



Playing with My Heart (My Heart #3)

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Description: It was okay to leave pieces of your heart in the places and people that shaped you. That's how we grow.

Travis Brooks, a carefree physical therapist in Chicago, revels in his wild bachelor lifestyle, thriving on casual hookups and spontaneous adventures. However, as he watches each of his friends fall in love and build lasting relationships, he begins to wonder if there might be something more fulfilling than just random flings.

Parker Reyes, Travis's dedicated new colleague, is in a comfortable yet passionless relationship with his high school sweetheart, David. As Parker navigates his long-term relationship, he grapples with guilt over his growing feelings for Travis, especially as David's demanding job creates increasing emotional distance.

As their friendship grows, so do the feelings between them, forcing both men to confront their fears—Travis must decide if he's ready to embrace love, while Parker must choose between the safety of his past and the exhilarating possibility of a future with Travis. Will they find the courage to pursue what truly makes them happy?

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Chapter One

TRAVIS

“ You’re doing great, Hailey. Keep going. That’s it, just a little more.” My eyes flicked up to my patient’s face. Sweat beaded across her brow and her lips were pinched together so tight the skin around them had turned white. Hands gripping the bars on either side of her, she slowly inched forward, one foot at a time. My assistant, Kara followed along behind with her hands out, ready to catch her if she started to fall.

“You’re doing it, baby. You’re almost to the end.” Hailey’s husband, Matt, walked alongside recording her progress with his phone, and his voice cracked with emotion.

Hailey reached the end of the bars and lifted her head. She looked exhausted, but she was smiling from ear to ear. “I did it.” Her voice was a mixture of elation and disbelief.

I beamed back at her. “You sure did.”

Matt grabbed her in a fierce embrace as the room erupted in cheers. Everyone working there knew about the terrible car accident that had left the young woman’s body twisted and broken. After six months in the hospital and countless surgeries, the doctors had warned her that she may never gain full mobility of her legs, but Hailey was a fighter, and she refused to give up.

The first time I’d met her, I’d asked her the same question I asked all new patients.

What outcome do you hope to achieve through physical therapy? She'd looked me dead in the eye and said, "Oh, it's more than a hope. I'm here because I am going to walk again."

I was still grinning as Matt began kissing the tears that were streaming down Hailey's cheeks but turned away when they began whispering words too low for the rest of us to hear. They'd more than earned their right to a private moment. Matt had come with her to every appointment, a constant support to his wife through months of grueling exercises which had tested the limits of her endurance and often left her in tears from pain and exhaustion. But all her hard work had finally paid off as evidenced by the victory she'd just claimed.

I began jotting down notes in my tablet while Kara grabbed Hailey's wheelchair. When she was settled in, I turned to face her. "How are you feeling?"

Hailey's smile remained bright despite the weariness in her eyes. "Like I can do anything."

"You can." Matt squeezed her shoulder as he gazed down at her adoringly.

"I agree. Your determination and drive are what's gotten you to this point and we're going to need that fighting spirit as we continue. Today was a definite victory, but it doesn't mean I'm going to take it easy on you now. I'm not stopping until you're able to walk out of those doors on your own," I said, hitching my thumb over my shoulder in the direction of the parking lot.

She raised her chin, a stubborn glint in her eyes. "I don't want easy. I want whatever gets me back to living my life the way I was before the accident."

"That's what I like to hear. I'll see you on Monday then."

“Thanks, Travis.” We grinned at each other for a moment before a yawn overtook her.

“Let’s get you home so you can rest.” Hailey nodded tiredly at her husband’s suggestion.

Matt shook my hand, thanking me for everything before taking hold of his wife’s wheelchair and pushing her outside. I watched them through the window as Matt helped her into the car then knelt beside her. He brushed a loose tendril of hair behind her ear then leaned in and kissed her. When he pulled away, he said something that made her laugh. I winced as an unusual ache settled in my chest.

“Are you okay?” Startled at the voice beside me, I looked over to see Justin, my front desk manager, staring at me with a look of concern.

I followed his gaze, surprised to see I’d been rubbing my chest with my hand. I let my arm drop. “Yeah, just a bit of heartburn, I guess.”

He nodded his understanding. “I’ve got antacids in my desk drawer if you need some.”

I glanced back at the window in time to see Matt and Hailey driving away. Shaking off the peculiar feeling, I shifted my focus back on my office manager. Justin was the face of my business. He was the first person clients saw when they came in for therapy and the last person they saw before they left. I couldn’t think of anyone better suited for the job. Not only was he friendly and polite, but he kept the office running smoothly and efficiently.

He was also cute as hell, but I made it a rule to never dip my pen in the company ink, so to speak. If I’d met him anywhere else, I’m sure I would have already tried to sleep with him, but the fact that he worked for me put him strictly in the “off limits”

zone.

“I’ll be fine. Thanks though. What’s next on the schedule?”

“Nothing. Your last appointment needed to be rescheduled, so that’s it. You’re free.”

I peered at my watch. I couldn’t remember the last time I’d finished work before dark. A couple of months ago, I’d signed an exclusive contract with the Chicago Cubs to be their team PT. The move was huge for my business, officially putting us on the map as the number one physical therapy clinic in the city, but it had left my team stretched thin which was why I’d recently hired a new physical therapist to help carry the caseload. “Well, in that case, I guess I’ll head into my office and catch up on some paperwo?”

“Don’t even think about it!” Justin said, shaking his head at me. Grabbing my arm, he steered me down the hallway as he continued. “You’ve been working your butt off for months now. You finally get a chance to leave early and I’m not going to let you waste it stuck in an office. We’ll finish cleaning up here. You go out, have some fun. Call your friends and see what they’re up to or heck, go to bed early if that’s what you want to do. Just enjoy your weekend.”

“But I have stuff?”

“And all that stuff will still be here Monday. Plus, the new PT you hired starts then, doesn’t he?”

“Yes,” I answered reluctantly. Parker Reyes was from a small town outside of Cincinnati but was in the process of moving to Chicago. His resume had proven him more than qualified for the job, but it was in speaking with him during a phone interview that I’d really been impressed. He was intelligent and well spoken, his passion for his work bleeding through over the phone. Instinct told me he’d be a good

fit for our team. I just hoped my instinct was right.

Justin gave me a smug grin. “Good. Then you’ll finally have the help you need. So, see? There’s no reason you can’t get out of here a little early.”

“Who’s the boss here?” I teased.

He cocked his head at me. “Technically, it’s you, but I’m your office manager and I’m going to manage to get you out of here early even if it kills me, and since I’m too pretty to die, why don’t you do us both a favor and get out of here.”

I snorted a laugh. “Did you just come up with that?”

“I did. Aren’t I brilliant?” he retorted, shooting me a dazzling smile.

I rolled my eyes as we reached my office doorway. “I refuse to answer that question. However, I will take you up on the offer to get out of here early if you’re sure you don’t mind closing up.”

“Of course not. Now, go have fun. You’ve earned it.”

I grabbed my keys off my desk and with a wave, headed out the door. I slid into the driver’s seat of my BMW and pulled out my phone, scrolling through my contacts. I tapped on the group chat I shared with my three best friends and typed out a quick message: Hey guys, finished work early for once. Anyone up for dinner at Julio’s tonight?

I drummed my fingers on the steering wheel, waiting for responses. My phone buzzed almost immediately.

Jasper: Hell yeah! Maks and I are in.

I grinned, picturing Jasper's excited face. Another buzz followed shortly after.

Akio: Morgan and I can make it. He's been craving their famous lobster mac and cheese all week.

My smile widened. It would be great to catch up with everyone. As I was about to reply, one more message popped up.

Garrett: Wish we could join, but Dean and I are still in LA. His movie premiere is tomorrow night.

His words sent a pang of longing through my chest. Garrett had met Dean—known to the rest of the world as Vincent Wilder, an action movie star and Hollywood heartthrob—when they were both vacationing in Hawaii. The two of them had fallen hard and fast for each other, quickly becoming inseparable. They had a condo in Chicago and visited as much as possible, but Dean's job required him to be in LA or on location most of the time. While Akio, Jasper, and I understood and were happy for Garrett, we missed him like crazy.

Garrett: Thankfully, that means the promo tour is almost over, and things should start winding down soon. He'll have a few weeks off before he starts his next project, so we'll be heading to Chicago. I can't wait to see you guys and catch up.

A grin split my face, and my thumbs flew over my phone screen as I typed out, It's about time you get your ass home. ;)

Akio: Yeeeeeesss! I can't wait!!!

Jasper: That's fantastic! It'll be great to have the whole gang together.

Garrett texted three heart emojis and promised to let us know when they planned on

arriving before saying he had to run. Akio, Jasper, and I finalized our dinner plans and then I tossed my phone onto the leather passenger seat.

My cheeks hurt from grinning so much. The four of us had become best friends when we met during our freshman year of college, but throughout the years, we'd become so much more than that. The three of them were my family, the brothers I would have chosen if the choice had been up to me. I would do anything for them, and I know they felt the same way about me.

Adrenaline ran through my veins as I started my car. The engine purred but it was soon drowned out as I brought up my favorite music playlist and cranked the volume. With the windows down and the breeze tousling my hair, I pulled out of the parking lot and headed home to get ready.

Painting the sky in vibrant hues of orange and pink, the sun was just beginning to set as I drove up to Julio's. I'd showered and changed, dressing casually in a white button-down with the sleeves rolled up and a pair of jeans that sat low on my hips. As I approached the entrance, I could hear lively chatter and laughter spilling out from inside. Pushing open the heavy wooden door, I was immediately enveloped by the warmth and energy of the bustling restaurant. The rich scent of sizzling steak and freshly baked rolls made my mouth water instantly.

My eyes scanned the room, searching for my friends. I spotted them sitting in a large booth near the back and began winding my way over to them. Akio was laughing at something Morgan had just said, but he jumped up when he saw me approach, throwing his arms around me in a quick hug. I wasn't at all surprised by the gesture. Akio had always been the most affectionate member of our group, having been raised by parents who lavished love and attention on him his entire life. They were wonderful people who had expanded their love to include each of us, treating us as if we were their children too.

