods. “Sure do. Still want to date you.”

“What if I can’t make you happy?”

“You already make me happy, Jerr.” He squeezes my hand. “My favorite thing is you in my arms, in my bed. Kissing you last night was incredible. I’m good with whatever you can offer. I’m good if things stay like they are. Though kissing would be a bonus. That was really nice.”

This is impossible. Bane is a dream come true, and he wants me? Even knowing my limitations?

“If you need time to think, we’ve got plenty of that.”

I’m stunned to the point of speechlessness. Never in a million years could I have seen this coming. Bane wants me?

“Hey,” he says softly. “You’re freaking out.”

I nod, swallowing hard.

“Because?”

I just stare at him, wide-eyed.

Bane exhales slowly. “Because you don’t feel that way or because you’re surprised?”

Okay, that helps. Give me options. “Surprised.”

“I knew you would be. I guess that means I’ve done a good job of not being a creep.”

I nod.

“I should’ve told you sooner. I should’ve been brave enough, but I hope the saying is true: Better late than never.”

A question finally forms. “Are you sure? Have you really thought this through? I’m not like other guys you’ve dated.”

He laughs softly. “I haven’t thought about anything else in years. Are you ready for some more truth?”

I shrug, but say, “Let’s try.”

“I’ve been attracted to you since day one. In that English Lit class sitting three seats away from you, I was so excited when we got put in that working group together. I wanted to get to know you, and I definitely wanted to date you.”

“Bane...”

“But it was clear early on that you didn’t respond the same way.

I learned why eventually, and I was happy enough to be friends with you.

As our relationship grew, I knew I wasn’t worthy of you.

I was such an ass when I was younger. I knew you couldn’t see me as an option the way I was, but I’ve grown up, Jerr.

I know what’s important now and what isn’t. ”

“Sex is important.”

“ Intimacy is important, and we have that. Do you know how many times the guys have asked why we’re not dating? They can see what we have.”

I remember the recent questioning I got too.

“I wasn’t going to say anything,” Bane continues. “I made myself happy with the way things are, because I get to spend all my time with you. I get to hold you sometimes, and I never wanted you to feel uncomfortable around me if you didn’t feel the same way.”

“Alec calling changed your mind?”

“Yep. I was so damn jealous I didn’t know what to do with myself. The night you met with him, I was fucking wreck. I thought I might’ve lost my chance, and I knew if he hurt you again...” Bane shakes his head. “Wouldn’t be good.”

“I had no idea.”

“I know, and that pisses me off too. You couldn’t see how I felt about you because of all the bullshit other people have planted in your head.

Then you came in here last night and you kissed me, and I’ve never been happier, even though I didn’t know what caused it or if you’d ever want to again.

If it was the only kiss we ever shared, it would’ve been enough. ”

His words still don’t make any sense, but maybe they don’t have to. I can choose to believe him. He’s never lied to me, so why would he start with something as major as this?

I’m torn between wanting to climb into his arms and kiss him and wanting to run away to process all this alone.

Bane smiles, tilting my head back with a finger under my chin. “Take your time, Jerr. I’ve waited twenty years. I can wait longer.”

I nod because it's all I can manage.

"I'm gonna take a shower, and then if you still want to, we can grab breakfast before we go to Moby's."

I nod, mumbling, "Okay."

"You're welcome to stay here if you want."

Any other day, I'd lie back in his bed and play games or scroll on my phone, waiting for him to shower and change. I wouldn't be thinking about what he looks like naked or what it would feel like to join him in the shower. I would wait for him.

"I'll wait. I'll change clothes and then I'll wait."

"Or you can wait and then I'll go back to your room with you while you change."

"That works too."

Bane leans in, and my breath hitches as his lips brush my cheek. I thought he might kiss me on the lips again, but he doesn't. As he moves back, I realize I wish he had.

"The ball is still in your court, Jerr."

He slides out of bed, and I allow myself to look at his body as he walks to the bathroom.

His body is so nice. His ass is full and toned, as are his thighs.

He has a tattoo of a phoenix on his shoulder that I've seen a thousand times, but right now everything about him feels familiar, but new at the same time.

He disappears into the bathroom, leaving me drowning in my thoughts. Bane wants to date me. A giddy feeling rises in my chest, but I'm terrified at the same time. He's my best friend, and a dream come true, but what if I'm not enough? What if he needs more? Then what happens?

I flop back in his bed and stare at the ceiling, completely lost in thought. I never thought this would be an option. Now that it is, I have no idea what to do, and the person I would talk it out with is a pivotal part of it.

Can I trust him to really know what he wants? Or will we ruin the best thing that's ever happened to me? Is there a safer way to find out than just jumping in the deep end?

SIXTEEN

BANE

Walking down the sidewalk to the coffee shop with Jerryn feels the same as it does most days.

Almost. There's a new current between us, an intriguing tension waiting to burst open.

I know him well enough to know exactly what he's thinking.

He's playing out every possible way his mind can come up with that this could go between us, but he doesn't know I've already done that.

Years ago. I have to remember there's nothing that can go wrong because me and Jerr will always work through any challenge.

A jogger moves past us, slightly bumping into Jerr and apologizing with a friendly wave as they continue on, but the interaction pushed my best friend right into my arms. He laughs, balancing himself with his hands on my shoulders, then his smile fades as he searches my eyes.

I wish he knew how gorgeous he is. If he could see himself through my eyes, he'd know the morning light catches the light brown flecks in his hazel-green eyes, and that his smile is my favorite thing in the world.

He'd know the cuddle sessions we have are just as much for me as they are for him.

He'd know no one else has ever stood a chance of winning my heart since the day I met him.

He runs his tongue across his bottom lip as he presses forward just a bit until my back is against the building behind me. Neither of us speak, we almost don't need to anymore, but I am curious about where he's landing with all this. Since he hasn't moved away from me yet, I'm pretty damn hopeful.

I want to kiss him. More than I want my next breath.

Jerryn's eyes move from mine down to my mouth and back up again, then he reaches up and plays with a tendril of my hair, something he often does when we're lounging on my couch.

"I'm scared," he whispers.

"Jerr—"

He puts a finger over my lips to quiet me. "I'm scared, but I'm also really excited. I didn't think there was any way you'd ever..." His words trail off as he shakes his head.

I move his finger off my mouth. "Because of sex or something else?"

"Sex. I know we're compatible otherwise, but this feels like a mountain I don't know how to climb."

"You're not climbing alone." I slide my hands around his waist. "So you've thought about us together?"

He nods, smiling softly. “How could I not? You’re my best friend and such an incredible person. I just figured it was a silly thought. Or that you’d be settling.”

“Hey.” I shake my head. “You’re not a last resort. You’ve been my first choice for a long-ass time, but I wasn’t good enough for you before.”

Jerryn scoffs. “That doesn’t even make sense.”

“It does. I didn’t have my priorities right. Or maybe I fucked around so much to distract myself from wanting you.”

His brow creases. “Hearing you say stuff like that doesn’t seem real. It feels like a dream where I’m a normal person who gets to have a guy like you.”

“First of all, you are a normal person, and second, you have to get me off that pedestal. You know me better than anyone, including my flaws. As far as I’m concerned, I’m still gonna be busting my ass to deserve you if you give me a shot.”

His eyes turn glassy. “That’s not the problem, Bane. I’m trying to figure out how I deserve you. I don’t know how to keep you happy.”

I cup his face. “You have to see that you already do. I have the life I want with you, Jerr. I just want to stop pretending my feelings are only platonic. We can figure out the rest.”

He nods, blinking away the unshed tears. “I’m still scared, but I want to try.”

Hearing the words feels like taking a gulp of air after almost drowning. “You do?”

“I do. I wouldn’t let myself hope for anything between us. It just seemed useless, so I’m still surprised, but happily surprised.”

“Nothing has to change, and if you want it to, we can go slow.”

His cheeks pinken slightly. “Can I kiss you?”

I blow out a breath. “Absolutely.”

Jerryn steps a little closer, pressing his chest to mine, and closes his eyes as he leans in to kiss me. I feel like a teenager again, giddy with excitement that my crush likes me back. But this isn’t just a passing crush. This is Jerryn.

His kiss is tentative and chaste, but he lingers, reaching up to touch my neck. I’m expecting him to back away quickly, so it catches me by surprise when his lips part and his tongue dances along the seam of my lips.

I open up to him, and my whole body reacts to the deepening kiss.

He has no idea that he turns me on as much as he does, or how many times I’ve stopped myself from fantasizing about him.

It took all of my twenties to quit thinking of him while I jerked off, then part of my thirties to stop thinking about him that way.

The past ten years have been me pushing away thoughts like that, but now here he is, pressed against me and kissing me like we’re alone.

I hear a wolf whistle that makes Jerryn giggle and break the kiss. I look up to see a guy who just walked past us and I laugh too.

“If Ridley were here, he’d tell us to get a room,” Jerryn says.

“He would.”

He takes a small step back, chewing on his bottom lip. “I’m a little less scared now.”

“Good.”

“We should get going.”

“Yeah.” As we walk on, I offer my hand. Jerryn looks at it, then up at my face, then, smiling, he takes my hand.

This works for me. I’m so done chasing after people and experiences that inevitably fall flat.

I’m focusing on the one person I’ve always wanted, and whatever our relationship looks like is good enough for me.

After grabbing our coffee and pastries, we walk across the street to the park and sit on a bench to eat. It’s a cool morning, as fall is quickly approaching, but it’s my favorite season. Winter is coming, and that means lots of cuddles.

Jerryn’s talking about his favorite tree in the park, and how he can’t wait to see the leaves change, and I’m eating up every word, his soft smile, the joyful lilt in his voice. He’s right—getting the chance to love him, openly love him, feels like a dream. If it is, I hope I never wake up.

After a while he looks at his watch. “We should go.”

I nod, taking his empty cup and napkins from him. “We should.”

I take our trash to the bin and toss it in, while Jerryn hovers behind me. When I turn to face him, he has his thinking face on.

“What’s going on, Jerr?”

“Uh, just wondering if we should tell the guys.”

I nod, grabbing his hand. “Did you decide?”

He shakes his head. “What do you think?”

“I’d love to. They’re our closest friends and they’d be really happy for us. Plus, I just want to brag on you.”

He chuckles, dragging a hand through his hair. “Maybe I want to brag on you too.”

“I’m good with that.” I step closer, brushing my nose against his cheek. “Whatever makes you feel comfortable.”

“What you want matters too.”

“I know.”

Jerryn blows out a breath and straightens his shoulders. “I think we can tell them, but maybe not, like, a big announcement. Just as it comes up.”

“That works.”

“Okay.”

He takes my hand again and we finish our walk to Moby’s.

When we enter, the bar is quiet, the chairs still stacked on tables, but there’s a light on and low voices coming from the hallway.

I'm sure it's Lowen and Oakley. Lowen is usually the first one here to make sure all the schedules and behind-the-scenes stuff is set up.

Before we get too far, the front door opens and Indy walks in, his arm draped around Salem. Right behind them are Ridley and Wren. The chef kisses his man's cheek before waving and heading to the kitchen. Kit will be in shortly, after he finishes walking Stewart to the university.

Lowen and Oakley join us. Oakley greets us and tells Lowen he loves him before he heads out to go cover his projects.

"I'm glad you're all here." Lowen frowns. "Oh. Kit's not."

"He'll be here in a few," Indy says. "Is something up?"

"Nothing major," Lowen says. "But we got an email that the university is hosting a job fair for students looking for part-time hours while they work towards their degree. We were specifically invited to attend."

"Which means we should revisit our scheduling," Ridley says.

"Exactly." Lowen nods. "We all know how crazy it's about to get. If last year is any indication, we'll be run into the ground by summer break. We should really consider hiring some additional servers."

"And an extra bartender," Salem says. "Florian and Jax could use some relief too. At least an additional barback."

Lowen nods again, spreading papers over the bar top. "I worked on our budget this morning. Our profits are much higher than we expected when we first did our projections, so we can afford it without affecting our operating budget."

“How many people and what positions?” Indy asks.

“I was thinking one dishwasher and three servers,” Lowen says. “But if we need a barback we can work that in.”

“I agree with Salem,” Jerryn says. “I think we need an additional bartender during the week to give Florian and Jax time off, plus a barback.”

Lowen nods, scrawling notes on his papers.

“So for the university job fair, I think we post the barback and server positions. Those have the most flexible hours for students. For the bartender, we can post on the industry job boards, and for the dishwasher position, we’ve had good luck posting locally in town.”