Jasper, however, hadn't been as lucky. His parents had done nothing to defend or protect him when he'd needed it the most. The trauma of it all had left an indelible mark on him and—aside from our close circle—he'd struggled to trust anyone with his heart and his body. That was until Maks had come along.

The ex-military turned security guard may have been trained to kill a person with his bare hands, but he'd shown Jasper nothing but care and respect, proving through kindness and devotion that Jasper could depend on him. Maks had pulled my best friend out of the darkness and brought him back into the light, and for that, he had my eternal gratitude. Jasper exuded happiness now, a fact which was evidenced by the carefree grin on his face as he bumped his shoulder with mine as I slid into the booth next to him.

A server walked up to our table with a tray and began handing out ice waters followed by menus. I set mine aside, knowing I'd order my usual steak salad with ranch dressing on the side.

"How's it going?" Maks asked.

I smiled at him. "Good. How are you guys?"

Jasper leaned against his boyfriend who was on his other side, one muscled arm stretched lazily along the back of the booth. "We're great. Maks has been busy with work, but nothing that's required traveling, which is good because I kind of like having him at home."

"Kind of? You kind of like having me home?" Maks teased, leaning down to nuzzle the side of Jasper's neck.

Jasper laughed, twisting out of his ticklish grasp. "Okay, okay. I really, really love having you home!"

“That’s better.” Maks grinned as he pulled Jasper back into his embrace.

“Ugh! You two are sickeningly sweet,” I complained, pretending to gag.

Across the table, Akio and Morgan laughed. “I can’t wait to see when it happens to him,” Morgan murmured.

“When what happens?” I asked, taking a sip of water.

“When you finally fall in love.” Akio’s answer had me choking on my drink.

I shot him an exasperated look as I grabbed a napkin and began wiping my chin. “No offense to you guys, but I’m not looking to settle down and play house with anyone.”

Akio grinned smugly. “Maybe not yet, but someday you’re going to meet someone who takes your breath away and you won’t have any other choice but to fall.”

I turned my head towards Jasper as he placed a hand on my arm. “We’re not trying to pressure you in any way. We simply want you to be happy.”

“I know you do, but I promise, I am happy.” I gave them all a salacious grin. “Why, you should have seen just how happy I was last night when I went home with these two guys I met at Whipped. They were identical twins and hot as fuck. And let’s just say, I wasn’t the only one they focused their attention on,” I added, waggling my eyebrows at them.

“Wait, you mean they...with...each other?” Akio asked, looking positively horrified.

“Try not to think about it,” Morgan said, kissing the side of his husband’s head.

“I think we all could stand to bleach our brains after that one,” Maks noted with a

shudder.

I struggled not to laugh as I gave them my most innocent look. “What’s wrong? I thought you all wanted me to be happy.”

“I changed my mind. Be miserable,” Jasper joked.

“He doesn’t need to be miserable,” Akio added kindly, but then he darted his eyes towards me, his expression turning stern. “Maybe just keep your stories to yourself.”

A laugh burst out of me, unable to hold it in any longer. “You should see your faces.”

Akio’s eyes narrowed. “You made all of that up?”

I shook my head. “Not all of it. I did go home with the twins, but it was a few weeks ago and they didn’t do anything to each other. Although, that would have been HOT!”

“You’re an ass.” The harshness of Jasper’s words was ruined by the twitching of his lips.

I bumped my shoulder with his. “Yeah, but I’m your ass. You guys love me and you know it.”

Maks smirked. “That says a lot more about us than it does you.”

Everyone laughed and I settled back in my seat, a happy smile on my face. We ordered dinner and spent the next hour and a half eating, joking around, and catching up with one another. As I listened to Morgan describe the intricacies of his latest woodworking project, I couldn’t help but notice the way Akio gazed at him adoringly. Their hands were intertwined on the table, wedding bands glinting in the

soft lighting of the restaurant. A familiar ache settled in my chest, one I'd been feeling more and more lately. I pushed it aside, focusing instead on the conversation and laughter around me. These were my best friends, my family. I should be happy for them, not feeling—whatever this was.

“So, Travis, how's work going?” Jasper asked, pulling me from my thoughts. “Akio mentioned you hired a new physical therapist?”

I nodded, grateful for the change in subject. “Yeah, his name's Parker Reyes. He starts on Monday. Seems like a great guy from our phone interviews. I just hope he works out; I could definitely use the extra help.”

“Especially since you signed on to work with the Cubs,” Morgan added.

“That's still so cool,” Maks said with a grin.

“Yeah, this is huge for my business. People trust who the top athletes go to for their own injuries. We've already been flooded with calls for appointments since the news announced the contract was signed.”

“That's great, man. I'm happy for you,” Morgan said.

When the bill came, I insisted on paying, waving off their protests. “It's my treat, guys. I'm just glad we could all get together. But the night is still young. Who's up for some drinks at Whipped?”

Jasper shook his head. “Sorry, but Maks has an early meeting.”

“We've got to get home too. We've got plans with Morgan's cousins tomorrow. Raincheck?” Akio asked hopefully.

“Yeah, sure. No problem.”

We said our goodbyes outside the restaurant, exchanging hugs and promises to meet up again soon. As I watched my friends depart with their partners, that hollow feeling in my chest intensified. I stood there for a moment, hands shoved in my pockets, debating what to do next. It was still fairly early, as I’d said, but suddenly the idea of going to Whipped alone didn’t hold much appeal.

I sighed, running a hand through my hair. What was wrong with me lately? I used to love hitting the clubs, reveling in the pulsing music and sweaty bodies. Now the thought just left me feeling—empty.

I shook my head, trying to clear my melancholy thoughts. This wasn’t like me at all. I was Travis Brooks—confident, fun-loving, always up for a good time. Yet here I was, standing alone outside a restaurant on a Friday night, feeling sorry for myself. “Get it together, man,” I muttered under my breath.

I pulled out my phone, scrolling through my contacts. There had to be someone I could call, someone who’d be up for some fun. My thumb hovered over a few names—guys and girls I’d hooked up with in the past who I knew would be down for a repeat performance. But for some reason, I couldn’t bring myself to call any of them. With a frustrated groan, I shoved my phone back in my pocket and headed for my car. Maybe a night in wasn’t such a bad idea after all.

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Chapter Two

PARKER

I sighed wearily as I looked at all the cardboard boxes that lay strewn about our new apartment, their contents spilling out onto the floor. The tenants before us must not have cared about getting their deposit back because they'd left the place a disgusting mess and we'd had to spend most of the weekend scrubbing it clean before we could even think about unpacking.

By the looks of things, we'd barely even made a dent in it. Guess I knew what I'd be doing that evening—and every evening for the foreseeable future. Especially with David working double shifts at Mercy Hospital where he'd recently been hired—the reason we'd moved to Chicago in the first place. At least he'd been able to get some time off over the weekend to help move the last of our stuff from home to the big city which was more than he'd gotten at his last job.

I glanced at the clock and swore under my breath; first days were not meant to start with a race against time. “David, have you seen my tie?” I called out, rummaging through a pile of clothes that smelled faintly of cardboard and dust.

“Which one? The navy blue with the tiny silver stripes?” David's voice floated from the bathroom, tinged with the sound of an electric razor buzzing to life. I poked my head around the corner, watching him as he meticulously maneuvered the device over his jaw, his concentration unfaltering.

“Yup, that's the one,” I replied, marveling at how even in the middle of disarray, he

managed to look effortlessly put together—a doctor right out of an ad for a prestigious hospital, his dark hair neatly styled, those warm hazel eyes focused.

“Check the box at the foot of the bed. I saw it there last night,” he said without looking away.

“Found it!” I emerged victorious, holding the tie aloft like a flag. Slipping it around my neck, I attempted to tie a knot, aiming for perfection but achieving something just shy of symmetrical.

David turned off the razor and wiped his face with a towel before stepping out to appraise my handiwork. With a gentle touch, he adjusted the tie, his fingers brushing against my collar, sending a familiar shiver down my spine. “There.” He smiled. “Now, it’s perfect.”

“Thanks.” I exhaled, trying to steady the flutter in my chest. “I’m nervous. You know, new city, new job?—”

“Hey,” he said, his hands settling on my shoulders. “You’re going to be amazing, Parker. You always are.” His thumbs smoothed over the fabric of my shirt, a subtle gesture that grounded me. “You’re kind, compassionate, and the best damn physical therapist I know. That clinic is lucky to have you.”

“Your confidence in me is terrifyingly unwavering,” I joked, though his words did bolster my courage.

“Because I know you,” he replied, leaning in to press a chaste kiss to my forehead. “And because I love you.”

“God, what did I do to deserve you?” I murmured, wrapping my arms around him in a quick embrace, feeling the steady beat of his heart against mine.

“Probably some heroic deed in a past life,” David teased, pulling back just enough to wink at me. “Now go out there and knock ‘em dead. Metaphorically speaking.”

“Right, no actual killing of any kind,” I grinned, grabbed my bag and gave him one last peck on the lips. “See you tonight?”

“Hopefully,” he said. It was the best he could offer me, never knowing when an emergency would need his attention.

“Try your hardest,” I replied and with that, I stepped out into the crisp Chicago air, my mind buzzing with the anticipation of what lay ahead.

A gentle chime announced my entrance into the clinic. The reception area of the physical therapy center was bathed in soft, natural light that spilled through the ample windows, casting a cheerful glow over several pieces of modern furniture. I paused for a moment, taking it all in—the inviting space, the hum of quiet conversation, and the faint scent of eucalyptus.

“Hey there! You must be Parker,” a voice called out from behind the front desk, pulling me from my observations. I turned to see a handsome young man with an easy smile that reached his eyes. “I’m Justin, we spoke on the phone a few times.”

“Yes, of course. It’s good to finally put a face to the name,” I replied, my nerves settling with his friendly demeanor.

“You too. Let me give you a quick tour before everyone gets busy,” he suggested, gesturing toward the interior with a sweep of his hand. As we walked, staff members greeted me with smiles and words of welcome. It felt as though I’d stumbled into a family rather than a workplace, and the warmth of it wrapped around me like a blanket.

“Everyone’s pretty laid-back here,” Justin explained as we passed by a row of treatment rooms. “We work hard, but Travis makes sure we also take time to enjoy the little things. He’s big on balance.”

“Sounds perfect.”

“Ah, speaking of the devil.” Justin nodded toward the end of the hallway where a figure approached—tall, with the kind of athletic build that didn’t just hint at his relationship with sports but shouted it from the rooftops. He was blond with strikingly blue eyes and his skin was a gorgeous golden tan, like he’d just gotten back from some tropical vacation.

“Hey, Justin. Who’s this?” Travis asked casually, showing off a set of straight white teeth.

“Travis Brooks, meet Parker Reyes, our new physical therapist,” Justin introduced us.

“Ah! It’s nice to finally meet you, Parker.” Travis extended his hand, and I was momentarily caught in his warm gaze before our hands met in a firm shake. His grip was strong, confident, and something about it sent a ripple of electricity up my arm.

“Likewise,” I managed, hoping my face didn’t betray how taken aback I was—not just by his appearance, which was undeniably striking, but by the casual ease with which he stood there, exuding a sense of fun and spontaneity that I’d always envied.

“Are you settling into the city okay?” His brow lifted in genuine interest.

“Uh, yeah, getting there.” I chuckled, ruffling the back of my hair awkwardly. “Chicago’s quite the change from the small town I grew up in.”

“I’m sure. But you’ll love it here,” he assured me with an easy grin, and somehow, I

believed him.

“Has Justin introduced you to the rest of our team?” he asked, nodding towards the small group of colleagues that moved about the therapy room.

“Yes,” I replied, the corner of my mouth lifting into a smile. “Everyone seems very friendly.” My eyes flicked over to him. “I suppose it helps when the boss is so—chill.”

“Chill?” He laughed—a rich, warm sound that made me want to hear it again. “I’ll take that as a compliment, Parker.” His gaze held mine, a twinkle of mischief dancing in those blue depths. “But don’t let the laid-back vibe fool you. I can be pretty intense, especially when it comes to helping our patients.”

“Guess I have a lot to look forward to then,” I said, feeling a strange sense of ease washing over me. Maybe it was his openness or the way he made me feel seen, but something about Travis sparked an immediate connection that I hadn’t anticipated.

“Speaking of which, why don’t we get started? Today, you can just observe if you’d like. Get the lay of the land so to speak.”

“Sounds good.”

The next couple of hours flew by, the clinic a revolving door of activity and at the center of it all was Travis. He was patient and understanding, treating his patients with compassion while also pushing them toward the next level in their recovery. Watching him was inspiring and I had a feeling I’d learn a lot from working with him.

“How about we grab lunch together?” Travis suggested when he finally had a break between appointments. “There’s a cafe just around the corner—best sandwiches in

town, and it'll give us a chance to chat outside of these four walls."

Lunch? With Travis? The idea sent a surge of excitement—and nerves—through me. "Yeah, that sounds great. I'd like that," I managed, surprised by my own eagerness.

"Awesome." He rose from the stool he'd been sitting on and stood tall, his athletic frame imposing yet inviting all at once.

Taking advantage of the beautiful weather, we decided to walk to the cafe. Travis led us over to a booth by the window, the sunlight filtering through the retro-patterned curtains, casting playful shadows on the tabletop. "Best spot in the house," he declared with a flourish, sliding into the seat across from me. "You get to people-watch without them realizing you're doing it."

I chuckled at his observation, settling into my own seat while taking in the atmosphere. "This place has character," I said, appreciating the eclectic mix of vintage posters and local artwork adorning the walls.

"Wait till you try the food; it's unreal." His eyes sparkled with enthusiasm. As we perused the menu, conversation flowed naturally. We volleyed back and forth, sharing tidbits of our lives amidst laughter and light-hearted banter. Travis regaled me with tales of some of his more...colorful clients which had me laughing harder than I had in a long time.

"And what about you, Parker?" he asked curiously, leaning forward. "Tell me about the man behind the physical therapist."

My mind danced back to the simplicity of home, and I found myself opening up more than I'd planned. "I grew up in a small town near Cincinnati," I began, tracing the condensation on my water glass. "It was one of those places where everyone knows your name, and your business is never just your own."

“Sounds cozy—and suffocating,” he mused, his eyebrows arching in understanding.

“Exactly,” I agreed with a soft laugh. “It was wonderful, but I always felt like there was a whole world out there waiting for me.” My gaze drifted out the window to the bustling Chicago streets. “But now that I’m here, everything’s so fast, so loud—overwhelming at times.”

“Big change,” Travis acknowledged, nodding thoughtfully. “But hey, it’s also exciting, right? New beginnings, new possibilities.” His smile was infectious, and I couldn’t help but mirror it.

“Definitely exciting,” I said, my spirits lifting. “It will just take some getting used to, I’m sure.”

“Give it time. Chicago has a way of growing on you,” he assured me.

Lunch arrived then, breaking the spell of our conversation as the waitress set down plates filled with towering sandwiches and crispy fries. The momentary distraction allowed me to gather my thoughts, yet part of me didn’t want to break away from the easy connection I felt with Travis.

“So, what made you choose Chicago anyway?” he asked as soon as she’d walked away.

I swirled a french fry through a dollop of ketchup and when I looked back up, I found his blue eyes focused on mine. “I didn’t really have a choice,” I answered honestly. His eyebrows reached toward his hairline, and I laughed, realizing how my words could have been construed. “That probably came out wrong. What I meant to say was I wanted to move here because my boyfriend got a new job at Mercy. He’s an emergency room doctor.”

Travis gave me an incredulous look. “You moved here for a guy? Must be pretty serious then.”

I shrugged, swirling another fry through the puddle of ketchup on my plate. “David and I have been together since high school, so yeah.”

He let out a low whistle. “Well, I hope you guys will be happy here. Adjusting to a new city takes time, but you’ve got people around who want to help make this place feel like home for you. Count me in as one of them.”

The sincerity in his voice wrapped around me, a comforting blanket warding off the last of the uncertainty I’d been feeling. “Thanks. That means a lot, really.” I took a bite of my sandwich, savory flavors bursting on my tongue, and I realized that maybe, just maybe, Chicago wouldn’t be so overwhelming after all. Not with someone like Travis at my side.

“Speaking of which—” He scooped up a fry, considering it for a moment before continuing. “How about I show you and David around this weekend? There are some spots in the city that aren’t in the guidebooks. Places where real life happens, you know? Plus, we can grab some good eats along the way.”

“Tour guide Travis, huh?” I teased, my heart warming at the offer. It wasn’t just the invitation that touched me—it was the inclusion of David too. “You sure you’re ready to take on that responsibility?”

“Absolutely.” His laughter was easy, a sound that filled the room with happiness. “Besides, I’ve been told I’m pretty damn good at it. Worst case scenario, we end up at Whipped, dancing the night away.”

“Whipped?” My head cocked to the side with curiosity.

“Only the best club in town. But don’t worry,” he added quickly, a playful wink accompanying his words, “we’ll start with the PG-rated tour. Work our way up to R.”

“Sounds like a plan,” I agreed, already picturing the three of us taking on the city, guided by Travis’s confident stride.

“Great!” He clapped his hands together once, as if sealing the deal.

The rest of lunch passed in a blur of easy banter. As we stood to leave, needing to get back for our afternoon appointments, I realized that maybe, just maybe, I had found a piece of home right there in that bustling café, sitting across from a man whose kindness felt as familiar as it was exciting.

“Hey, Parker.” Kara voice cut through my thoughts as I pushed through the doors of the therapy center. “How was lunch?”

“Great,” I answered, more to myself than to her. My words felt light, buoyant. “Really great.”

There was an ease to the rest of the afternoon, patients coming and going on an endless cycle. I hadn’t realized how much I needed this, the camaraderie and connection, until Travis offered it so freely. There was no denying the pull I felt towards him, a magnetic draw that went beyond his undeniable physical appeal. He was also a genuinely nice guy.

By the time I headed home for the evening, my heart was a mix of gratitude and exhilaration. My phone rang as soon as I stepped outside. “Hey you! How was your first day?” David asked.

“It was great! Everyone was so nice, and I think I’m going to love working there. Travis is very laid-back, but he takes his job seriously. I can tell how much he cares

about the patients. Oh, and Travis even offered to show us around the city this weekend,” I added excitedly.

“Ah, making friends already?” David’s tone was teasing, but I heard the pride underneath.

“More like a guide with benefits,” I joked, earning a playful snort from him.

“Benefits, huh? Should I be worried?”

I laughed. “Only the benefit of knowing every corner of our new city.”

“I’m so relieved to hear that everything went well, babe. This move was a good thing, you’ll see.”

I smiled as I hung up and pocketed my phone. I was beginning to think David was right. This move was certainly looking like a fresh start for both of us.

Chapter Three

TRAVIS

The midday sun slanted through the windows of the café, casting a warm glow on the polished wooden table where I sat across from Parker. We had slipped away from the clinic for a lunch break. So far, he'd proven to be a real asset to our team. He kept up to date on all the latest studies regarding physical therapy and how to apply their findings to our patients, he got along fantastically with the other members of the team, and best of all, the patients loved him.

Not that I could blame them. Parker was one of the nicest guys I'd ever met, as well as being extremely easy on the eyes. Not that I would ever get a chance to do anything about it since he was in a committed relationship, but still, that didn't mean I couldn't admire the view. And what a view it was. He was almost the same height as me with short dark hair, gorgeous gray eyes, and a toned, athletic body that begged to be touched. Such a pity that he was already taken. The things I'd have liked to do with him...

I gave my head a shake, trying to clear those thoughts from my mind. I'd never gotten involved with someone I worked with before. Never even seriously considered it—not even with cute little Justin. So, what was it about Parker that kept pulling my mind in that direction? Not that it mattered. He had a boyfriend; one he'd had since they were teenagers for God's sake. The two of them were probably as sickeningly in love as my best friends were with each of their significant others.

I watched him unwrap his sandwich with careful precision. "Turkey and Swiss, huh?"

I teased, taking an exaggerated bite of my own pastrami on rye. “You’re a classic man, Parker.”

He chuckled lightly, eyes sparkling with amusement. “I’m predictable, I guess. But it’s hard to go wrong with a classic.” His voice was soft but confident.

“Predictable isn’t all bad,” I mused, leaning back in my chair, feeling the pleasant weight of his gaze. “Means you know what you want. Speaking of wanting things—” I began.