“Works for me,” Indy says.

“I think Florian might know some people interested in the bartender position,” I say. “He mentioned it a couple of weeks ago.”

“Even better.” Lowen writes that down too. “Salem, are you up for being the face of Moby’s again?”

“Sure thing.”

“I’ll go too,” Indy says, gazing at his man. “When is it?”

“Two weeks from tomorrow. I’ll reply to the school and let them know to count us in and then I’ll forward any new details to you both.”

“Perfect,” Indy says, wrapping his arm around Salem as they walk off.

Ridley heads to the bar to pour himself a glass of ice water, and as Jerryn goes to the patio to unstack chairs, I pause to chat with Ridley.

“Hey, man.” Ridley bites down on a piece of ice. “What’s good?”

“Everything.” I glance at the patio.

“Yeah?” He leans against the counter. “Did you finally decide to shit or get off the pot?”

I laugh. “Kind of. I’m not really sure how it went down, to be honest, but we finally talked.”

His eyes go wide. “And? Don’t leave me hanging, man.”

“I think we’re gonna date.” Just saying the words makes my stomach flutter. “But don’t make a big deal. We said we’d let everyone know as it comes up, but I felt like I needed to tell you since it was your advice that kickstarted me.”

He mimes zipping his lips. “Won’t say a word, but I sure am happy for you.”

“Thanks. We’re taking it slow, but it’s progress.”

“So if the room is rocking, I won’t bother knocking.”

His comment makes me glad Jerryn isn’t close by.

It’s not Ridley’s fault. We joke about sex all the time, and fuck knows there’s plenty of it happening in the house at all times.

I can’t help but wonder if it makes Jerryn uncomfortable sometimes, but if it does, he

never says anything about it.

Maybe he's used to it in a sex-obsessed society, but the last thing I want is our friends thinking of Jerr in a sexual way.

Call me protective, but it is what it is.

"It's not like that, Rid."

Ridley frowns slightly, but he nods. "Sorry. Didn't mean to be crude."

"It's okay, but..." I shrug. It's hard to talk about it without telling things that aren't mine to tell.

"It's cool." He pats my shoulder. "You don't want me talking about your man like that. I get it." He smiles. "No disrespect."

"Thanks," I mumble. "He's private about certain things."

"You don't say? I may have picked up on that in the last twenty years."

"Right."

"No worries, Bane. My lips are sealed. I hope you two feel comfortable and safe being yourselves with us though. All we'd be is happy for you."

"I know that. We both know that. He's just..." I glance over my shoulder. "Let's just say he was surprised to know I have romantic intentions towards him."

Ridley chuckles. "Dude is oblivious, but I'm sure you'll get him there. You going all in now?"

I nod. “And then some.”

“I’m so here for that.” He lifts his hand for a high five, so I slap it.

Jerryn comes in seconds later, walking over to both of us, and from behind, he leans his chin on my shoulder. It’s not something he’s really done before; at least, not in front of other people.

Ridley smiles. “Hey, Jerr. How’s it going?”

“Good.” He steps around to my side and glances at me. “Really good.”

“Glad to hear it. I’m gonna go flirt with my man before he gets too busy. See you, guys.”

“Bye,” Jerryn says while I up-nod.

I turn to face Jerryn. “Full disclosure, I told Ridley, but I asked him to keep it to himself.”

Jerryn nods. “Okay.”

“I hope that was okay. I felt I should because it was his talk with me that got me moving.”

“Of course. It’s your life too. I just meant I didn’t want to hold a family meeting about it.”

I laugh. “Fair.”

“Want to help me with the chairs?”

“Yeah. One sec though. Do you remember a long time ago, we were at happy hour and the guys were making sex jokes. Pretty vulgar ones.”

He nods. “I remember.”

“We talked about it that night. About how you feel when you hear things like that, but if I remember correctly, you sort of blew it off.”

“It doesn’t bother me. I’m used to hearing stuff like that. When I was younger, it made me wonder what it would be like to even think like that, much less to feel like fucking everything that moves.”

“And now? When the guys joke and tease?”

Jerryn shrugs. “I don’t think about it that much. I know it’s how most people experience sex and dating. I find it sort of interesting in a way. Why are you asking?”

“It was just on my mind.”

“Don’t worry about me so much. I’m a big boy. I can take care of myself.”

“I know.”

“But thank you.” He leans in and kisses my cheek. “For caring.”

“Always.”

A pretty smile lights up his face. “What should we do after work?”

“Hang out. Cuddle. Watch something.”

Jerryn nods, still smiling. “Maybe kiss?”

My stomach flutters. “If you want to, I’m all over that.”

“I want to.”

The door opens and Kit enters. “Hey, guys.”

“Hey,” we both answer.

“Anything new?”

“We’re hiring,” Jerryn says. “Lowen has more details.”

“Sweet.” He studies us for a second. “Is that all?”

“For now.” Jerryn winks at me.

Getting through our shift is going to be a test of my patience, but for now, I have to push back my excitement and focus on the job. Jerryn wants to kiss me again, and I can hardly wait.

SEVENTEEN

JERRY

It's nearly closing time when it finally slows down enough for me to think about things with Bane.

He wants to date me. A smile tugs at my lips.

I'm more than a little surprised. All this time, I thought the worst thing I could do was indulge any feelings toward my best friend.

To hear him tell me he's interested, even knowing what he does about me, is truly startling.

There was a time when all I wanted was to be an option for him.

How long ago was that? Ten years? Maybe more.

It was the night I came home after what was supposed to be a weekend at my boyfriend Paul's apartment, but I only made it to Saturday afternoon before the subject of our sex life came up.

It turned into an argument that ended with Paul saying hurtful things and me riding the Link home with tears in my eyes.

I fill two water glasses with ice as the memory replays in my head.

Bane was at home playing a video game when I walked in.

Since he wasn't expecting me, he was butt naked on the couch, but he was so concerned over why I was home early, he didn't pause the game or even bother to cover up as he hurried over to me.

We talked until I fell asleep in his arms. He kept telling me I was a catch for the right guy, and in my heart, I wanted him to be the right guy so badly that it took a whole year before I went out on a date again.

But Bane was a different guy back then. He was using apps and hooking up pretty frequently.

I convinced myself that no matter how I felt about him, I was never gonna be the guy who could make him happy.

Not completely. So I blocked it out, kept him safely in the friend box, and focused on trying to find a suitable partner.

Funny that it led me right back to Bane.

His hands land on my shoulders, squeezing gently. "Hey."

I turn my head slightly. "Hey. Let me drop off these waters."

He nods, releasing me while I take the glasses over to my last table.

They've already paid and are waiting for a car to drive them back to their apartment.

The bar is in shutdown mode as tables get wiped down and tickets are closed out.

Soon we'll stack the chairs on tables and mop the floor.

Ridley is already closing down the patio since no one's out there.

Five customers linger, but Salem is great at shoing them towards the door in a friendly way.

I return to the bar area, where Bane is helping Jax by washing some glasses. He glances up, winking and smiling at me, and my stomach flutters. In less than an hour, we'll be alone in his room. He's gonna kiss me again.

And then... what? I don't know. I know what I'm hoping for, but I don't know if I'll actually be able to execute. Maybe tonight will be one of those times when my body reacts to the action.

I lean on the bar, smiling at Bane. I've never told him about the brief moments when I do feel the things I hear about so much.

My dick gets hard, my body heats, and for those few wonderful minutes, I feel like a regular person.

I told a doctor years ago and he offered me meds.

That was not what I wanted. I wanted to know why I didn't feel it, not how to keep my dick hard.

"Ready to get out of here?" Bane asks.

"Yep."

"Cool."

We walk to the back together to grab our jackets and double check that everything is done. We stayed longer than planned tonight because an unexpected large group came in for dinner. Normally, we stagger the times when everyone leaves, but the guys won't be far behind us.

After a quick round of goodbyes, Bane and I walk out the front door and head towards home. My nerves kick up the closer we get, but I have to remember this is Bane. He's my best friend above all else.

"I want to tell you something."

Bane nods. "I'm all ears."

"You said you wanted me to see you as an option." I slide my hands into the pockets of my jacket. "It's not that I don't—or haven't, I should say. It's because I didn't think there was any way you would..." I stop myself as the words feel like they're tumbling from my mouth.

Bane grabs my hand, squeezing it gently and moving a little closer as we walk. "You can see it? Us as a couple?"

I nod, biting my bottom lip. "I had a crush on you for the longest time back when we were younger."

Bane's smile grows. "No way. You never let on even a little bit."

"What was the point?"

"You outgrew your crush?"

"More like buried it. I think it's been hard to reconcile what my brain wants and what

my body does.”

“I get it.”

“You don’t. When you want to be with someone, you just can. You know you’ll get turned on at the right time and you’ll be able to perform, but I don’t know that. I don’t know if…” I stop myself again, blowing out a slow breath. “I’ll tell you the rest when we get home. I don’t want to out here.”

“No problem.”

Bane pulls me closer, wrapping his arm around my shoulders. It’s something he’s done a thousand times before, but it feels different now. Definitely feels like more.

We arrive at the house a few minutes later, removing our jackets and shoes before heading straight up to Bane’s room. I don’t know why we mostly hang in his space. Maybe because he invested more in his gaming setup, or maybe it’s because it smells like him—spicy and sexy.

“Want some hot chocolate?” he asks, already on his way to the kitchenette. He knows the answer.

“Yes, please.”

“Get comfy. I’ll be right over.”

I head to his couch, sinking into the soft, deep cushions. Lowen picked out amazing furniture for us to choose from, and Bane chose this cream chenille sectional, so it’s incredibly soft and comfortable enough to sleep on. I know, because we have, several times.

He's back in a minute, tugging his shirt over his head and tossing it onto the back of the couch.

Instead of looking away like I normally do, I keep my gaze on him, taking in his lean muscles, the dark brown disks of his nipples, and the light dusting of brown hair on his chest down his stomach and below the waistline of his jeans.

He's not looking at me yet, as he runs his fingers through his curly hair, but then he lifts his head and focuses his sultry gaze on me. My stomach flutters a little, and just as I open my mouth to confess more truths, the electric kettle clicks.

Bane smiles. "Be right back."

He disappears around the corner and I sigh, leaning back.

When he comes back, I'm gonna be brave enough to tell him things I've kept to myself for a very long time.

I didn't think it was important to tell him, since it never led to anything interesting, but if we're really gonna move from friendship to romance, he should know.

He returns with two mugs of steamy chocolate goodness, handing me one as he sinks onto the couch right beside me. I blow into my mug, giving myself a few more seconds to compose my thoughts, and Bane, because he knows me so well, just waits quietly.

"So the reason asexual never fully resonated with me... Wait. I should maybe give some context."

"Start wherever, Jerr. I'll catch up."

I nod, clutching my mug. “Right. Okay. I’ve never told you this because... I don’t know, it didn’t feel like it mattered, but now I think it kind of might.”

“Okay.”

“Sometimes, in rare situations, I do feel sexually attracted to something. Or someone, I guess.”

His eyes widen briefly with surprise, but then he nods. “No, you haven’t told me that. I thought it was never there.”

“It’s not frequent, but it does happen. Um, it happened when you kissed me.”

“It did?”

I nod, feeling the lump in my throat growing. “But it’s gone too quickly. I don’t know how to make it stay, but it does happen.”

“That’s awesome.”

“And in my mind, when it comes to certain people...” I shake my head. “No. I’m being weird.”

“You’re not. Just take your time.”

“Okay. If I’m honest, in my head, you’re the person I have those kinds of thoughts about.”

“Sexual thoughts?” he asks carefully.

I nod, looking at my mug instead of his handsome face. “I think you’re hot and sexy

and visually very nice to look at.”

“Yeah?”

“That doesn’t happen with every guy, or even most guys. Like the ones I’ve dated. I’ve had to sort of convince myself to do physical things with them, but you...” I pause again, swallowing my nerves. This is Bane. I can tell him anything.

He puts his hand on my thigh, rubbing softly.

“You’re different,” I manage to say. “You’ve always been different. A long time ago, I would feel it more often, usually after a night of drinking and hanging out when you’d be extra touchy with me. We’d end up in your bed and you’d curl around me and I could feel...” I clear my throat. “You know.”

“You could feel my hard dick pressed up against you?”

My eyes widen and I laugh nervously. “Yeah.”

“And you’d wonder if I was just drunk or was I really turned on by you. Now you know.”

I nod, taking a sip of my drink. “Sometimes, I’d close my eyes and imagine it.”

“Imagine what, Jerr?”

“Touching you. I’d have this thought of wanting to, maybe even asking you if I could, but I was never brave enough. I didn’t want to get you worked up and not be able to see it through.”

“I had no idea.”

“I know. Eventually, I pushed those thoughts away because they were frustrating.”

“I get that.”

“And then I heard this term, gray-ace demi, and it was a lightbulb moment. It makes more sense to me now the way I feel around you sometimes. Our connection is safety for me, and safety allows me to explore. It allows my body to be free.”

“Jerr, that’s incredible.” He puts his mug on the coffee table before taking mine and doing the same. “I feel incredibly honored.”

“Honored?” I scoff. “Come on, Bane. I’m still not like most guys. I can’t get hard whenever I want to, and I can’t count on those fleeting moments.”

“Maybe, and I’m just spitballing here, maybe the safer you feel with me the more it grows.”

“How could I feel any safer with you?”

“This is a new aspect of our relationship. Of course you’re gonna have some insecurity, but I’m here to help you through that.

” He holds my hands in his. “I know this is hard for you to believe, but you’ll get there eventually.

This isn’t about sex for me. It’s about the feelings I’ve had for way too long that I want to let out.

I want to treat you better than any guy you’ve ever met.

Whatever we do or don’t do together physically, we’ll navigate it together. ”

“I know. I wanted you to know so you had some expectations.”

“I’m glad you told me. Anything else on your mind?”

“A million things.” I laugh.

“Anything you want to talk about right now?”

I shake my head. “No.”

“Okay. How about I find a movie to watch?”

That doesn’t sound fun at all. I know what I want to do, I just have to tell him. “How about we make out instead?”

“I like your idea much better.”

Bane scoots closer until he’s between my legs. His hand slides around the back of my neck, and as he bends his head to kiss me, I close my eyes, waiting to experience the most amazing feeling again. Just before our lips meet, I whisper another hidden thought of mine.

“Touch me wherever you want, Bane.”

“Fuck,” he whispers, finally brushing his lips over mine. “You sure?”

“Very.”

Our lips meet, and I exhale softly, flicking my tongue out to taste the chocolate lingering on his. For once, I need to get out of my head and experience the physical part of what’s happening.

I can do this, and more importantly, I want to. If anyone can help me find the key I've been searching for all my life, it's Bane.

There's a gap between our bodies that won't do. I want him to kiss me the way I've seen him kiss others. I don't want him to treat me like I'm fragile, so I climb onto his lap, straddling his hips and wrapping my arms around his neck.

His breath catches as he deepens the kiss, murmuring my name against my lips.

His hands slide down my back and rest on the waistband of my jeans before sliding up under my t-shirt.

His hands are warm and strong, and I really want to feel them all over me.

Kissing Bane is so nice. It's better than nice. It's the kiss I've always wanted.

He tips me over, laying me down and climbing on top of me. His weight pressed into me is amazing, but even better, I can feel his cock swelling against my thigh. I turn Bane on. That's wild.

His mouth moves to my neck, sucking and biting gently before he returns to my lips, but then he breaks the kiss, hovering just above me.

"We're not doing anything tonight except kissing," Bane whispers.

A sense of relief washes over me, and I feel the tension leave my body. I was in my head about what might happen next, and Bane freaking knew it.

"Even if I ask for more?"

"Even if you ask for more." He smiles. "As far as I'm concerned, we have the rest of

our lives to do whatever we want. We can take our time, and I want us to.”

“Really?”

“You’re not just some guy, Jerr. I’m not trying to nut and leave. I want to kiss you until we’re too tired to keep going. Until our lips hurt. That’s all I want.”

Reaching up, I stroke his cheek. “That sounds really amazing.”

“I think so too.”

I close my eyes as Bane presses into me again, wrapping my arms around him and truly experiencing what it’s like to have him close to me like this.

It’s way different from cuddling when he keeps a bit of space between us.

I always thought it was because he got hot—he’s like a furnace—but now I think it’s because he’s actually turned on by me. Amazing.

I move my hands up to tangle my fingers in his hair, mentally relaxing and pushing away thoughts about anything but what’s happening in this moment.

I can do this.

EIGHTEEN

BANE

How many times have I fantasized about holding and kissing Jerryn over the years?

Now it's actually happening, and it's even better than any fantasy I could conjure up.

I always thought he'd be shy and tentative, but he's not at all as he tangles his fingers in my hair and returns my kiss like he needs it to breathe.

With him sitting on my lap, the temptation to really explore is strong, but even with his permission, I don't want to take us there tonight.

I want him to wake up feeling as safe and secure as he did before all this started.

Unfortunately, it's not that easy. Touching Jerryn is everything and kissing him is even more. His soft moans and whispers of my name are wearing down my resolve to keep this PG.

"Bane," he whispers as he nibbles my bottom lip.

"What, babe?"

"I want..." His words trail off and I feel him shiver in my arms.

"Anything you want, Jerr. Just ask."

“You said just kissing.” He leans back enough to meet my eyes. “You sure about that?”

“Are you... feeling something?”

He nods. “Good. I feel good. Amazing, actually. I want to make you feel good too.”

“You do.” I kiss his jaw then nuzzle my nose against the column of his neck. “I feel incredible.”

With his hands on my shoulders, he looks into my eyes. “Are you sure?”

Insecurity radiates from him, and it’s my job to reassure him. “I’m very sure.”

“But...” He lightly grinds his ass into my obvious erection, which feels too damn good, but I have a lot of self-control. “You have that.”

“Because you turn me on and I’m so fucking happy to have you in my arms and taste your delicious kiss.”

His cheeks bloom pink and he giggles, shaking his head. “Delicious, huh?”

“Yep.” I gently pinch his chin. “I promise I’m happy and feeling good and don’t want anything more to happen tonight.”

I know him so well I can actually see the pressure he was putting on himself melt off his features. “Okay.”

“Okay.”

“Can we go to bed and cuddle?”

“Sure can, Jerr.”

“Can we, um...” His eyes go wide, like he’s surprised by whatever thought is in his head right now.

“Can we what, babe?”

Jerr hesitates, searching my eyes, then nodding like he just convinced himself to say what’s on his mind as he scrambles off my lap. “Can we do it naked?”

I raise an eyebrow. “Do what naked?”

“Cuddle?”

“Hell yeah.”

A slight smile tugs at his lips. “Awesome.”

“Can I ask why you want to?”

“I thought it would feel nice.”

“It will.” I stand and offer him my hand. He takes it and I use the connection to pull him close until our chests are touching. “I always want you in my bed, Jerr. Just so you know.”

His smile grows. “Good thing that’s where I like being.”

Hand in hand, we walk to my bedroom. Jerryn tugs his shirt over his head, then with a more confident smile than usual on his lips, he unbuttons his jeans.

I've seen Jerr naked over the years, many times, but I never allowed myself to look for too long.

I've even made myself look away from his biteable ass and what he's got between his legs.

Not that I wanted to look away. It just felt like the right thing to do.

Now, I'm pretty sure I have permission to look, but I want to check in.

As he tugs the denim down, I keep my eyes firmly on his face, following his movements until he's upright again.

"Can I look at you, Jerr?"

He nods. "I want you to."

Even with pink cheeks and patches of red on his neck and upper chest, he pulls the waistband of his briefs down, revealing his body in all its glory. My breath catches and my cock immediately begins to swell.

"Fuck, you're gorgeous."

"I am?"

"You gotta know that."

He shrugs, but there's a smile on his face as he sits on the edge of my bed. "Your turn."

I kick off my jeans in mere seconds, desperate to get close to him again. He laughs

softly, but the smile fades and his eyes go wide once he realizes I'm definitely turned on.

"You sure you want me to take these off?" I ask with my thumbs on the band of my underwear.

"I'm sure."

I tug them down, keeping my eyes on his as my cock springs free. He's staring at it, his bottom lip trapped in his teeth, but then his eyes flit up, and his expression relaxes slightly.

"You're hot, Bane."

"Thanks." I walk to the other side of the bed and pull the blankets back. "Ready for bed?"

He nods, slowly turning around to climb under the sheets. As soon as he's settled, I scoot closer, draping my arm over him but keeping enough distance that my dick isn't rubbing all over him.

I close my eyes, focusing on making my erection die down, but Jerryn has other ideas as he scoots back, rubbing his ass all over me.

"Jerr..."

"Is this bad?"

"What do you mean? Nothing we do is bad."

"Bad for you? Am I making it harder to not touch?"

I laugh, kissing the back of his neck. “You’re obviously making it hard.”

He laughs with me, twisting around to face me. His laughter fades as he searches my eyes. I lean in just a little to kiss him, the way I’ve wanted to a thousand and one times, the way I’m allowed to now.

He sighs into the kiss, dragging his hand down my chest, surprising me when he drapes his leg over my hip. I slide my hand down his back, tentatively letting it rest on the curve of his ass.

And then I swear I feel it. His cock brushing against mine. Could it be?

“Bane...”

“What, babe?”

He doesn’t say anything, but a few seconds later, he huffs, breaking the kiss and rolling onto his back. Jerryn stares up at the ceiling, clutching the blankets to his chest.

“What happened, Jerr?”

He’s quiet, and I know him well enough to know he’ll talk when he’s ready, so I lay my head on his shoulder and give him space.

Enough time passes that I start to feel drowsy, but I force my eyes to stay open. Finally, he exhales slowly.

“I think I get it now,” he says.

“What?”

“I’m thinking too much. I was starting to feel it, you know? That tingle of arousal, and then my brain took off in a thousand directions thinking about what to do about it and if it would last and if I should try and?—”

“Hey.” I cup his cheek. “Take a breath.”

Jerryn nods, pausing to breathe. “Thanks.”

“I got you.”

“I know,” he says softly. “Thank you.”

“Of course.” I reach for his hand and kiss the back of it. “This is why I said we’re not doing anything tonight but kissing and cuddling. I don’t want you in your head about what’s next because we’ll figure that out in time. Together. Tonight, all I want is to be close to you.”

His eyes soften. “You’re right. I got ahead of myself because...” His face goes blank. “I guess because I want to make you happy. You’re taking a chance on me, and I want to be worth it.”

“Nah, Jerr. It’s not like that. I’m not taking a chance on you. I already know you’re worth it. It’s me who wants to step up and be the man you need. You’ve always been the man for me.”

He nods, but the insecurity lingers in his eyes. “I promise you don’t have to try so hard.”

“I’m going to anyway. You deserve it. Let’s try to get some sleep so we can kiss some more in the morning.”

“Okay.”

He rolls over again so his back is to my chest, and thankfully, that conversation got my dick to settle down, so I rest my chin on his shoulder.

He relaxes in my arms, and soon his breathing settles into a slow rhythm. I kiss his cheek and close my eyes. He doesn't see it yet, but I'm the happiest I've ever been. Over time, he'll stop overthinking the sex stuff and we'll find what works for us. For now, this is more than enough for me.

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Source Creation Date: July 20, 2025, 6:47 am

NINETEEN

JERRYYN

I've been scrolling this stupid forum for almost an hour, but I'm not finding what I want. Correction: what I need. I can't be the only person in the world going through this.

I'm just about to give up when I notice a sub-forum link on the left side of my screen. It's part of the ace spectrum forum, and it might be exactly what I'm looking for.

I click it and start scanning through the various posts, and then I see it.

Finally. The forum is about navigating sex.

I hope someone's experience matches mine.

Reading through a few posts, my hope starts to fade.

Not because the experiences aren't there, but because the situations don't resonate with me.

There's lots of advice about dating an allosexual person, but it's coming mostly from people who don't experience sexual desire at all.

I keep scrolling a bit more, but I'm interrupted by several of the guys coming into the office at Moby's where I've been hiding out for the last twenty minutes.

It's midday on a Wednesday, so it's very quiet right now.

"Oh, hey, Jerr," Ridley says. "You okay?"

"Just taking a break. What are you guys doing?"

"We've had some applications come in." Lowen walks behind the desk to open a drawer. "I thought we could go over them since it's quiet."

"Where's Bane?" Indy asks, leaning against the wall.

"He said he had an errand to run," Kit says. "He's supposed to be back soon."

That explains his cryptic text telling me he'd be gone for about thirty minutes. He always tells me exactly what he's doing, and most of the time I'm with him, but I didn't question it. He has his reasons, and he's allowed to do things without telling me.

The past three nights have been close to magical—cuddling, kissing, sleeping beside him completely nude—but the more I want to get out of my head and just enjoy it, the less I can.