He shifted in his seat, curiosity painting his features. “Spill it, Brooks.”

“Alright, here it goes,” I began, my heart drumming an eager beat. “We’ve got a clinic softball team—nothing too serious, just a bunch of us blowing off steam after work. We could use someone with your—let’s call it ‘athletic finesse.’”

A laugh escaped him, and it was a sound that danced down my spine, light and infectious. “Softball, huh? It’s been ages since I played ball.” He took a thoughtful sip of his water, considering the offer.

“Come on, it’ll be fun. Plus, it’s been forever since we’ve had a fresh recruit who can actually swing a bat without pulling something.” My playful grin was met with a contemplative silence that stretched between us. “At least say you’ll come to practice with me after work and check it out. No pressure at all.”

“Alright, you’ve convinced me,” he finally said, a spark of excitement igniting in his eyes. “But I’m warning you, I might be a bit rusty.”

“Rusty or not, you’ll fit right in. We’re more about the laughs than the stats anyway.”

The conversation drifted then, ebbing and flowing around topics from favorite movies

to pro sports. His laughter was like a cocktail I couldn't get enough of—potent and heady. And as we talked, I caught myself admiring the way his hair caught the light, the way his hand gestures punctuated the air with enthusiasm.

“Thanks for inviting me, Travis,” Parker said as we stood to leave, “not just to the practice but—lunch too. I like hanging out with you.” His smile held a warmth that rivaled the sun, and I found myself nodding, pleased that he seemed to enjoy my company as much I enjoyed his.

“Anytime, Parker. Really, anytime.” I tossed our trash, feeling a sense of camaraderie that extended beyond the walls of the clinic.

As we walked back to work side by side, a part of me wondered if this could be the beginning of something more than friendship. But with David in the picture and my own reluctance to tie myself down, I reminded myself to enjoy the moment—for whatever it was worth.

The shift at the clinic wrapped up with the usual flurry of activity, leaving my muscles humming with the satisfaction of a day well spent. I'd already changed my clothes, anxious to get to the field and start stretching my muscles. I tossed my duffle bag into the back seat of my car, then climbed behind the wheel, turning to grin at the man sitting in my passenger seat. “You ready to have some fun?”

Parker chuckled at my enthusiasm. “Sure, but do you mind driving me to my apartment first? I don't think I can play softball in these clothes.” He gestured to his khaki pants and dark blue polo shirt with the clinic name along the left breast.

“Of course not. Give me your address.” I quickly put the address he gave me into my car's GPS then waggled my eyebrows at him. “Prepare for the best playlist you've ever heard,” I warned as I tapped the screen to bring my music library to life.

“Is that so?” Parker chuckled, buckling his seat belt. “Challenge accepted.”

After a few minutes, we arrived at Parker and David’s apartment building. I waited in the car while he ran inside to change clothes. He bounded back down the steps a few minutes later, dressed in a pair of black athletic pants, a white t-shirt that stretched over his broad shoulders, and a ballcap on his head with Fairview Wildcats written across it in white stitching. He looked like every locker room fantasy I’d ever had, come to life and I swore under my breath. It wasn’t fair that he should look so tempting when he was so completely off limits to me.

We drove through the busy city streets, our conversation dancing from topic to topic like old friends. “Back in high school, I played catcher,” I said, tapping my fingers on the steering wheel in time with the beat. “I loved the thrill of it—the strategy, the rush. What about you?”

“Shortstop,” Parker replied, a reminiscent light in his eyes. “There’s something about that split-second decision-making, you know? Plus, I always had the dirtiest uniform by the end of the game. Wore it like a badge of honor.”

“Ah, a man after my own heart,” I quipped, shooting him a sideways glance that I hoped conveyed admiration without crossing any lines.

The field was a familiar sight as we pulled in and parked—well-trodden grass, a diamond carved into the earth, the smell of anticipation hanging in the air. “Here we are,” I announced as we got out of the car. “Welcome to the Thunderdome.”

“Looks more like a softball field to me,” Parker teased, hoisting his sports bag over his shoulder.

“Ah, but this is where legends are made,” I said with a dramatic flourish, leading the way to where my teammates were warming up. Their friendly chatter filled the space,

punctuated by the occasional pop of a ball hitting a glove.

“For those of you who don’t work with us, I’d like you to meet the newest member of our squad—Parker Reyes, shortstop extraordinaire,” I introduced him with a grand gesture, laying it on thick because why the hell not?

“Hey, Parker!” came the chorus of greetings, welcoming smiles and nods coming our way.

“Shortstop extraordinaire, huh?” Logan said, clasping hands with Parker.

Parker glanced at me, amusement dancing in his eyes. “No pressure. Isn’t that what you said?”

“There’s no pressure,” I shot back. “Just don’t let us down, or we’ll never let you hear the end of it.”

“Great.” Parker snorted a laugh.

I clapped him on the back. “Seriously, just get out there and have fun and if you decide this isn’t something you want to do, it’s fine. But maybe it’ll help you make even more friends here.”

“Okay,” he said, his smile genuine.

If Parker was anything like me, he was going to relish the chance to be part of a team again, back out on the field, playing a game that was in our blood. “Alright, everyone! Let’s get this show on the road,” I called out, rallying the troops.

And as we dispersed to take our positions, I watched Parker jog to shortstop, his movements fluid and assured. This was going to be fun, I thought, a surge of

something warm and bright expanding in my chest—something like hope, like possibility.

“Play ball!” someone shouted, and the game began.

The crack of the bat echoed across the field, sending the softball soaring into the early evening sky. With a grace that belied his power, Parker leapt, snagging the ball mid-flight, and landing with the finesse of a cat. Cheers erupted from our makeshift bleachers as I joined in, unable to keep the pride out of my voice.

“Damn, Reyes!” I hollered, throwing my glove into the air in mock exasperation. “You trying to show us all up on your first day?”

He sent me a grin, warm and unassuming, as he tossed the ball back to the pitcher’s mound. Watching him jog back to his position, I couldn’t help but admire the way his muscles moved under the fabric of his t-shirt, the easy confidence in his stride. It was sexy as hell without even a hint of effort, and my body responded with an involuntary pull of attraction.

“Focus, Brooks,” I muttered to myself, adjusting my cap to shield my eyes from the setting sun—and from the view. Parker was a friend, a colleague, and yeah, he had a boyfriend waiting for him somewhere in this big city.

“Hey, boss man! You’re up!” Kara called out, snapping me out of my reverie.

“Right,” I said, gripping the bat and stepping up to the plate. I took a swing, connecting solidly, and sprinted around the bases, the laughter and cheers from my team filling the air. It wasn’t just about the game; it was the camaraderie, the shared moments that turned colleagues into friends.

“Nice hit, Travis!” Parker cheered as I rounded third, his gray eyes alight with

genuine enthusiasm.

“Thanks!” I panted, sprinting toward home plate with a grin.

As practice wound down, with the last streaks of pink and orange fading from the sky, everyone gathered their gear, buzzing with the kind of satisfaction that only comes after a good game.

“Hey, why don’t we grab some drinks to celebrate?” I suggested, wiping sweat from my brow. “There’s this great spot not far from here.” Everyone nodded their agreement. Everyone but Parker. He hesitated, shifting his weight.

“I should really get back to unpacking...” His voice trailed off, and I could sense the reluctance mingling with a desire to stay.

“Come on,” I coaxed, hoping my smile was convincing enough. “The boxes will be there tomorrow, but tonight? It’s about making memories with your new team. What do you say?”

For a moment, he wavered, his eyes reflecting the internal debate. Then, like the clouds parting after a storm, his face brightened with a resolved smile.

“Alright, you’ve twisted my arm,” he conceded, and I felt a flutter of victory. “Drinks it is.”

“Awesome,” I replied, clapping him on the shoulder. We walked off the field together, shaking our heads as we talked about some of the more memorable plays.

“Thanks for inviting me today,” Parker said, sincerity lacing his words as we approached my car. “It feels good to be part of a team again.”

“Anytime, Parker,” I said, glancing over at him. “And just so you know, you’re a natural. The team’s lucky to have you.”

“Guess I’ll have to prove I’m more than just a one-hit wonder,” he joked, and I laughed, feeling the ease between us grow.

“Something tells me that won’t be hard for you to do.” I started the engine, ready to lead the caravan to our post-game celebration, a warm glow settling in my chest.

“Let’s go then,” he said, climbing into the passenger seat. “Lead the way, Captain.”

The neon sign of “Murphy’s Bar” glowed like a beacon as we approached, the din of chatter and clinking glasses spilling out into the cooling evening air. I pushed open the heavy door, holding it for Parker and the rest of our teammates.

“First round is on me,” I declared, guiding us toward the cluster of high-tops near the bar. The team cheered in response.

“Generous!” Parker chuckled, sliding onto a stool with an ease that belied his newness to the group. His gray eyes sparkled under the bar’s dim lights, casting him in a glow that was all too flattering. Damn if he didn’t look sexy.

“Only the best for my team,” I shot back, winking at him as I flagged down the bartender. Orders flew fast and loose, a cacophony of preferences that spanned from craft beer to whiskey sours.

“Hey, Parker,” Jenna, one of our outfielders and a notorious jokester, called out from a few seats over. “You planning on showing us up at every practice, or was today just a fluke to make us like you?”

“Eh, somebody needed to bring the talent to the game,” Parker joked with a grin, and

the table erupted in laughter.

“Careful, Parker,” I interjected, leaning closer so only he could hear, “she’ll recruit you into her weekend shenanigans if you’re not wary.”

“Shenanigans, you say?” He raised an eyebrow, playing along. “Sounds ominous.”

“Trust me, they are,” I said with a laugh, taking a sip of the cold beer that had just arrived. The bitter hops danced on my tongue, a perfect contrast to the warmth spreading through me from the camaraderie around us.

As the night wore on, the laughter grew louder, and the stories more outlandish. Parker’s tales of small-town antics were charmingly quaint compared to our city-slicker escapades, but it was the way his lips curved around each story, the light touch of his hand on his chin as he recounted memories, that held my attention.

“Did you really convince your entire high school to have a flash mob at graduation?” I asked, incredulous yet entirely captivated by the image.