I'm really worried that Bane is gonna start thinking I'm not attracted to him, when I am.

I just can't get my body to show it. He says it's fine and he's happy with what we're doing, but for how long?

Lowen is reading off the qualifications of an applicant, but my eye catches something on my screen. It's titled "This is how it works for me and my partner" so I click it. What I read makes my eyes sting. It makes sense, but dammit, it's not the solution I

was hoping for.

Salem taps my shoulder, and when I look up, I realize everyone is looking at me.

“What?”

“We were voting on if we’d like to bring this person in for an interview,” Lowen says.

“I’ll go with the majority.”

“No, then,” Lowen says in his curt tone, laying the résumé face down on the desk.

“Next we have Louie.”

I do my best to listen to Lowen, but my thoughts are still swirling from what I just read. Is that the best way to handle this? Maybe it would take the pressure off me, and I’d be able to perform when and how I want to.

“That guy sounds good,” Indy says, taking the résumé. “He’s worked in some pretty busy places in the city, so he can probably keep up.”

“I was thinking the same.” Lowen nods.

“Do you think he’d get bored here though?” Ridley asks. “Those restaurants are pretty high end.”

“Maybe he wants a change of scenery,” Kit says. “Burnout is real.”

“That’s what we’d find out in the interview, right?” I ask.

“Exactly,” Lowen says. “Yes pile?”

We all agree, then he goes on to read the next résumé.

Halfway through that discussion, the door opens and Bane enters.

My stomach flutters and I feel heat immediately crawling up my neck.

Seeing Bane has always made me happy, but it's a new feeling now.

It's remembering the way his lips feel on my neck and how his tongue tangles with mine.

It's the way he smells in the morning when he's cuddling close to me—soft but masculine, clean but earthy.

And it's the way he looks at me like no one else exists.

Like right now. His focus is completely on me, until he blinks and addresses the guys as he walks over to stand next to me.

“What are we doing?” he asks.

“Going over résumés,” Lowen says.

“Cool.”

Lowen continues and we end up with a pile of five people to interview.

We sort out who is going to interview who, and of course Bane and I are assigned a person together.

The meeting breaks up, and I get to my feet.

Now that we're alone, Bane wraps his arm around my waist, pulling me close and pressing a quick kiss to my lips.

Smiling, I play with the hair resting on his shoulder. "Got your errands done?"

He nods, his eyes searching mine like he has something major to say. "I managed to get my hands on two tickets to next month's Comic book convention."

My eyes go wide. "What? How? They sold out months ago."

"I know. I found someone who was selling theirs because they couldn't make it anymore. Dude was cool too—he only charged face value."

A smile tugs at my lips. "You really got them?"

He pulls his wallet out of his back pocket, opens it, and pulls out two slender pieces of paper. "I really got them. I know you wanted to go. We both do. They're VIP tickets too. Collector's edition."

"That's amazing. Thank you."

"Seeing you smile is thanks enough."

Standing this close to him, his sultry smile warming parts of me I'm just discovering, it feels all the more important that I broach the topic on my mind.

"Can we take a walk over to the park?"

"Of course. You okay?"

"I'm good." Sort of. I feel a little sick, but once we talk it out, I'll feel better. At least

I hope I will.

Bane slides his hand to my lower back, saying, “After you.”

We exit the office and walk through the restaurant. Bane stops next to Indy, letting him know where we’re going and that we’ll be back soon, then we walk outside. The weather today is pretty chilly, but the sun is out, so it still feels nice.

As we cross the street, Bane grabs my hand, but my nerves are really getting to me. I hope he takes this okay. It’s for him, after all.

We find a bench that faces the fountain and sit down. I can feel Bane’s attention on me, his concern almost palpable.

I guess I’ll just jump in. “I’ve been doing some research.”

Bane nods, holding my hand in his and resting both on his lap. “About?”

“Me and my sexuality. I wanted to see if there were any examples of how other people have navigated it, you know?”

“Yeah. Did you find something?”

I nod, chewing on my bottom lip—my go-to move when I’m nervous.

“Are you gonna tell me?” he asks, smiling.

“Hear me out, okay?”

“Always.”

“I think the solution could be non-monogamy.”

Bane’s forehead creases and he pulls his head back slightly. “What?”

“Keeping things open so you can feel free to have your needs met. In the meantime, I’ll keep working on myself and my blocks.”

His jaw drops and he blinks rapidly. “Are you suggesting that I would be in a relationship with you and fuck other people?”

I nod, even as my stomach turns sour at the thought. “It’s not fair for you to put your sex life on hold because of me.”

He lowers his head, rubbing his forehead.

“Jerr. My sweet, sweet Jerr.” When he lifts his head, the intensity of his gaze makes my breath hitch.

“I’ve waited twenty years. Twenty fucking years, Jerr, to be with you.

If you think there’s another person on this planet who could get me in their bed, you’re seriously off base. ”

“You say that now because it’s still new, but what if this goes on for...” I shake my head. “Forever. What then, Bane?”

He squeezes my hands. “This is forever. Just us. You and me, Jerr. There’s no chance that I would ever fuck around with someone else when I can be next to you whenever I want. What kind of fucking advice is that? Where did you get it?”

“A forum. There were so many posts about how difficult it can be and how frustrating

for the allo partner. I don't want you to resent me someday."

He tilts his head back, squeezing his eyes closed, and I know that's a sign of frustration. Maybe he's going to rethink this whole thing, which is totally fair. I brace myself for the inevitable. I knew it was too good to be true.

"It's like you don't even know me," he whispers. "I guess I'm fumbling the ball here if you still think I'm not happy with you."

"You're not fumbling any balls. You're amazing, but..."

"But what, Jerr?"

"I'm afraid. I know you're committed to this. It's not that."

He blows out a breath, standing and pacing in front of the bench for a second before he turns and levels me with a serious gaze.

"I've been with you through every date, every relationship, every promising moment for twenty years.

You think I don't remember what you've been through?

The things that have been said to you?" He scoffs.

"I get that you're scared because so many people have failed you, but I'm not those guys.

I know exactly what I signed up for and I would sign up for you a thousand times over. You can't shake me, Jerr."

He joins me on the bench again, turning sideways to face me. “This isn’t how I imagined having this conversation. I’ve been waiting for some perfect moment. Maybe after Comic-Con, or I’d take you out for a fancy dinner.” Bane shrugs. “But you need to hear it now. I need you to hear it.”

“What are you talking about?”

“Jerryn, babe, I’m in love with you.”

My jaw drops.

“And in case you think this is new, it’s not.

I’ve been in love with you for as long as I can remember.

Every little thing you do lights me up. The way your cheeks turn pink, your amazing laugh, and your eyes.

You’ve always seen me like no one else ever has.

You see me, beyond my flaws and inadequacies, you see the man I’ve wanted to become so I could be the man you need.”

My eyes well with tears and I breathe in and out slowly.

“So if you think for one second that I’d fuck someone else just to nut, you’re very, very wrong.

There are so many ways we can make each other happy that have nothing to do with sex, and in time, we’ll figure out what works together, because there’s love here.

I've always loved you, and I'm always going to. ”

I blink and the tears break free, sliding down my cheeks. “You’re in love with me?”

Bane nods. “Everyone knew it but you.”

“I would have never thought...”

“I know. Listen, Jerr, there’s still no pressure.

You don’t have to say anything you’re not feeling or not ready to feel.

You don’t have to do anything you’re not ready for.

You don’t have to perform. Not for me. I’m your best friend, and I want to be the love of your life, and you can take as much time as you need to catch up with me. ”

A sob bubbles out of me, and Bane’s expression softens as he opens his arms to me.

I lean into him, burying my face in the crook of his neck.

He loves me? It feels like a dream or a miracle.

My heart is beating fast and the tears are flowing as I realize this is the first time in my life I’ve heard those words said to me.

No one has ever been in love with me, but all along, Bane was?

“I wish you’d told me sooner,” I mumble, lifting my head to wipe at my cheeks and nose. “I wish you saw yourself the way I do and knew you were perfect for me all along.”

“I wish I’d told you sooner too. I wish I’d felt brave enough years ago to beg you to stop looking at losers who don’t understand you because I do. I always have.”

“I used to wish we could be something,” I admit. “Because I knew what an amazing man you are, but I thought it was useless because I’m not like other men you’ve dated.”

“No shit. You’re a thousand times better.” He takes my hands in his again. “I fucked around a lot, and maybe I was trying to get over you in a way, but it never worked. I was never gonna fall for someone else when you’ve had my heart all along.”

A hesitant smile pulls at my lips. “You’re really in love with me?”

“Absolutely.”

“That’s pretty amazing.”

“Can you promise you’ll never get an idea like that again? There’s no one but you. There’s never gonna be anyone but you. I want you, and all that you are, Jerr. Whatever that looks like for us, I’m all in.”

I nod, even as my head swirls with possibilities. I’m too jumbled up to tell him my feelings too, but it’s Bane, and he’s gonna be there when I’m ready.

I believe him.

I trust him.

And my god, I love him.

TWENTY

BANE

Telling Jerry I'm in love with him is such a surreal feeling. I've known forever, wondered if I would ever have the nerve to tell him, and now that I have, my only regret is not telling him sooner. I could've been this happy a long time ago.

It was honestly the only reasonable response to his suggestion.

Fuck other people? No way. No shade to anyone that works for, but I can't even imagine it now that I'm in an actual relationship with Jerr.

The last thing on my mind is getting laid.

The only thing that matters to me is making him feel safe and happy. That's it.

He's standing near a table after delivering some appetizers to them, and I realize how many times I've watched him, just like I am now, dreaming about finally admitting my feelings. I'm leaning on the bar, all my attention focused on Jerr, when someone bumps into me.

I turn to my left to see Lowen. His cheeks are pink and he looks a bit flustered as he reaches out and grabs my arm to balance himself.

"So sorry. I wasn't watching where I was going."

“It’s cool.” I tilt my head. “You okay?”

“Yes. Fine.” He smooths his hands over his t-shirt, and over his shoulder I see Oakley coming down the hallway.

I get it now. “Were you smooching back there?”

Lowen practically chokes on his own spit before clearing his throat. “Of course not.”

I grin. “So that beard burn is from this morning?”

Oakley joins us, a big smile on his face. “How’s it going, Bane?”

“All good here. You?”

“Perfect.” He kisses Lowen’s cheek. “I’m gonna sit at the bar.”

Lowen nods, blows out a breath, then actually laughs softly as Oakley leaves. “He’s amazing.”

“Seems like it.”

“How are you? I feel like we haven’t caught up in a while.”

“Life is good. No complaints.”

Jerryn walks over to us, smiling and tucking some of his hair behind his ear. “Hey, Low.”

“Hey. Thanks for grabbing that table for me.”

“Of course.” Jerryn glances over at Oakley. “Things are good with you guys?”

“Yes. Very good. The future is bright.”

Jerryn nods, glancing briefly at me before leaning against my arm. “I agree.”

Lowen seems to notice the contact between us, but it’s not exactly unusual, so he just smiles and excuses himself. Once he’s gone, Jerryn leans in even closer and kisses my cheek.

“I’m excited to get out of here tonight.”

“Yeah? Why’s that?”

“Being alone with you is my favorite part of the day.”

“Mine too, sweet stuff.”

His smile grows, but I know there’s something else on his mind. I can tell from the way he bites his bottom lip, plays with his hair, and searches my eyes like he’s looking for permission.

“You know you can tell me anything, right?”

“I do.”

“Good. Anything on your mind?”

He shakes his head, smiling at me. “Just excited to get home.”

“Me too, Jerr.”

He'll tell me when he's ready. Until then, I'll just keep showing him how I feel and how amazing he is.

About an hour later I get my wish. I leave Moby's with Jerryn, Indy, Salem, and Kit.

Ridley and Lowen are staying behind to shut the place down.

We all head down the sidewalk together, chatting about the day's events from funny customer interactions to getting ready for the weekend crowd.

Jerryn is talking about a customer who insisted he was allergic to tomatoes and was adamant they weren't on his burger, but then he kept eating the cheese sticks and dipping them in marinara sauce.

When Jerryn stepped in to clarify that the marinara sauce was made with tomatoes, the man said he was only allergic to them if they weren't cooked.

"I don't know why people insist on saying they have an allergy to something they don't like," Salem says. "Just say you don't like raw tomatoes, dude. It's okay."

"No, it's real," Kit says. "I had a roommate who had the same thing with tomatoes. He could handle them in small amounts if they were cooked, but if he ate them raw he broke out in hives."

Salem's eyes widen for a second. "I had no idea."

"Granted, a lot of customers just say stuff like that to make sure we won't put something they don't like in their food," Kit continues. "But it can be a real allergy."

"Good to know," Salem says.

“I had no idea either,” I add.

The topic shifts when Salem talks about a reservation we have on the books for next week. “They asked if they could reserve a table for their group. I had to ask what the group was about to make sure it fit our vibe, and I’m so glad I did.”

“What’s it about?” Jerryyn asks.

“Bisexual men.” Salem wiggles his shoulders. “They’ve been meeting in each other’s houses, but they’ve always wanted to support a queer business if they could.”

“That’s fucking cool,” Kit says. “What do they do at the group?”

“Caller said they just talk about their experiences or get advice from the others. They talk about the challenges of being bi as male presenting people.”

“I dated a bisexual guy,” I say. “He said he got shit all the time about not picking a side or actually being gay but not admitting it. It seemed kind of rough.”

“I hope that’s changing,” Salem says. “No one should be judged for the way they love.”

I glance at Jerryyn and he smiles before blowing out a breath. “Things are getting better.”

Everyone is silent for a moment as Jerryyn continues.

“I’m not bisexual,” he adds, “but my sexuality is a little different from what you might think.”

I rub his shoulder. I'm so proud of him right now.

"Different?" Indy asks.

Jerryn nods. "I've never talked about it because I wasn't really sure where I fell. I knew I wanted to date men, but I don't experience attraction the same way as a lot of people probably do."

Jerryn glances at me and I wink.

"I'm on the ace spectrum," he says, and I know it took a lot to get the words out. "And demisexual."

"Not to be dense, but what does that mean?" Kit asks.

"I resonate with gray-ace and demi, which means I feel infrequent or inconsistent attraction, but it's only possible when there's an emotional connection. Learning about it changed my entire view, and it made my dating life make a lot more sense."

"That's what you meant when you said..." Kit's words trail off.

"What?" I ask.

"Yes," Jerryn says, even though I'm still lost. "When you guys asked me why not me and Bane, that's why."

"When did this conversation happen?" I ask.

"When that guy called Jerryn," Salem says. "The guy he dated."

"Right after you stomped off to get water." Kit grins at me.

I nod, remembering how that text from Alec started the ball rolling that got us where we are now.

“Turns out, I was wrong,” Jerryn continues. When I glance over at him, he’s looking down but his cheeks are bright red. “Bane accepts me the way I am.”

“Well, duh,” Salem says. Indy smacks his arm.

“Are you low-key telling us something, Jerr?” Indy asks.

Jerryn nods. “Yeah. We’re finally together.”

“Hell yeah.” Kit squeezes my shoulder from behind. “’Bout time you made the conversion, man.”

“It is.”

“That’s awesome,” Salem says, patting Jerryn’s arm. “I’m happy for you guys.”

“Thanks,” he says softly. “I’m happy too. I figured it was time to tell you guys about me because I’m not ashamed.” He smiles. “Anymore.”

“Anymore?” Indy asks.

“When I didn’t understand, it just felt like something was wrong with me and that I’d never make a good partner, but now I know that’s not true.”

“I’m glad you figured that out,” I say.

“I hope you didn’t think we’d judge you,” Indy says. “We’re your friends. We would have supported you.”

“I know. It wasn’t that. I didn’t have the words. Telling you guys never crossed my mind.”

“I’m glad you found your answer,” Kit says. “Everyone deserves that.”

Jerryn clears his throat. “I am too. It’s been a long time coming, but I finally know who I am and where I belong.” He smiles. “I belong in Willow Bay, surrounded by friends, and with an amazing relationship.”

“We need to celebrate,” Kit says. “Sunday. We’ll do it up big.”

“We don’t need to make a big deal of it, guys,” Jerryn says.

I slide my arm around him. “Actually, yeah, we do. I think you’ve earned a little time in the spotlight.”

He offers me a shy smile. “We’ll celebrate everyone. How’s that?”

“Works for me,” Kit says. “Stewart’s gonna love this. He says from the moment he met you guys, he knew there were sparks.”

Jerryn smiles and reaches down to hold my hand. Now those sparks can grow into a big flame, and I am so here for it.

We make it back to the house and all go our separate ways.

Jerryn follows me up the stairs to my room, and I can tell he’s still thinking about something, even after his epic announcement to our friends.

Whatever is on his mind, I hope he’s willing to tell me about it.

It can't be as wild as suggesting we go non-monogamous.

Once inside my room, Jerryn seems to freeze in place. I put my hands on his shoulders from behind, leaning in to kiss the side of his neck.

“What do you want to do tonight?”

He turns around, holding my gaze. His teeth briefly graze his bottom lip, but he stops himself quickly.

I tilt my head, smiling. “Tell me.”

Jerryn huffs out a small laugh, dragging his hand through his hair. “I tried something earlier. In the office.”

I nod, rubbing his arm. “Go on.”

“I wanted to see if maybe something had changed after what you told me in the park.”

“Something?” Where is he going with this?

Jerryn clears his throat, nodding. “I'm pretty sure that being in my head about the sex stuff is what prevents me from feeling things the way I want to.”

“Right.”

“But hearing that you're in love with me changed...” He shrugs. “Everything. I think I always hoped that could happen for me, but having it happen with you is a dream I didn't dare to have.”

“Jerr—”

“Let me finish.”

I nod.

“I went and sat in the office, and I closed my eyes and imagined telling you all the things in my heart and knowing I wouldn’t freak you out or make things weird.” He grabs my hand. “Because you already feel those things.”

My jaw drops and it takes me a second to process his words. “What are you saying?”

He smiles as his eyes turn glassy with unshed tears. “I’m in love with you too. I’m pretty sure I have been for a long time, but I wouldn’t let myself go there. Like you said earlier, maybe that’s why I never clicked with anyone else. I was always comparing them to you.”

“Jerr...” I can only manage a whisper as it sinks in.

“I convinced myself that there was no way because you’d need more than I could give, so I tried to bury it. All this started because I wanted you to feel free to go out and find love, not feel obligated to spend time with me.”

“What do you mean?”

“I went to the seminars so I could figure myself out and maybe find a way to date successfully. I thought if I did that, you’d go out too. I thought I was holding you back.”

“You know better now?”

He nods. “It still feels like I might wake up any second and realize you’re still just my best friend, and we’re still just hanging out together, and I made up all the other stuff.”

“You didn’t, sweet stuff. You’re awake.”

He nods, blowing out a breath. “So in the office, I imagined something else.”

“Tell me.”

“We were naked, and I put you in my mouth.”

His words surprise me, but my body reacts immediately, heating up and sending tendrils of desire winding through me. “How did you feel?”

“I felt...” His expression softens. “I felt it, Bane. I didn’t panic. I just sat there and let my mind take me on a trip.”

I’m blown away.

“And finally, after imagining what it would feel like to have your cock in my mouth and knowing how you would look at me and talk to me, hearing your satisfied moans... it happened.”

“What happened?”

“I got hard.” A bright smile graces his face. “And I mean actually hard. Not a brief twinge. I was so excited I almost ran out to show you.”

“I wish you would’ve texted me to come back.”

“Oh.” He blinks rapidly. “I didn’t think of that.” Jerryyn grabs my hand, squeezing it. “But I got hard from thinking about us together. I never do that.”

“Fantasize?”

He shakes his head. “Never. I guess I didn’t ever feel like I wanted to.

When I was younger, I tried watching porn, but it didn’t do anything for me.

Watching people I don’t know get it on had no effect on me.

I tried a couple of times with guys I was dating, and I convinced myself I was feeling it, but what I felt today was completely different.

It made me lightheaded and I cried a little. ”

“Babe...”

“But it proved something.” He exhales slowly. “I’m not broken, and I can feel sexual things. I can want them. I think the missing link was you.”

“Me?”

“It’s the demi part I didn’t get. I have to feel safe and loved, and those are two things I haven’t felt in any of my other relationship attempts.

The connection you and I have is special and unique, and it’s even better now.

Bane...” He swallows hard. “For the first time ever, I really, really want to make love. I want to have sex with you, and I want to do all the things I’ve only ever wondered about. ”

I can't believe my ears. "There's still no rush, Jerr. We can take it slow."

"We've been taking it slow. I think twenty years is long enough, don't you?"

"Are you sure it's not because of what I said earlier? I don't expect sex just because I'm in love with you."

"I know that. In a way it is because you told me that, but not because I feel pressured or because I think I'm obligated." His voice cracks. "It's because I know you're the man I've waited for all my life. It's not a fantasy that we can be together. It's real, and I'm safe. Finally."

A tear slides down his cheek, and I step forward to brush it away with my thumb.

"If it's what you really want, I'd be honored."

"I'm not doing anything I don't want to do." He cups my face. "I can't make any promises about how long it will last or if it'll be good for you, but I want to be with you."

"None of that matters. Being with you is all I care about. We'll figure it out together."

Jerryn's expression softens as he smiles. "I'm not even nervous."

"That makes one of us."

He laughs softly. "Don't be. This is us, Bane."

"You're right. I just want to make it so good for you."

"It would be impossible not to."

“Your expectations are high.”

He shakes his head. “No. My only expectation is that it’s you and me. Took us long enough.”

I laugh, feeling the nerves dissipate. “It did. Better late than never?”

“Yep.” Jerryn glances over his shoulder toward my bedroom. “I’m ready, Bane. I’m so ready.”

I nod, leaning in to kiss him briefly. Jerryn is in love with me too and he wants to take things to the next level. I promised him he’s not dreaming, but if we are, please never let us wake up.

TWENTY-ONE

JERRY

I'm not nervous. Not at all. I'm always nervous when relationships turn sexual, but not this time. Not with Bane.

I pull my t-shirt over my head and toss it onto the armchair beside the bed. Bane looks at me like I painted the sky, slowly pulling his shirt off too.

"How about a quick shower?" I suggest. "That will help us relax."

He nods, flicking his tongue out to wet his lips. "Good idea." He clears his throat. "Be right back."

"I'll be here."

Bane hurries off to the bathroom while I take off my jeans and socks.

I've been thinking about this moment for hours, especially after what happened in the office.

Bane is in love with me. I almost can't believe it, but when I look back at all the ways he's been trying to show me, it makes so much sense.

I just couldn't see it, too busy convincing myself that there was no possible way.

All this time, I thought he indulged my need to cuddle because he was a good friend, nothing else.

I chuckle softly. Twenty years we've wasted. I shake my head at that thought. No. We wasted nothing. We were together the whole time. We've lived an amazing life, and all of it, every experience, led us here. If I hadn't done the recent soul searching, we might still be dancing around it all.

Bane appears in the doorway to the bathroom wearing just his briefs.

It's obvious he's excited about what's going to happen, and I am too.

Hopefully my body will decide to join the party, but if it doesn't, it's gonna be okay.

Like he keeps trying to tell me, there are lots of things we can do together.

Bane crooks his finger at me, inviting me to join him. I hop up and walk over to him as more memories flood my mind.

"Do you remember that weird-ass shower we took together right after we moved to Seattle?"

Bane chuckles. "How could I forget? Not gonna lie, I spent most of it thinking of very unsexy things so I wouldn't pop a chub in front of you."

I shake my head. "I was so oblivious."

"I was bummed when the landlord fixed the water heater. A lukewarm shower with you was better than a hot one by myself."

Smiling, I let my eyes roam down the length of his body. "Are you still worried about

popping a chub in front of me?”

Bane shakes his head as his eyes heat. “No, and you can pretty much count on it.”

“I hope I do too.”

“There’s zero pressure here, Jerr.”

“I know.”

Looking him right in the eye, I bend slightly to remove my underwear. He holds my gaze, not looking at any other part of me as he takes his off too. The bathroom fills with steam while we stand quietly before each other, then he offers his hand, and I take it, stepping into the shower with him.

He walks under the shower spray and the jets massage my tired back muscles, relaxing me even more. I drape my arms over his shoulders, mentally convincing myself that this is all actually happening.

“Let me take care of you, Jerr,” Bane whispers. “Let me do all the things I’ve wanted to do for so long.”

“Okay, but I have one request.”

“Whatever you want, sweet thing.”

“I want to suck you.”

He visibly shivers. “You can do whatever you want to me.” Bane slides his hands down my back to rest on my waist. “First, I’m gonna wash you.”

“Can I wash you too?”

“Yep.”