“Guilty as charged,” Parker admitted, the confession accompanied by a sheepish rub of the neck. “David helped me plan it. We thought it’d be a memorable exit.”

“Memorable doesn’t even begin to cover it,” I said, shaking my head in admiration. “I wish I’d been there to see it.”

“Maybe one day I’ll reenact it for you,” he offered, and I couldn’t help the way my heart skipped a beat at the prospect.

“Is that a promise?” I teased, trying to keep the atmosphere light, despite the gravity pulling me toward him.

“Hell no,” he answered, and we both burst out laughing.

Time swept away with our laughter, and it wasn’t until the bar lights brightened for last call that I realized how late it had gotten. Glancing at Parker, who was now thoroughly integrated into a debate about the best 90s sitcom, I felt a warmth bubble in my chest—a happiness that was different from the thrill of a night’s conquest or the satisfaction of hard work.

“Alright, last round, folks!” I announced, unwilling to end the night but knowing we all had early starts tomorrow. “Make it a good one!”

“Here’s to new friends and killer softball plays,” Parker toasted, raising his glass with a smile that reached all the way to those mesmerizing gray eyes.

“Cheers to that,” I echoed, our glasses clinking together, a sound as clear and promising as the connection blooming between us.

As the bar began to empty, I stood up, stretching my arms above my head, feeling the pleasant pull of muscles well-used during practice. I caught Parker, his eyes sweeping over me from head to toe. They widened when they landed on my face, and he caught me staring back at him.

“You ready?” I asked, aiming for a casual tone. I was sure the look he’d given me hadn’t meant anything, but there was part of me that had really liked having his eyes on me.

“Yeah, let’s get out of here,” he said, his smile looking a bit forced in the dimming bar lights.

We said our goodbyes to the friends who were still lingering then made our way outside, stepping out into the balmy summer night. We were quiet as we climbed

back into my car and drove off.

“Man, you were on fire today at practice,” I chuckled, glancing over at Parker, whose profile I could see in the passing streetlights. “I mean, seriously, you’ve got some killer moves out there.”

Parker’s laugh was a warm sound in the enclosed space. “Thanks, Travis. It felt good to be back on the field again. You guys have a great team spirit—makes it easy to jump right in.”

“Easy? Dude, you were like a damn ninja on those bases,” I teased, making a mental note of how his eyes crinkled when he laughed. It was infectious, and I found myself grinning, relieved that whatever tension I’d felt between us back at the bar seemed to have disappeared. “You’re definitely going to keep us on our toes. That is, if you decide to join the team.”

“I’d love to, if you think everyone else is alright with it,” he replied. His modesty was genuine but unnecessary. The guy was a natural, and I knew talent when I saw it—plus, it didn’t hurt that every dive and slide just added to his appeal.

“Of course they will. We’re lucky to have you,” I assured him, turning onto his street. “I’m looking forward to seeing what we can do against Pete’s team this year. Those damn electricians have managed to beat us the last two years. I can’t wait to see their faces when they get a load of you out there.”

“Pressure’s on now,” Parker joked, though the undercurrent of excitement was palpable between us. “I’ll have to make sure I don’t disappoint.”

“Impossible,” I said, more earnestly than I intended. But it was the truth—Parker had this way of exceeding expectations without even seeming to try. As we pulled up to his building, I found myself wishing I could prolong the night, keep this easy flow of

banter going, but reality was a persistent third wheel.

“Thanks for the ride,” he said, his hand resting on the door handle. “And for inviting me today. It really meant a lot.”

“Anytime,” I replied, the word simple but layered with a sincerity that I hoped conveyed more than just friendly gratitude. “See you tomorrow at the clinic?”

“I’ll be there,” he answered, flashing me a final smile before stepping out of the car.

Watching him walk away, my thoughts flickered to the way his laughter had filled my car, the stories we’d shared which helped me get to know him beyond the professional exterior I met at work. There was something about Parker that felt like—well, like a possibility waiting to unfold.

With a sigh, I maneuvered my car back onto the road, the empty passenger seat beside me suddenly too prominent. But the thought of tomorrow, another day with Parker’s presence, kept the loneliness at bay.

“Tomorrow,” I murmured to myself, a promise wrapped in anticipation.

Chapter Four

PARKER

The first light of dawn had barely peaked above the horizon when I stirred awake, a tremor of excitement fluttering in my chest. I'd been looking forward to this day all week. I was finally going to be able to introduce David to Travis who had offered to show us some of the best places in Chicago.

Smiling, I rolled over to look at my boyfriend. His chest rose and fell in an even rhythm as he slept, his face as familiar to me as my own. After all, I'd been staring at that face for over a decade. I traced the line of his jaw with my fingertips and his eyes fluttered open. "Good morning," I whispered.

A lazy smile spread across his lips as he pulled me closer. The scent of his evening shower lingered on his skin—warm and comforting, weaving a sense of home into the air that surrounded us. "Hey," he murmured, voice rough with sleep.

Our mouths met in a kiss that promised more, igniting a slow burn that spread throughout my veins. This was the connection that had bound us together as high school sweethearts to navigating adult life side by side. Our hands roamed, tender at first and then with growing urgency. My body began to awaken under his touch. After all these years together, we knew exactly where to touch the other, how to bring each other to the heights of pleasure. But before the heat between us could build into a flame, a shrill beep sliced through the quiet room.

David tensed, and I fought back a sigh, knowing that sound all too well—the

harbinger of duty calling. He reached for the phone on the nightstand, and the crease between his brows deepened as he read the text that illuminated the screen. “It’s the ER,” he said, voice laced with resignation. “There’s been a massive pileup.”

“But what about our tour of the city?” I asked, hating the petulant sound in my voice but unable to stop it.

“I’m sorry, babe. They’re calling everyone in, I have to go. But why don’t you still go with Travis. Let him show you around and then you can show me another day.”

I understood the demands of his job better than anyone, but it didn’t make these moments any easier. His schedule had been a bone of contention between us for a while. I’d begged him to take a job in a medical office, somewhere with more consistent hours, but he’d insisted that working in the emergency room was his true calling. I tried to be understanding. I wanted him to follow his dreams, to be happy, but more and more, it seemed like the thing that made him happy was the exact thing that was pulling him away from me. I’d been hoping the move to Chicago would be a fresh start for us, but so far, I wasn’t convinced.

“Of course,” I replied, trying to mask the disappointment that gnawed at my insides. “Go save lives, Dr. Hero.”

He offered a rueful chuckle, pecking my lips one last time before slipping out of bed. I watched the muscles of his back flex as he gathered his things. “I’m sorry about...” David said, gesturing to our bed and what had been about to transpire there. “We’ll make up for it tonight?”

“Sure,” I answered smoothly, forcing a playful wink even though my stomach twisted with the knowledge that he would probably be too tired by the time he got home to want to pick up where we’d left off.

David hurriedly got ready in the bathroom then with one last apologetic glance, slipped out of our room. The apartment door closed a few seconds later with a quiet snick that echoed loudly around the small space, like the sealing of a tomb. I lay back against the pillows, the remnants of our interrupted intimacy hanging in the air like a question left unanswered. Frustration simmered beneath my skin, mingling with a restlessness I couldn't quite explain.

My gaze landed on the empty space beside me, cold and unyielding without David's warmth. It was supposed to have been a day of fun and friendship, a chance to explore our new surroundings while strengthening our bond. But now, with plans unraveling, I was left with a pulsing silence and ache inside my chest.

Maybe this was some sort of sign, a nudge from the universe telling me to take a step back and reevaluate. David and I had built a life together, but were we still walking the same path? Shaking off the thought, I swung my legs over the edge of the bed. I needed to clear my head, find a way to salvage the day.

I grabbed my phone, the screen lighting up with David's last message—a string of apologies over missing dinner the night before. With a sigh, I typed out a text to Travis. Hey, looks like our plans have changed. David got called into work.

Almost immediately, my phone buzzed, and Travis' reply popped up. No worries! How about I swing by and pick you up? Chicago won't explore itself!

A smile tugged at the corners of my mouth, my mood from just a few moments before, lifting. That was Travis—ever ready to seize the day with a grin. “Yeah,” I whispered to the empty room, “let's do this.”

The city greeted us with its symphony of sounds and vibrant array of colors, and we dove headfirst into the heart of it all. Millennium Park was alive with tourists and locals alike, all basking under the summer sun, a constant breeze keeping it from

becoming unpleasantly hot. I suppose there was a reason Chicago was known as The Windy City. Travis's laughter was infectious as he snapped photos of us with the gleaming curves of The Bean reflecting our grinning faces.

"Come on, Parker," he said, a challenge sparkling in his blue eyes. "Let's see if we can get the whole skyline in one shot."

We posed and stretched, angling our bodies in ridiculous ways until we were both doubled over with laughter. It wasn't just the absurdity of our attempts, but the easiness between us. "Next stop, Navy Pier!" Travis announced with a flourish, leading the way.

As we strolled along the pier, the breeze off Lake Michigan carried the scent of fresh popcorn and cotton candy. "Ready to conquer new heights?" he quipped, motioning toward the towering Ferris wheel.

"Uh...Only if you promise not to let go," I replied, only half-joking.

"Never," he vowed, and there was something in the solemnity of his tone that made my heart skip a beat.

The world fell away as we ascended, Chicago sprawling beneath us. I leaned against the railing, peering down at the tiny figures below, but it was the occasional brush of his knee against mine that had caught my attention. It was purely innocent, but the jolt of electricity that traveled up my leg every time was as exciting as it was confusing.

We rode the wheel twice, the second time in comfortable silence, our shoulders touching, our gazes lost in the horizon where sky met city. As we stepped off, the glow of the setting sun painted everything in muted colors, and I knew that this moment, this day, would be etched in my memory forever.

“Thank you for showing me around. Chicago truly is a beautiful city,” I said.

Travis beamed at me, the unfiltered joy on his face momentarily stealing my breath. “I’m glad I could help you fall in love with it. But the tour isn’t over yet. You still need to try some of the food.”

My stomach decided right then to snarl with hunger, letting out a loud and embarrassing growl. With a laugh, Travis suggested we cap off our tour with some authentic Italian cuisine. “Romero’s isn’t far from here,” he said, his eyes sparkling with anticipation. “Best carbonara in the city.”