He grabs the bodywash and pours some into his hands, rubbing them together to make suds. My breath catches when he presses his hands to my chest.

“I can’t count all the times I’ve thought about us,” Bane confesses. “All the times I’ve wanted to slip into the shower with you, or the bath in Seattle. Do you remember how I’d sit on the toilet and talk to you while you soaked?”

I nod. “Of course.”

“I wanted to get in there and wash your hair or rub your back. I just wanted to touch you and be close.” He chuckles. “I sound like a stalker.”

“No. I wish I’d noticed it. Maybe I did, but I convinced myself it was just wishful thinking. I kept hoping you’d find someone amazing and fall in love so I could...” I shake my head. “Sounds ridiculous now.”

“So you could what, Jerr?”

I’m quiet for a few seconds while I collect my thoughts. “There’s always been a part of me that wanted more with you, but I shoved it so far down I almost forgot. If you met someone and fell in love and got married, moved into your own place, I’d have to let it go once and for all.”

His fingers swirl over my nipples, leaving a nice sensation in their wake.

“And now you know why I never did. I was waiting to be the man you deserved.”

“You always have been. In a way, I guess we’ve been together all along, haven’t we?”

He nods. “We sure have.”

“No one I’ve ever dated has treated me as well as you do. For not being a boyfriend, you sure have been a boyfriend.”

“I was auditioning for the role.”

I laugh softly. “I’m really happy, Bane.”

“So am I, gorgeous.”

He moves his hands behind me and washes my back, slowly sliding them down to my ass. I nod, holding his gaze, hoping he knows he can touch me anywhere. I want him to. I want to feel things.

“This okay, Jerr?”

“Yes.” When I let myself look at his body, his dick is standing at attention between us. “Can I touch you?”

“Anywhere but my dick. I don’t want to blow too soon.”

“You really are turned on by me?”

He scoffs a laugh. “Uh, yeah.”

Instead of touching him with my hands, I close the gap between us, pressing my chest to his. His breath hitches and his eyes heat as he dips his soapy fingers into the crease

of my ass. I nod, biting my bottom lip as I hold his gaze.

“Fuck, Jerr,” he whispers, touching my hole gently.

“That feels nice.”

“For me too.”

I reach up to drag my fingers through his wet hair to get it off his face. “I’m not comparing, but at the same time...” I shrug. “I don’t know what I’m saying.”

“Go on. This is all new and you need to process it. That’s okay with me.”

I blow out a breath. Of course he understands. He’s Bane.

“I’ve never felt so relaxed and excited with another person in this situation. I mean, I’ve never been in a shower with any of them, but just the touching and stuff, knowing what was coming... I would get all jumbled up and nervous, but that’s not at all how I feel right now.”

“Good.”

I slide my hands down over his shoulders. “You know there’s only been three guys who have...” It’s embarrassing to say aloud, even to Bane.

“Yeah, babe, I know. That’s not something we have to do. Not at all.”

“I want to. I want to know how it feels with you. With love.”

His eyes soften and he pulls me a little closer. “I don’t have to top. I’m more than willing to bottom for you.”

A giggle bubbles out of me. “I’m glad you are, but I’m not at all comfortable with that idea. I wouldn’t have the first clue how to manage that.”

“We don’t have to do anything right away. We have the rest of our lives, remember?”

I nod. “Yeah.”

“So if you get curious, and you want to try, say the word, babe.”

“Okay.”

I let my hands wander down his back and tentatively slide my fingers into his crease. He moans softly, holding my gaze. I don’t plan to do anything but wash him, but I do have to admit to myself that this feels very nice, and I want to do more. I want to explore.

Bane’s Adam’s apple bobs as he puts a slight distance between us, his hand moving down my chest to my dick. “Can I?”

“Please.”

When he touches me, my stomach flutters and a shiver moves down my spine. I blow out a breath, reminding myself there’s no pressure or judgment here. This is my best friend, and he loves me. I can do this. I want to.

“We should get out,” I say. “I’m ready.”

Bane smiles, reaching over to turn the water off while I focus on the fact that my body feels different. It’s like a thousand lights are shimmering inside of me, waking up parts I didn’t know were there. Bane steps out, handing me a towel before he dries himself off.

His cock is obviously hard now, and I realize with only mild shock that I really want to put that in my mouth. I'm not sure I've ever thought about it before. It was just something I did to appease the guy I was dating, but that's not my motivation right now. I actually want to.

Bane leads me to the bedroom, dropping his towel at the foot of the bed. I drop mine too, crawling onto his bed and lying on my back. I've been in his bed countless times, but never like this.

"Do me a favor?" I say.

"Anything."

"Don't treat me like I'm made of glass. I'm an adult and I know what I'm doing. If I need to stop or slow things down, trust me to tell you. Can you do that?"

Bane nods. "Absolutely."

"Good." I smile. "Now get up here."

Bane crawls onto the bed, settling between my legs to kiss me.

I wrap my arms and legs around his lean body, reveling in the feeling of his weight on me and his tongue in my mouth.

I'm glad I figured out the missing puzzle piece of my attraction ability.

It was probably never gonna happen without the love and safety I feel with Bane. I never got that far with anyone else.

I'm aware of his erection pushing against my thigh, and I feel the slightest of tingles

deep in my belly, tiny tendrils of heat snaking between my legs. It's happening. Mentally, I push away my thoughts. The less I focus on it, the better it is.

"Bane," I whisper against his lips. "Want you."

"How?"

"On your back."

He nods, kissing a trail down my neck before lifting off me to roll over onto his back.

His cock juts out from his hips, standing straight and proud, and my stomach flutters again.

I lick my lips, shifting to a new position beside him.

I'm woefully out of practice with this. I haven't given anyone head in years, but right now, all I want is to feel him in my mouth.

I don't hold back, diving in and sliding my mouth down his shaft. Bane moans, lifting his head to watch me awkwardly find a rhythm. It's unlikely to be his best blow job ever, but hopefully he doesn't mind.

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His cock twitches and swells on my tongue, leaving a trail of sticky, salty-sweet precum behind.

“Fuck, Jerr. Go slow.”

I nod, meeting his gaze for just a moment before focusing on my task.

I like the way he feels in my mouth, the way the silky skin of his cock brushes over my tongue, the weight of it, the head tickling the back of my throat.

But his scent. Wow. He smells clean from the shower, but there’s something else.

It’s familiar and comforting, and I’ve smelled it a thousand times in my life. It’s Bane.

“Oh shit.” He blows out a breath. “Feels so good.”

I’m not sure whether that’s true, but I’ll choose to believe him.

A surge of confidence flows through me as I reach down to massage his balls, and he shivers, his breath catching.

Not once does he push my head down or pump his hips to gag me.

He lies as still as he can, his fingers tangled in the bedding as he watches me do my best.

I try to get as much of him down my throat as possible, and he moans long and slow as his eyelids flutter. He likes it. I'm giving him this pleasure.

"You gotta stop soon, babe," he pants. "Unless this is how you plan to finish me off."

It's a tempting idea, but I really want to try the one thing that's always challenged me.

Every time I've gotten to this point with a guy I dated, I either wanted to run or I suffered through it for his sake, but that's not what I feel right now.

Far from it. I want to make Bane feel good, but I want to feel good too.

I really want to make love, actual love, for the first time in my life.

I pop off and move up his body to kiss him. Bane tangles his fingers in my hair, deepening the kiss, and as I climb on top of him to straddle his hips, the hint of an erection teases my cock.

"You good?" Bane asks.

"Really good."

I lean over to open his nightstand drawer and pull out his lube. He's shaking beneath me, which is kind of sweet. He's nervous. Bane, the most amazing man I know, is nervous about being with me. Wild.

My fingers brush the foil wrapper of a condom. "We've always done our testing together."

He nods, gazing at me with pure awe in his eyes. "Yeah."

“So we can skip these, right?” I hold one up. “I don’t want anything between us.”

“Fuck.” His voice is deep and raspy now. “We can skip them.”

Smiling, I drop the condom and grab the lube instead.

I open the lid and pour some onto his cock.

His breath hitches, and he tenses when I drop the bottle and touch him instead.

He feels hard and slick in my grasp, but when I look down, a foreign sensation takes over.

Is this what lust feels like? The overwhelming desire to touch and look and feel?

Now I understand what all the hype was about. This is amazing.

Before I can say anything, Bane flips me onto my back, lifting my legs. “Gonna get you ready.”

I nod, chewing on my bottom lip. “Please.”

His brow creases, and I think he’s about to check in, but instead he nods and grabs the lube bottle again. I watch as he slicks his fingers then slides them into my crease, finding my hole and gently pressing against it.

“There’s so many things I want to do with you,” Bane whispers. “Not just in bed, but definitely some of it is in bed.”

“I want to do everything. It feels like it’s all brand new. It’s never been like this.”

A smile tugs at his lips as he circles my rim with his fingertip. When he breaches me, my breath hitches, and it stings, but I knew it would.

“Okay?” he asks.

“More.”

He pushes his finger completely in, but doesn’t move, letting my body adjust. Bane leans down, kissing my neck and jaw and then my mouth.

I lift my legs higher, rocking slightly to encourage him.

Bane pushes a second finger inside me. The sting is intense this time, but this new, exciting feeling of desire doesn’t dissipate at all.

I close my eyes as Bane kisses me, moving his fingers inside me, slowly but with purpose.

I let all my thoughts go, focusing solely on the man causing all this pleasure.

And then it happens.

My cock swells.

I almost squeal, but Bane lifts his head, looking down between us and smiling. I put my finger over his lips to keep him from addressing it. He nods, understanding my silent appeal, and carries on stretching me out.

It feels like weeks have passed by the time he grabs the lube again, using one hand to open it while the other is still between my legs. I glance at my erection, aware of its presence but trying not to think too hard about it.

“Ready?” Bane asks, slowly pulling his fingers out of me.

I flinch, grabbing his wrist. “Please. Please, Bane.”

He nods, pouring a little more lube over his cock.

Then he scoots closer, his eyes focused between my legs as he presses the head of his dick to my hole.

This is the part I’ve always tensed up for, knowing I wouldn’t enjoy a second of it, but that reaction doesn’t surface.

It’s probably gonna hurt or at least be uncomfortable, but that’s okay, because it’s just the first time. There will be more.

Bane pushes into me slowly, his brow creased as he holds my gaze. My hole clenches around the intrusion, but it doesn’t hurt like I thought it would. It stings a little, but it’s pleasant in a way, and as I lift my arms to drape them over his shoulders, I smile so he knows I’m good.

“I’ve dreamed of this,” he says. “So many times.”

“How does it match up?”

“Way, way better than my dreams.” His hand moves to gently grip the front of my neck. “I love you so much, Jerr. It feels so good to tell you.”

“It’s amazing to hear it.” I grab his wrist and pull his hand to my mouth to kiss it. “All of this is amazing.”

He nods. “Gonna move now.”

“Okay.”

Bane rocks his hips slowly, his cock sliding in and out of me until my muscles relax and accept him a little more.

He’s gentle, but not so much so that I feel like he’s holding back.

He hooks his arm under one of my knees, increasing the depth of his thrusts inside me, and the sensation causes strange flutters in my belly.

We hold each other’s gazes, rocking gently together. I’m aware of my still-hard cock brushing against his stomach, of his swelling inside me, and the increase in his breathing and body heat.

“Can’t hold back,” he moans. “Fuck, Jerr.”

“Don’t hold back. I can handle it.”

He makes a guttural noise as he snaps his hips, pounding into me in a way that makes me smile. He’s finding his pleasure with me. He’s gonna come because of me .

“Jerr,” he pants before tensing and grunting my name again. His moves slow as he grinds against me, filling me with his release.

My eyes sting. I don’t think I’ve ever been so happy giving someone else pleasure. His arms tremble on either side of me as he slowly opens his eyes.

“Don’t move.”

“I won’t.”

Bane slowly withdraws, both of us flinching from the loss. I'm about to complain, but I don't have time before Bane scoots down and sucks my cock down his throat. I nearly launch off the bed, but his hand on my stomach holds me in place.

I'm lost in a sea of novel sensations, my thoughts floating to a happier place than I've ever visited before when it comes to sex. Nothing negative is clouding my mind right now, just pleasure. Actual pleasure.

The room feels like it's spinning, like I'm floating on clouds as my body tenses and reacts to the heat of Bane's mouth sucking me like his life depends on it.

"Oh god, Bane." My stomach tightens and I feel my cock swelling. I'm astounded. Truly.