As we pushed through the restaurant’s front door, the aroma of garlic and fresh basil enveloped us. The hostess, a stunning redhead, greeted Travis like an old friend as she led us through the dining area where customers chatted quietly, enjoying their meals as well as the company. Soft music played in the background, giving the restaurant a warm, cozy feel.

The hostess showed us to a table nestled in a corner, the flicker of a candle casting playful shadows across the crisp linen tablecloth. We’d just begun looking over the menu when two men emerged from the kitchen. The tall, dark, and handsome one was wearing black slacks and a deep plum colored button-down while the shorter man—who looked awfully familiar—wore an apron over his clothes. “Travis!” the shorter one called, tossing his arms around Travis’s shoulders. I stared at him, trying to figure out if we’d met somewhere before.

Travis hugged him back then shook hands with the taller man before turning toward me. “Guys, this is Parker Reyes, a friend of mine and the new physical therapist at the clinic. Parker, this is Giovanni and Caleb. They own Romero’s together, but Caleb is the one who draws everyone in with his amazing cooking,” he said.

“Nice to meet you,” I said, shaking hands with them both, but the fact that I couldn’t

place where I'd seen Caleb before nagged at me. There was something about him...perhaps the tilt of the head or maybe the shape of his smile. It was driving me nuts. "I'm sorry, but you just look so familiar. Have we met before?" I asked, curiosity knitting my brows together.

Caleb let out a chuckle that seemed to fill the room. "I get that a lot," he admitted. "You might know of my twin brother, Carter Greene?"

My jaw dropped slightly. Of course! Carter Greene, the rock and roll superstar whose posters had adorned the walls of half the dorm rooms on campus. I could see it now and the resemblance was striking.

"Wow, that's—Wow," I managed, earning a chuckle from both Travis and Giovanni.

"Caleb is also a cousin to my friend Morgan who's married to my best friend, Akio. So, we get invited to a lot of the same functions," Travis explained. He smiled as he looked back at his friends. "Parker just moved here from the Cincinnati area, and I've been showing him around the city. No tour of Chicago would be complete without a stop at Romero's."

Dimples appeared on Caleb's cheeks as he grinned. "Well, I certainly hope you enjoy your meal after all that build up."

Giovanni tucked his arm around Caleb's waist. "You never disappoint, sweetheart. You two enjoy your dinner. And order anything you'd like. It's on the house."

He waved us off when we tried to argue then the two of them retreated to the kitchen. "They seem like great guys," I mused.

"Yeah, they're the best. And still totally crazy about each other even though they've been together for years." I couldn't be sure, but I almost thought I detected a hint of

longing in Travis's voice.

Our conversation flowed as freely as the wine from our glasses. We traded stories of our childhoods. I told him about my family—two loving parents, two sisters and a brother all of whom were older than me—and how their unwavering support in all aspects of my life had helped shape the man I'd become.

“I want what my parents have, you know? They've been married for forty years and are still madly in love with each other. That kind of devotion is hard to come by these days.”

Travis nodded thoughtfully. “I know what you mean. My parents were the same way. They were each other's best friends.”

“Were?” I hedged carefully in case he didn't want to talk about it.

He gave me a sad smile. “Yeah. They both died in a car accident when I was thirteen. I was an only child, so one minute I had a family and the next...”

I reached across the table, covering his hand with my own and rubbing soothing circles over it. “Oh, Travis, I'm so sorry. That must have been awful.”

He nodded. “It was, but luckily, my mom had a younger sister who was willing to take me in, so I didn't end up in the foster system. Aunt Lisa was only nineteen when my parents died, barely an adult herself. She had no idea what she wanted to do with her own life, much less how to raise a thirteen-year-old boy, but she tried her best. She was always more of a friend than a parental figure, but we made it work, and I love her to death.”

I moved my hand back to my lap but noticed his were shaking slightly when he lifted his water glass to his lips, and I got the feeling this wasn't something he talked about

often. I felt honored that he'd shared this piece of himself with me. "So, what made you decide to go into physical therapy?"

Travis seemed grateful for the change in subject because his smile made a reappearance. "I was like you, active in sports throughout school. I played all sports at one time or another, but basketball and baseball were my favorites. Once I graduated, however, I was ready for a change. I didn't want to play sports in college, but instead, looked into a degree in physical therapy. I'd always admired the athletic trainers who worked with us in school, and I wanted to be like them, to help people recover from injuries and surgeries whether they happened through sports or not."

The server came with our food then, setting down plates of delicious smelling pasta and a basket of fresh baked garlic bread. Travis waited until she walked away and then his eyes met mine. "What about you? How'd you end up in this career?"

I finished the bite of carbonara I'd taken, moaning at the creamy texture, then I swallowed and wiped my mouth with my napkin. "My true love was always baseball. I played a little football, but nothing got to me the way baseball did. I ate, slept, and breathed that sport and I dreamed of playing college ball and maybe eventually getting to play in the Majors one day. But then I got injured during my senior year. I was rounding the bases and collided with the third baseman. It was a hard hit. He got a concussion, and I ended up with a torn ACL. I started treatment right away, but by the time it healed, I'd already missed most of the season. And since I wasn't playing?—"

"Then recruiters couldn't see you in action," Travis supplied knowingly.

"You got it. It ended up being a blessing in disguise though because if that injury hadn't happened, I never would have gone into physical therapy—which I love. I picked that field because I wanted to help other athletes who have been sidelined the way I was, and it's turned out to be the most fulfilling career I could have chosen.

Helping people isn't just a job to me, it's a passion."

"I know what you mean," Travis said, his gaze holding mine. "Seeing someone take those first steps after an injury, it's like witnessing a personal miracle. Makes all the time and effort and pain worth it."

"Exactly." I smiled, feeling a kinship that transcended our professional roles. He seemed to understand me in ways that no one else ever had. Not even David.

"Travis," I began, hesitating as our eyes locked again. "Today was—it was more than I expected."

"Unexpected in a good way, I hope?" His tone was light, yet there was an undercurrent of something deeper.

"Definitely good," I assured him, my heart skipping a beat. "Thank you for showing me around."

"It was my pleasure," he said softly.

The hum of the car engine was soothing after spending the day immersed in the noisy city. I leaned my head back against the seat, a contented smile playing on my lips. I turned my head, staring at his profile while Chicago's night lights blurred outside the window. "Thanks again for today. I can't remember the last time I laughed this much."

"Anytime. I had a great time too," Travis replied. "It's been a while since I visited some of the better places our city has to offer. It's too easy to take them for granted when you live here, I suppose."

I nodded my understanding then turned back to look out the windshield as the car

slowed down. As we pulled up to my apartment building, a sliver of guilt wedged itself into my chest. David should have been the one making me laugh today, not Travis. And yet, throughout the hours spent exploring and eating and laughing, my boyfriend had barely even entered my mind.

“See you at work on Monday?” Travis asked as he parked the car, pulling me from my reverie.

“Of course,” I assured him, though part of me wished I could rewind and relive this day all over again. I stepped out onto the curb, the cooler night air almost refreshing after the warmth of his car.

“Goodnight, Parker,” Travis called out, his tone conveying a hint of something I couldn’t quite decipher.

“Night, Travis.” I offered him a final wave before darting up the front steps of my building. He waited until I was safely inside before pulling away from the curb.

David still wasn’t home when I got inside our sparsely furnished apartment, so I slipped out of my jeans and into a pair of well-worn sweats that still smelled faintly of fabric softener. My eyes landed on a box in the corner and my fingers brushed across the label marked Memories . I hesitated, contemplating whether to dive into unpacking or leave it for another day.

Determined to make progress, I tore open the flaps, revealing photo albums and trinkets from my life before Chicago. But as I arranged video game consoles and slotted old DVDs into their new homes, my mind kept betraying me, wandering back to Travis. To his sun-kissed hair and his infectious laugh that seemed to resonate in a place deep within me.

I forced myself to focus on the task at hand. Shuffling through a box labeled Books ,

each novel I pulled out was a reminder of quieter nights with David. I sat down on the floor, back against the couch, surrounded by memories in physical form, but my treacherous mind returned again to Travis. The way his easy smile, his ability to make even the smallest things fun, the warmth of his arm as it casually brushed against mine. It was electrifying, this new camaraderie, and the realization hit me hard—I hadn't felt this kind of excitement in a very long time.

“Fuck,” I whispered, the word slipping out like a secret confession. Was this what I'd been missing? This thrill of connecting with someone who shared my passions, my dreams? With David, our conversations had grown practical, the spontaneity of our early days replaced by schedules and routines.

I stood up abruptly, a restlessness overtaking me. Moving to the window, I watched the city lights blink, a silent witness to my inner turmoil. The image of Travis's easy smile persisted, unbidden and unwelcome, yet impossible to shake.

“David's just busy, that's all,” I tried to convince myself. “You need to spend some quality time together, reignite what you've always had.” But the words felt hollow, even to my own ears. David was incredible—a brilliant doctor, compassionate and caring—but when was the last time we'd really connected? Really laughed until our sides hurt or chased an adventure without a care in the world?

The reflection staring back at me from the glass was conflicted, caught between loyalty to the past and an unexpected spark that hinted at—what? Possibilities? A different path? “Shit.” I scrubbed a hand over my face, my heart a battleground of shoulds and what-ifs. I loved David; I did. But the time spent with Travis had opened up questions in my mind. Questions that I couldn't ignore, no matter how much I wished I could. I needed to figure this out. For David's sake as well as my own.

The city hummed below, indifferent to my personal crisis, as I sank into the sofa once more, cradling my head in my hands. Tomorrow, I promised myself, tomorrow I

would talk to David. Maybe schedule a date night with him. We'd find our way back to each other, rekindle what we had. More determined than ever, I set to work unpacking boxes.

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Chapter Five

TRAVIS

The crack of the bat against the softball was as satisfying as the grin on Parker's face when he sprinted to first base. "Not bad, Reyes," I hollered from the dugout, clapping my hands, unable to keep the pride from my voice.

"Like riding a bike," he shot back with a wink, dusting off his pants as he settled on the bag. The late afternoon sun cast an orange glow over the field, and I couldn't help but think how right this felt—Parker and me, just two guys enjoying the game and that special bond that comes from playing on the same team.