Bane doesn't let up at all, dragging his tongue up and down my shaft before he swallows around me. When the dam breaks and the first sticky rope of cum escapes, I'm in shock.

Bane drains me, swallowing every drop I give him until I'm a boneless mess of emotion beneath him. He lays his head on my stomach, and I play with his hair, but the tears are building, and I can't hold them back.

My body trembles with the emotion pouring out of me. Bane moves up, wrapping his arms around me, and I turn on my side and bury my face in his chest. He rubs my back, kissing the top of my head and letting me cry it out. I'm almost forty-two, and I've just had my first orgasm.

It was so worth the wait.

TWENTY-TWO

BANE

I've been staring at Jerryn like some kind of creep for ten minutes, but I can't get over what happened between us last night. It's not unusual that he's in my bed, but it's unusual that he's naked and that my dried cum is on his skin.

My eyes well with tears, but I blink them back. Happy tears. Twenty years of pining, all out in the open. He knows I love him. It felt so damn good to admit it too.

The sound of the coffee pot finishing pulls my attention away. I force myself out of bed to pour us some, then return, setting the mugs on the nightstand and crawling back into bed to lie next to him.

I kiss the back of his neck, inhaling his scent. "Wake up, Jerr."

He moans and stirs, arching his back slightly to stretch. Before he fully opens his eyes, there's a sweet smile pulling at his lips.

"I'm sore." He laughs softly. "Amazing."

"Good sore?"

He nods, finally peeling his eyes open to look up at me. "Morning."

"Morning, sweet thing. I brought you coffee."

“Awesome. Gotta pee. Be right back.” He climbs out of bed and hurries to the bathroom. While he’s gone, I settle with my back against the velvet headboard. He comes out a few minutes later with a bright smile on his face.

I take him in greedily, noting every beautiful part of his body and how his cheeks turn pink from my attention. He climbs in next to me and I hand him his coffee.

“Thank you.” He sips his drink, glancing at me. “Did you sleep well?”

“Incredibly. You?”

Jerryn nods. “Yes.” He drags his finger around the rim of his mug. “Do you know why I cried last night?”

“I assumed you were a little overwhelmed. Was it something else?”

“Yeah.” He takes another sip of coffee. “It was the first time I’ve had a real orgasm.”

I blink rapidly. He’s never told me that. “Really?”

“I tried jacking off a few times, but I couldn’t get it to happen. Definitely not with partners. When I was really young, still a teenager, it kind of happened on its own a few times, like when I was sleeping, but it was just a little bit and it wasn’t intense at all.”

“Oh.”

“Last night was the first time it’s happened like that and with a person.”

Thank fuck I didn’t know that. Talk about performance anxiety. “How was it?”

Jerryn laughs. “How was it? It was mind-blowing. I finally understand what all the fuss is about.” His brow crinkles a bit. “What I want to know is how you’ve been going without for so long when you know how it feels.”

“Jacking off.”

“Right.”

“It’s better with a person, of course, but I get by.” I put my hand on his thigh. “The best it’s ever been was with you last night.”

He rolls his eyes. “You don’t have to say stuff like that. I’m inexperienced, but I’ll get better.”

“Don’t short sell yourself, Jerr. Last night was incredible for me.

It was the culmination of twenty years of wanting you.

Kissing you, touching you...” I blow out a breath as my body reacts to the memories.

“Nothing about it was less than perfect. I’m really honored to have given you your first experience like that. ”

He’s quiet for a few seconds, staring into his mug, and when he looks up, I’m struck by his beauty. It’s like seeing him for the first time again.

“It could only be you, Bane. I’ve spent most of my life wondering why I wasn’t like everybody else and feeling pissed off at how unfair it was.”

I nod, squeezing his knee.

“I thought I’d have to make do, you know? Accept that it would never happen for me, but try my best to be a good partner in other ways. Eventually I gave up.”

“I know.”

“I’m so glad we came back to Willow Bay. Between seeing our friends fall in love, reducing the stress in our lives, and the weirdest call from the past, I think it’s how we got here to this moment.”

“I think so too.”

“For a minute last night, I was kind of sad that we wasted so much time, but then I realized we didn’t. Not really. You’ve been my partner through everything, and sure, we’ve both tried finding love elsewhere, but it was always here, right in front of us. We didn’t waste a thing.”

“We didn’t.” I lift his hand and kiss the back of it. “But I’m glad we leveled up.”

“Me too.” He sips his coffee. “Do you think things will change now?”

“A little.”

Jerryn nods, biting his bottom lip.

“What’s on your mind, babe?”

“How is it gonna change?”

“Well...” I set my mug on the nightstand before I take his and do the same. “I think we’ll spend our time a little differently. More date nights. More showers and baths together. More romance.”

“You’re okay if sometimes I don’t... or I can’t... I don’t know how consistent...” He trails off with a huff.

“Jerr. I’m in this with you for you. I accept every part of you, and I don’t expect sex all the time.

I told you before, it’s about the intimacy, and we’ve got that in spades.

I want to hold you and kiss you and tell you how much I love you.

I don’t want to hold it back anymore. If sometimes our cuddling leads to more, great, and if it doesn’t, that’s fine.

It’s always gonna be fine as long as we’re together. That’s all that matters.”

He swallows hard, blinking fast. “I believe you.” He wipes at his eyes, laughing softly. “I really do.”

“Good. You know I wouldn’t lie to you.”

“Promise me that if it changes, if you need more, you’ll talk to me.”

“Of course I will.”

“Promise.”

I squeeze his hand. “Promise.”

“Okay.”

I lean in and kiss his cheek. “I do think it’s only fair that I warn you about something

though.”

“What?”

“I’ve been holding back a long time, Jerr, and now that I don’t have to, you’re gonna feel the full force of my feelings for you. You deserve to be romanced, and that’s what I’m gonna do.”

He blushes a bit, nodding. “Okay. That means I can do the same, right?”

“Bring it on, sweet thing.”

I hand him his coffee again and he sips it, glancing at my naked body a few times.

“Can we shower together again?”

“Yep. Every day if you want. On Sunday mornings, we can take a bath before brunch and spend the day doing whatever you like. Museums, art galleries, Comic-Con, whatever.”

“What about what you like?”

“Babe, I’ve spent my life doing what I like, and none of it comes close to being your man. When I said you deserve to be romanced, I meant it. I’m gonna make you so happy.”

“I’m already happy. It’s important to me that we do things you like too.”

“Jerr, what things do I like? Video games, eating, and hanging out with you. I’m sure there’ll still be plenty of all that.”

He chuckles. "I guess you're right."

After a pause, I smile. "I can't wait to tell our parents. Wanna bet one of them says it's about time?"

"My mom for sure." He grins. "Maybe your mom too."

"Both of them. At least we have news."

"Finally. Hopefully my mom doesn't start bugging me about marriage. She's still obsessed."

I tilt my head. "We could..." I shrug as my throat clogs with emotions. Marrying Jerryn would be a dream come true, but is it something he could even see himself doing? Neither of us has ever talked about it.

"Could what?"

"Have a wedding." I clear my throat. "Get married."

His face goes blank, but his cheeks turn bright red. "Bane..."

"If you wanted to. I'd love it."

He opens his mouth like he's going to speak, but no words come out.

"This isn't a proposal. Not one you deserve. I'd ask properly."

His eyes turn glassy as his teeth graze his bottom lip.

"Speak to me, Jerr. Too much?"

“You...” His lips tremble as he tries to get words out. “You want to marry me?”

The too-big feeling in my chest blooms, filling me with so much love and rightness that it makes me lightheaded. “God, yes. It would be amazing to be your husband. Saying it out loud is incredible. I don’t think I knew how much I wanted that until right this minute.”

A tear slides down his cheek.

“If it’s too soon, we can wait.”

“Too soon?” he chokes out, shaking his head. “Bane. Too soon? We’ve known each other for twenty years.”

“I know, but this part is new. More for you than me.”

Jerr wipes his eyes with the backs of his hands. “You can ask me properly when you’re ready.” He sniffs. “I’ll be waiting.”

“Does that mean it sounds good to you too?”

“I’ve never heard anything more perfect.”

“Then prepare yourself, sweet thing. I’ve been saving all this up, and now that I can let it out, I’m going to.”

He graces me with a sweet smile. “I can handle it.”

“I know.” My mind is swirling with ideas for the perfect proposal. “I love you so damn much, Jerr. I’ve always loved you.”

“I’ve always loved you too. I wanted to change so I could be a good partner, so I could be seen, but you saw me all along. I don’t need to change.”

“I don’t want you to. You’re perfectly made the way you are, so there’s nothing to change or fix. I’m glad you see that now.”

“Me too.” His smile grows. “I have a confession though.”

“Hit me.”

“I liked it a lot when you had your cock in my mouth.”

My eyes go wide. I wasn’t expecting that. My cock twitches with interest. “Jerr…”

“It felt good, and I really wanted to do it. For the first time, it wasn’t an obligation or a way to pacify someone. I wanted to do it, and I want to do it again.”

“Anytime.”

He nods. “Ready to shower?”

“Yeah.” Before he can get too far, I grab his wrist. “I have something to tell you too.”

“Okay.”

I tug him until he’s in my lap. “You taste like dreams coming true.”

“What?”

“Your cum.” I brush my fingers across his cheek. “Delicious.”

His cheeks bloom pink again as he smiles. “I guess I should find out what you taste like.”

“We can work on that.”

Jerryn drapes his arms over my shoulders. “I’m excited to see what happens. I’ve waited a long time to feel this way.”

“I know you have.” I press a quick kiss to his lips. “I have too, and I can promise you one thing.”

“What’s that?”

“I’m gonna make it worth the wait.”

“It already is, Bane.”

TWENTY-THREE

JERRY

I feel like I'm in a dream.

The last month has been nothing short of epic now that Bane and I are no longer dodging our feelings, and for the first time since puberty I feel like a whole person.

I carry the plate of bacon to the dining room where Bane is already setting out the hash browns.

Lowen has the orange juice pitchers and Oakley has bottles of champagne.

It's expected to snow today, the first one this season, which makes me smile.

I'm looking forward to a snuggly day on the couch with my favorite person.

Salem and Indy come in next, both carrying platters. Kit and Stewart are right behind them with the eggs Benedict. Wren and Ridley went all out this morning, so much so that I probably won't have to eat again until dinner.

We all settle in our seats, passing platters around and filling our plates. Everyone is talking and laughing, and a new sense of joy fills me. It's obvious to me now that I was always a little detached from the romance around me, thinking it wasn't for me, but now I get to have it too.

Bane leans over to kiss my cheek, smiling before he bites into his strip of bacon while I pour syrup over my pancakes. “I hope it doesn’t snow too much this week,” he says. “We have a fun night planned on Wednesday.”

“It isn’t supposed to be much.”

We’re going into the city on Wednesday to see a special showing of a cult classic movie from the fifties. I don’t know what it’s about, but Bane said it was his grandmother’s favorite movie, so I’m up for it. He does so much for me; I’m more than happy to return the favor.

Kit clears his throat loudly, getting everyone’s attention. He shifts in his seat, glancing at Stewart, who smiles and rubs his arm in encouragement.

“Hey, guys,” Kit says. “I want to tell you something.”

Indy nods. “What’s up, man? You okay?”

“Oh yeah, I’m good. It’s in the past, but I want you all to know.” Kit glances at Stewart again, then blows out a slow breath. “My time on the West Coast was... difficult, to say the least. That’s why it was so easy to take Indy up on his offer to come back here to Willow Bay.”

Everyone is silent as we listen. My stomach tightens with nerves. I hope nothing is wrong with Kit.

“I coped with stress and disappointment in unhealthy ways,” Kit continues. “Long story short, my family intervened and I ended up in a treatment program.”

“Dude,” Ridley says. “For alcohol?”

Kit shakes his head. “No. Online gambling mostly, but generally, my tendency towards destructive behavior.”

“Oh, Kit,” Lowen says softly. “Why didn’t you reach out to us?”

He shrugs, scratching his beard. “I was embarrassed. I knew you’d all be there for me, but I was so fucked up, I didn’t even know where to start.”

“How are you now?” I ask.

“Good.” Kit smiles. “Really good. Like I said, this is all in the past, many years ago now, and I’ve done well with my coping skills since then. I’m bringing it up because of something Jerryn told us a while ago.”

I tilt my head. “Something I said?”

“The night you told us about your sexuality,” Kit says.