I chuckled, glancing out to the field where Pete Landowski and his merry band of electricians were setting up for the next play. The rivalry between our two teams had been going on for the last five years. It was friendly as far as getting along when we were off the field, but when it was game time, there was quite a bit of trash-talk, both sides dead set on claiming a victory.

Kara's husband, Troy, was the next one up to bat, and I could feel my anticipation beginning to build. Troy was one of our strongest players. If anyone could help get Parker around to home plate, then it was him. I held my breath, my fingers turning white as they gripped the chain link fence that protected the players within the dugout.

The pitcher lobbed a fastball that would have flown over top the base with most players, but Troy's stance was perfect, his focus zeroed in on the ball. He swung the

bat, and I heard a loud crack! An audible gasp sounded from my teammates behind me as we watched the ball soar through the air, too high and too far for Pete's team to catch it.

A cheer went up as Parker took off, rounding the bases like a pro. I kept my eyes on him, unable to tear them away. He was incredible, his movements fluid, and in those few seconds, I could believe that if an injury hadn't sidelined his dreams, he would have made it into the Major League.

He stepped over home plate, followed a few seconds later by Troy. Kara ran out of the dugout and leapt into her husband's arms, her legs and arms wrapped tightly around him as she peppered his face with kisses. Parker's eyes scanned the dugout, searching, and my heart skipped a beat as they landed on me.

His smile was radiant, matching my own as he strode towards me. I tossed an arm around his shoulders and drew him in for a friendly hug. He smelled like sunshine, fresh air, and clean sweat, an intoxicating mixture that my body reacted to immediately. I quickly let go and took a step back, needing to get a fucking grip before I did something stupid—like lick the bead of sweat that was running down the column of his throat.

“Great work out there. I think we're finally going to beat those assholes,” I said, my words coming out rougher, more forceful than I'd intended.

If Parker noticed, he didn't let on. He grinned instead. “That felt amazing. Thanks again for inviting me to be on the team. I didn't realize how much I'd missed the game until I got back out there.”

“Well, you know what they say, you can take the player out of the game, but you can't take the game out of the player.”

We laughed at the old saying, but the laughter died in my throat when I saw his smile falter as he pulled out his phone, his fingers hovering over the screen. “Everything okay?” I asked, stepping closer.

He let out a sigh, one that seemed to carry the weight of the world. “It’s David. He’s canceling on me again.” He tried to mask the hurt in his voice with nonchalance, but I heard the underlying disappointment.

“Damn, man. That’s rough.” I ran a hand through my hair, feeling an unexpected protectiveness swell within me. “You’ve been having a lot of rain checks lately.”

“Yeah.” Parker pocketed his phone, his gaze fixed on the outfield. “You know, we moved here together because of his job at the hospital. I thought it would be a new chapter for us, but lately, it feels like—I don’t know—Like I’m an afterthought instead of a priority.”

“Sounds lonely,” I said quietly, watching as he traced a line in the dirt with his shoe.

“Sometimes,” he admitted, a vulnerability creeping into his voice that made my chest tighten. “I mean, I love him, but there’s only so much understanding I can have before it starts to feel like I’m the only one trying.”

I wanted to tell him he deserved better, that anyone would be lucky to have someone as genuine and caring as him, but those words felt too heavy, too loaded. Instead, I nudged his shoulder with mine. “For what it’s worth, you’re never just an afterthought around here. You’re like the headline, Parker.”

He offered a small grateful smile, and I felt something shift inside me—a dangerous, thrilling tilt in the balance of our friendship. But I shoved it down, keeping it light. “Come on, let’s show them how it’s done. Your turn to pitch, and I wanna see you strike out Pete.”

“Challenge accepted,” Parker said, the spark returning to his eyes as he walked toward the pitcher’s mound. But even as we slipped back into our easy banter, I couldn’t shake the sense that we were both standing on the edge of something neither of us were quite ready to admit to. Not yet, anyway.

The game wrapped up with our team claiming a narrow victory, and we all shared high-fives and Pete and I exchanged some playful jabs. I caught Parker looking at his phone again, his expression a mixture of disappointment and resignation that tugged at something deep in my chest.

“Hey,” I said, pulling him out of his thoughts. “You got plans tonight?”

Parker pocketed his phone and shook his head, the corners of his lips turning down ever so slightly. “Not anymore.”

I clapped a hand on his shoulder, feeling the solid muscle beneath his shirt. “Well, now you do. I’m having dinner with my friends and you’re coming too,” I said, making it more of a statement than a question.

“Are you sure?” Parker raised an eyebrow but there was a hopeful glint in his eyes.

“Absolutely. My friends would love to meet you. They’re good people—you’ll fit right in.” I smiled, hoping to convey the sense of belonging I wanted him to feel.

“Thanks, Travis.” His gratitude was sincere, and it made me feel like I’d done something important, even if it was just offering him a spot at our table.

I drove to each of our places so we could grab a quick shower and change clothes, the comfortable silence between us filling the space. “David’s always been focused on his career,” Parker began, breaking the quiet. “I knew what I signed up for, but sometimes—I don’t know. I thought there’d be more ‘us’ in the equation.”

Listening to him, I fought the urge to say more than I should—to tell him that he was worth more than being someone’s afterthought. But I held back, choosing instead to offer support in the way I knew best. “It takes a strong person to stand by someone with big ambitions. It says a lot about you, Parker.”

“Or it says I’m a pushover,” he replied with a self-deprecating chuckle, but the humor didn’t quite reach his eyes.

“Definitely not a pushover,” I countered firmly. “You’re compassionate, man. There’s a difference.” He turned to look at me, and I felt the weight of his gaze, heavy with things left unsaid. We drove on, the city lights beginning to twinkle as evening closed in around us.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered, looking down at his hands.

I glanced over at him, surprised. “What for?”

He let out a loud sigh as he tilted his head back on the headrest and stared up at the roof. “You hired me to help you out, but it seems like all you’ve done since I got here was take care of me; showing me around, letting me join the team, introducing me to your friends.”

“Hey!” I reached over and put my hand on his arm. His skin felt warm, the muscles firm beneath my fingertips. Normally, I would have reveled in the fact that I was touching him, but this wasn’t the time. Parker was hurting and I was determined to do whatever it took to bring a smile back to those full lips. “That’s not true at all. You’ve been a great help. We’ve been able to accept so many new patients because you’re there to help me carry the workload. As for the team, you’re a big part of why we finally got a win over Pete’s group today. As far as the rest goes...I didn’t do any of it just to be nice or because I feel sorry for you. I did it because I like spending time with you. You’re my friend and I take that shit seriously.”

“Thank you. I like spending time with you too. You’ve made the adjustment to living in the city much easier. But enough about me,” Parker said, shifting gears. “Tell me about these friends I’m about to meet.”

My smile was instantaneous. “They’re the best. I mean it. You won’t ever find a better group of guys.”

I could feel Parker’s eyes on me, probably surprised by my impassioned words. Admittedly, there wasn’t a lot in life that I took seriously, but my work and my family were two things I would always fight for.

“How did you meet?”

“Akio, Garrett, Jasper, and I all met during our freshman year of college. Despite our different backgrounds and interests, somehow, we all just clicked. We became best friends and from then on, we’ve been inseparable. Well, mostly.”

“Why mostly?” Parker asked and I could hear genuine interest in his voice.

I shrugged. “Eh, you know, life happens. They’ve all met people and fallen in love. Garrett lives in L.A. most of the time and he travels a lot, but he still has a place here in Chicago and he comes to visit as often as he can. The rest of us still get together every week for dinner. It helps us keep up with what’s going on in each other’s lives.”

My eyes flicked over to Parker, and I saw him smiling. “You guys sound close.”

“We are. These guys are my family, and that includes the men they love. They’re all like brothers to me. I’d do anything for them, and I know they feel the same about me.”

“Well, in that case, I definitely feel honored to get to meet them,” he said sincerely.

“You should. I don’t bring just anyone to our dinners.” I said it in a teasing manner, but it was the truth. I never brought anyone to meet my friends. The fact that I was bringing Parker was no doubt going to have the guys asking questions. Questions I didn’t have an answer to.

“Good to know I’m not just anyone,” he said, and I could hear the undercurrent of something more in his words—a burgeoning bond that was growing stronger with every shared confession and laugh.

I bit my tongue before I could say the words that threatened to spill from my lips. Words like, “Yeah, Parker, you’re definitely not just anyone.”

Stepping into the pub with Parker by my side, I was acutely aware of every movement he made. The way his hair caught the soft glow of the overhead lights, how his eyes seemed to hold secrets and stories that I was only just beginning to hear. It was a dangerous slope, being this close to someone who stirred something in me that I couldn’t—shouldn’t—entertain.

“Travis, you okay?” His voice cut through my thoughts, laced with genuine concern.

“Absolutely,” I lied smoothly, flashing him a grin that felt like it belonged to someone else. I knew I was crossing lines in my head that friends didn’t cross. I wanted things with Parker that I had no right to want. But there I was, watching him light up the room with his mere presence, feeling a sense of pride that I was about to introduce him to my inner circle.

“Let’s grab our drinks,” I suggested, leading the way to the bar. He followed, and as we maneuvered through the crowd, I felt the warmth of his body close to mine—a proximity that sent a thrill down my spine.

Handing him a beer, our fingers brushed, and it was like a damn live wire zapped between us. I jerked back slightly, my heart thumping erratically against my ribs. His eyes met mine, wide with that same shock. For a long moment, neither of us moved, the air charged with something unspoken.

“Thanks,” he said eventually, his voice steady but his hand trembling ever so slightly as he took the bottle from me.

“Anytime,” I mumbled, watching him take a sip of his drink. What the hell is happening to me? This wasn’t the Travis Brooks playbook; this was uncharted territory.

The familiar clatter of dishes and laughter surrounded us as we settled into the large rounded booth at O’Malley’s, the pub where my friends and I had made countless memories. The wooden table was worn from years of rowdy dinners and spilled pints, but it felt like home.

“Uh...Hey, Trav!” Jasper was sitting in the curve of the booth, nestled into Maks’s side. His voice did nothing to hide his curiosity.