“You were vulnerable with us, and you trusted us with that. It made me realize that I still had a little bit of shame to work through, so I did, and part of that is telling you guys because I know you’ll still hold me up.

” He looks over at Stewart. “I’m not indestructible, and there’s always a chance that those behaviors could sneak up on me again.

I wanted you all to know in case, but also, just to know me. ”

“Is there anything we can do to support you?” Bane asks.

“Nah, man, I’m solid right now. Moving back here was the best thing I could do. Being with you guys, meeting Stewart, and having Moby’s to focus on has been great

for me.”

“Thanks for telling us,” I say. “We’re glad you’re okay now.”

“Thanks, Jerr.” Kit smiles. “Now, enough heavy talk. Let’s finish eating.”

The conversation starts up again, all of us talking, sometimes as a group, and sometimes in side chats. Sundays make me so happy.

After brunch and cleanup, we all split off in different directions. Bane holds my hand as we climb the stairs to his room. He opens the door first, stepping to the side to let me enter. When I cross the threshold, my jaw drops.

The sitting room is decorated with scattered candles, all lit. The couch is piled high with comfy blankets and pillows, and on the coffee table is a medium-sized white box.

“What is this, Bane?”

“I know how much you love cozy Sundays,” he says, squeezing my shoulders from behind. “I ordered a cake from Rachel’s Bakery in the city.”

“Rachel’s? When did you do all this? It wasn’t like this when we went downstairs.”

“You were whisking eggs when I slipped out.” He grins. “I made sure Wren would keep you busy for a few minutes.”

“This is so sweet.” I twist around to look at him. “You spoil me.”

“I waited a long time to be able to. Hope you’re not too full. I got your favorite flavor.”

“Peanut Butter Splendor?”

“Of course.”

“Oh my god.” I hurry over and sit on the floor, pulling the lid off the box to get a whiff of the incredible peanut butter cream cheese frosting. Before I can dig in, something catches my eye, and my heart races.

“Bane?”

“Yeah, sweet thing?” He kneels next to me, a bright smile on his face.

“What is that?”

“It’s exactly what you think it is.” He reaches into the box and picks up the delicate jewelry sitting atop the cake on a small piece of paper.

“I have zero chill when it comes to you. The minute we talked about getting married, the seed was planted. I’ve been looking for the right ring and then the right moment for a week now, and today felt perfect. ”

My eyes well with tears as realization sinks in, but I’m too choked up to speak.

“I fell in love with you the second I saw your sweet face,” Bane says.

“It hasn’t faded, and it never will. We have what it takes to go the distance, and I promise with all my heart to give you my best every single day until I take my last breath.

” He holds my left hand in his. “Jerryn, will you marry me?”

The tears slide down my cheeks as the words settle over me. I never thought I'd get married, and definitely didn't think it would be to my best friend in the whole world.

"Is this real?" I manage to ask.

"Yeah, babe, it's real. What do you think?"

"What do I think?" I laugh as the tears flow. "Yes. A thousand percent yes."

"You'll marry me?"

I nod, knowing I must look a mess, but I don't care. He really wants to marry me!

Bane holds my hand steady as he slides the black metal band onto my left ring finger. I look down at it and I see engraving on the band. I peer closer to read it. It's our initials, J and B, with a heart between them.

"Your initial had to come first," Bane says. "Otherwise the rings would read BJ."

I sputter a laugh, and with shaky fingers, I pick up his ring and put it on him.

"This is perfect," I whisper, sniffing.

"I'm glad you think so. Good thing I canceled the flash mob."

"What?"

Bane laughs, lifting my hand to kiss it. "Kidding. I think I know you pretty well after all these years, and I know you wouldn't like a public show. I considered asking in front of the guys, but my gut told me you'd prefer a private, simple declaration of my love for you."

I nod, smiling. “You do know me.”

Bane tucks my hair behind my ear. “Are you happy, Jerr?”

“Happier than I’ve ever been.”

“Good. I’ll tell you a funny story.”

“Okay.”

“Do you remember a couple of months ago when Florian gave us the drink samples for our signature cocktail?”

I nod. “Kind of. I remember thinking that we didn’t get individual drinks.”

“That was my doing. I worked with him to come up with something that I hoped would show you I was trying to get your attention in a romantic way.”

“Really?”

“It’s called Love Potion, Jerr. By design. It’s sweet and sexy, just like you.”

I laugh softly. “That’s adorable, but I didn’t get it.”

“Yeah, you did actually.”

“I guess I did.”

“Now—” He gets to his feet. “—let’s dig into this cake and pick a movie to watch. Tomorrow we’ll tell the guys and our folks, then we’ll start planning.”

“Okay.”

After we get settled under the blankets, with the cake box sitting on our laps and forks in hand, Bane leans in and kisses my cheek.

“You’re gonna be my husband soon. That’s so badass.”

“It is.” I exhale slowly. “Thank you.”

“For?”

“Being everything I always thought you were. Not only did you help me see myself as whole, you showed me what love feels like, long before you declared it.”

“The easiest thing I’ve ever done is love you.”

It took a long time for this to happen, but I know now that we weren’t ready any sooner. As Bane has said before, better late than never.

“You’ll still be my best friend,” I whisper.

Bane smiles, kissing my cheek. “Always.”

THREE YEARS LATER

Bane

“This is wild,” Jerryn says, peering through the drapes. “There’s a crowd of people on the sidewalk.”

“Lowen definitely didn’t expect this,” Indy says from his spot on the green velvet couch. “Guess he figured he was old news.”

“He underestimated the public’s interest,” Ridley says, smiling with Wren perched on his lap. “He hasn’t exactly stepped out of the limelight though.”

“Just the Parisian one,” Salem says. “He might be an even bigger deal here than he was there.”

“I think that’s true,” Stewart says. “He has a new write-up in the paper or a magazine every month.”

“It’s cool how his and Oakley’s work blew up,” Kit adds. “They deserve the recognition.”

“Yeah, they do,” I chime in. “And today is the payoff.”

“Isn’t it weird how calm Lowen has been through this whole thing?” Jerryn asks. “I think I expected some diva behavior.”

We all laugh at that, with Indy adding, “I think we all did.”

“That’s how you know it’s right,” Stewart says softly. “He’s not stressed about it because he knows he’s made the right choice this time.”

Kit lifts Stewart’s hand and kisses it. “Well said, Prof.”

Jerryn walks over to where I’m sitting, and I scoot over a little on the small loveseat to make room for him.

We’ve been in this room for almost an hour, waiting for the coordinator to come in and direct us to our spots.

We haven’t seen Lowen all day, but I know when we do, it’s going to be amazing.

The door opens and Oakley enters, looking dapper in a champagne gold tuxedo. He got a fresh haircut and beard trim for the big day, and there’s a serene smile on his face.

“Hey, guys,” he says. “Almost ready?”

“Are you?” Ridley asks. “It’s your event.”

“I’ve been ready.” He chuckles. “Almost since the day I met him.” He walks over to Indy and holds out his hand.

Indy, looking slightly confused, shakes the offered hand. “What’s this for?”

“I’m not sure I ever properly thanked you for having the idea that brought you all to Willow Bay. Without you, I never would have met Lowen.”

Indy chuckles. “You’re welcome, dude.”

“There are people outside,” Jerry says. “Security has it under control, but it’s a big group.”

Oakley nods. “I saw.”

“Does Lowen know?” I ask.

“He does. He’s mildly perplexed but taking it in stride.”

We all exchange glances. Lowen taking something in stride? Wonders never cease.

Not surprisingly, he went from wanting a small, private ceremony to the grand event we’re having today, deciding it wasn’t fair to him and Oakley to downplay their incredible love story.

It’s been in the works for a little over a year, and while lots of NDAs were signed just in case, word still got out to the media, hence the fan club out front.

Who knew so many people were into design?

I rub Jerry’s back and he smiles at me.

Our own wedding took place just six months after I proposed, attended by our families and our closest friends, in the backyard of the mansion.

It was sweet and absolutely perfect. The two weeks we spent in France were epic, thanks to Lowen calling in some favors on our behalf.

We had the best of everything at a fraction of what it would normally cost.

I watch Jerry, simply admiring him. He catches me, and his cheeks turn pink, just like they always have.

“What?”

“Just looking at you, sweet thing. Sometimes I can’t believe how lucky I am that you’re my husband.”

He smiles, reaching over to rub my thigh. “I feel the same way.”

“I know.”

“Can you believe what the last five years have been like?” Indy asks. “We’ve built quite a life together, haven’t we?”

Kit nods, glancing at Stewart. “An amazing life.”

“I’m so grateful,” Wren says. “I don’t even recognize my life now from where it was when I walked into Moby’s.”

“Ain’t that the truth,” Salem says, grinning at Indy.

“It’s been really cool,” Jerryn says. “Not just personally, obviously, but what’s happened with Moby’s. It’s way beyond what any of us expected.”

“Way beyond.” Indy chuckles.

“I couldn’t have seen any of this coming,” Oakley fiddles with his cuffs. “When I met Lowen, my whole life shifted into high gear.”

“You deserve it,” Jerryn says. “Lowen saw something in you. We all know if you didn’t meet his standards, we wouldn’t be here today.”

Oakley smiles. “Yeah, true.” He exhales slowly. “Thanks, guys. For all the support, and for...” His voice cracks as his words trail off. He clears his throat and continues.

“For being good people.”

There’s a knock at the door and a second later the wedding coordinator walks in. Apparently, he’s the most popular wedding planner in the state, and jumped at the chance to do Lowen and Oakley’s wedding.

He’s got his ever-present tablet in his hand, running through the itinerary for about the tenth time in the last forty-eight hours. We’ve been through several rehearsals and planning meetings too. It’s fine though. Whatever it takes to make Lowen’s day perfect.

Standing, we line up in the order we’re going to walk down the aisle. After a discussion, we decided to choose by pulling names out of a hat. It worked out really well since we’ll be on both sides of the couple. Jerryn will be next to Stewart and opposite me.

As we wait for our cue, my mind replays all that’s happened since we returned to Willow Bay.

Moby’s is so popular that a year ago we bought the building next door and expanded our dining room, and the downtown area is thriving with new and revitalized businesses, largely due to our popularity attracting people to the area.

Wren continues to shine, and we’re all pretty sure we’ll lose him at some point to go open his own place, but we’re supportive. He deserves to have his name in lights.

Lowen has less of an active role at Moby’s due to the explosion of his design and renovation endeavors with Oakley. The two of them are constantly booked and have to block out time on the calendar just to have some down time.

Indy and Salem do most of the heavy lifting with the back end of the business.

Salem has learned well under Lowen and runs all of payroll, inventory, and accounting, while Indy manages the front of the house, supported by Kit, Jerryn, and me.

We have a lot more time off now too since we can afford to be staffed well.

We get a lot of students working part time during the school year, and some stay on through the summer, so we're never short-staffed.

Twice a year, we still go hard—for Pride in June and for New Year's Eve. Those are my favorite times because we're all there, even Lowen and Oakley, and it's so damn fun.

I glance over at my sweet husband. He's grown in confidence so much in the past three years.

It's been amazing to witness. He's a lot more confident in the bedroom too, learning how he best responds to stimuli, and now that he feels secure in his relationship with me, he's a lot more comfortable.

It's been so awesome seeing him shed his past insecurities and truly embrace who he is.

I'm just the lucky guy who gets to be his man.

There's not a single thing about my life I would change.

"Okay, gentlemen," the coordinator says, standing at the door and tapping on his tablet. "Let's line up in front of the ballroom doors."

We walk out in order. Before we get too far from each other, Jerryn reaches over and squeezes my hand.

“I love you,” he whispers.

“I love you too, sweet thing.”

His smile grows. I’m really looking forward to the post-wedding activities.

It’s guaranteed to be an epic party, but even more exciting is spending the night at this posh hotel with my husband.

I’ve already got a fancy breakfast scheduled with room service, and a day of fun events since we’re in the city.

Oakley is standing behind us, looking dapper and a bit anxious. Little does he know Lowen’s outfit is going to blow his mind. It’s a custom piece that blends a traditional gown with a tuxedo in a way only Lowen could pull off. All of us are betting Oakley cries when he sees him.

“You ready for this, man?” Indy asks Oakley.

Oakley beams. “So ready.”

The doors open and the coordinator gives us the signal to start our walk. Today we celebrate two friends, but honestly, every day feels like a special occasion. This life, this family, my husband—it’s so much more than I ever imagined for myself.

All thanks to a bold idea and having the bravery to follow through on it.

Thank you for reading Bane and Jerryn’s book.