“Hi, guys! This is my friend, Parker Reyes,” I said then gestured toward the two men whose eyes were currently darting back and forth between me and Parker like they were watching a tennis match. “Parker, this is Jasper and his boyfriend, Maks. And these two?—”

“Hi! I’m Akio and this is my husband, Morgan,” Akio said warmly from across the table before I could finish. Parker took turns shaking each of their hands.

“Parker Reyes. Oh! You’re the new PT Travis told us about,” Jasper exclaimed as he made the connection.

“Whatever he told you, it’s all lies,” Parker joked.

“Oh, so you’re not great with all the patients?” Maks quipped.

“And you aren’t God’s gift to softball?” Morgan teased.

My face flushed hot as Parker turned his head in my direction, a playful smirk on his face. “Is that so? Well, in that case, it’s all true. Every word.”

I nudged his shoulder with my own. “Don’t let it go to your head, Reyes,” I joked to cover my embarrassment.

“I wouldn’t dream of it. One of us needs to stay humble,” he teased back.

I smiled at him, but my smile wavered as I turned and saw my friends staring at us, curiosity and shock etched on their faces. I knew they were wondering what exactly was going on between the two of us. Well, get in line buddies, I’d like the answer to that too.

As the night unfolded, the conversation flowed easily. We talked shop, shared stories, and laughed until our sides ached. Parker fit right in, his laughter mingling with ours—a sound I realized I could get used to hearing.

“Another round?” the server asked, approaching our table with a familiarity that came from serving us week after week. This time, though, his focus lingered on me, a playful glint in his eye.

“Sure thing, Matt,” I said, returning his smile with politeness rather than invitation.

“Maybe after my shift, you could join me for a drink?” he suggested, leaning in a touch too close to be considered casual.

“Thanks, but I’m good tonight,” I replied, feeling the weight of several surprised gazes upon me.

“Suit yourself,” he said with a shrug, leaving to fulfill our order. “Whoa, did the Earth stop spinning or did Travis Brooks just turn down a sure thing?” Morgan teased, his voice filled with mock astonishment.

“Ha-ha, very funny,” I retorted, rolling my eyes but unable to shake off the embarrassment heating my cheeks. Normally, I’d revel in the attention, maybe even share the encounter later as a boastful tale. But now, with Parker sitting beside me, it all felt wrong.

“Everyone has their off nights,” I tried to joke, hoping to deflect their scrutiny.

“Travis having an ‘off night’ with flirting is like Chicago having a mild winter,” Akio added, chuckling along with the others.

“Guess there’s a first time for everything,” I muttered, forcing a laugh while stealing a glance at Parker. His expression was unreadable, but I hoped he didn’t see me as just a player.

The server returned with our drinks, his demeanor still friendly but missing the earlier flirtation. I took a sip of my beer, the bitter hops grounding me as I silently vowed to be better. Not for my friends, not for my reputation, but for Parker—because somehow, his opinion had started to matter more than I ever expected it would.

We placed our orders and then Parker turned his attention to the other men at the table. “So, what kind of work do you guys do?” he asked. It made me happy to see him showing interest in my friends.

“I work as an office manager for an entertainment management firm,” Akio told him.

Parker's eyes lit up. "That sounds exciting! Have you gotten to meet a lot of famous people?"

Akio smiled. "I have. Some of them are great and some are just divas, but my work is never dull. In fact, my job is what led me to this handsome guy." He stared up lovingly at his husband. "Morgan was hired by my boss and his brothers to rebuild Agape House."

At Parker's blank stare, I explained. "Agape House is a non-profit place where LGBTQ+ kids can go to hang out with other kids like them. They even offer a place for them to stay if they get kicked out of their homes."

"That's amazing! And that's right here in Chicago?" When I nodded, he said, "I'd love to see it sometime."

"I'll take you," I promised.

The conversation halted when the server arrived with our food, but as soon as he was done passing it out, it picked back up. "Anyway, Morgan was in charge of the project, and I was sent in to make sure everything went smoothly," Akio said.

"Only he was more interested in the project builder than the project itself," Jasper teased.

Akio blushed profusely but couldn't deny the truth. Morgan leaned in and kissed his husband's cheek. "The feeling was mutual."

I heard Parker sigh as he watched the two and I wondered if he was comparing his relationship with David to these two. I jumped in before he could get too down again. "Morgan doesn't just do construction. He also is a master woodsmith. He makes beautiful furniture that people from all over the world love to buy from him."

It was Morgan's turn to blush as Parker turned an appreciative eye on him. "I'd love to see some of your pieces someday," he said eagerly.

"We'll have to get Travis to bring you out to our house sometime," Akio supplied kindly.

"I'd enjoy that. Thank you." Parker then turned his attention to Jasper and Maks. "And what about you two? What do you do?"

Maks had just taken a bite of food, so Jasper answered for them. "I own a tattoo shop and Maks works for a security firm."

I rolled my eyes. "He's being humble. Jasper does more than tattoos. He's also an incredibly talented artist who works with many different mediums. And Maks is former military who now uses the skills he learned to protect people, including a lot of famous people and political figures."

"That's impressive, both of you." Parker looked at me with a gleam in his eye. "I had no idea you kept such esteemed company," he teased.

"Oh, I am top shelf, and don't you forget it," I joked, making everyone laugh.

"If only your game was as top shelf as the rest of you," he quipped, arching an eyebrow at me in challenge.

Leaning back in my seat, I smirked. "You know, if physical therapy doesn't work out for you, there's a future in comedy with that swing of yours."

He snorted, shaking his head. "Says the guy who almost took out a bird with his last pitch."

“Hey, that bird had it coming,” I retorted, winking at him. The table erupted in laughter, and I reveled in the sound of Parker’s chuckles mingling with the rest.

“Travis, man, you’re on fire tonight,” Akio observed, nudging Jasper under the table. They shared a look that I couldn’t quite decipher.

“Can’t help it. Parker brings out my A-game,” I said, shrugging nonchalantly.

“Or maybe he just brings out the real you,” Jasper murmured, so soft I almost didn’t catch it over the din of the pub.

The server returned with our bills, signaling the end of our evening. We finished paying and then we all headed outside. “We enjoyed meeting you, Parker,” Akio said, his eyes darting over to me. “Travis will have to bring you again sometime.”

“Anytime,” I replied, feeling a heat rise in my chest over the fact that my friends had clearly accepted Parker. Even better, they seemed to truly like him.

As we continued toward our cars, Jasper tugged at my sleeve and steered me a few steps behind the others. “Okay, spill. What’s the deal with you and Parker?”

“Deal? There’s no deal,” I insisted, but the intensity of Jasper’s gaze made me wonder if I was trying to convince him or myself.

“Come on, T. I’ve known you for years, and I’ve never seen you like this with anyone. You’re different with him.” Jasper crossed his arms, the streetlights casting shadows across his face. “There’s definitely chemistry there, and I don’t think it’s one-sided.”

“Jasper.” I sighed, running a hand through my hair. “He’s got a boyfriend. And we’re just friends.”

“Uh-huh.” Jasper didn’t look convinced. “Just remember, people who are ‘just friends’ don’t look at each other the way you two do.”

“Look, it’s complicated, okay?” I muttered, frustration knotting in my stomach.

“Everything worth having is a little complicated, right?” Jasper clapped me on the shoulder before heading towards Maks, who waited with an understanding smile.

I watched them go, their easy affection a stark contrast to the mix of emotions inside me. Turning back to Parker, I saw him laughing at something Akio said, and my heart did a damn somersault.

“Travis, coming?” Parker called out, beckoning me over with a grin.

“Yeah,” I murmured, my heart doing crazy things as I walked toward him.

We left Akio and Morgan at their car then moved on to mine. A comfortable silence settled over us on the drive home, each of us lost in our thoughts. My mind kept replaying Jasper’s words. You’re different with him. Was it that obvious? The way my heart raced when Parker laughed, how I hung on to every word he said?

“Thanks for tonight, Travis.” Parker’s voice pulled me from my thoughts. “I needed this.”

“You’re welcome,” I replied, trying to keep the emotion from my voice. “That’s what friends are for, right?”

“Right.” He nodded, but there was a hesitation in his voice that made me wonder if he felt it too—that spark, that pull.

We reached his apartment building, and he turned to face me, his expression

unreadable in the dim light. “Goodnight, Travis.”

“Goodnight, Parker.”

He disappeared inside, but I continued sitting there, staring out the window but not really seeing anything. Jasper’s words echoed in my head, mixing with the feelings I couldn’t deny any longer. The truth hit me like a fastball to the gut—I was falling for Parker Reyes. But he was taken, off-limits. And I was supposed to be the carefree playboy who didn’t do complicated.

What the hell was I supposed to do now?

Chapter Six

PARKER

The rich scent of freshly ground coffee beans filled the air as I opened the door to the tiny coffee shop. I held it open for Travis, his easy grin acknowledging the gesture as we stepped inside. We were on a break from the non-stop pace of physical therapy sessions, and we'd both agreed that caffeine was needed if we were going to make it through the rest of the afternoon.

"Hey, I wanted to say again that I really enjoyed meeting your friends the other night," I said, weaving through the small tables toward the counter. "They're a great group of guys."

"Thanks." He stood next to me, his hands tucked casually in his pants pockets. "Like I said before, they're family to me. I'm pretty damn lucky to have them."

"Well, it's obvious that they feel the same way about you," I observed, noting how his eyes softened at the mention of his friends. It was a warmth that seemed to infuse his entire being, a contrast to his usual playful confidence.

He shrugged, but there was a shadow in his bright blue eyes that hinted at deeper scars. "We've been through hell and back together. Luckily, the good has far outweighed the bad, but still, that shit has a way of bonding people."

The line moved up and I ordered us both coffees, something strong and bitter. As the barista worked the espresso machine, the whirr and hiss providing a backdrop to our

talk, I found myself marveling at the man standing next to me. Travis, with his perpetual tan and ripped abs, hid layers beneath that athletic exterior.

“Family isn’t always blood, huh?” I mused aloud, accepting our drinks with a nod of thanks.

“Definitely not,” he agreed, a smile returning as he accepted his cup. “It’s the people who stick by you when the shit hits the fan—the ones who see you at your worst and still think you’re pretty okay.”

“You’ve got yourself a solid bunch,” I said, genuinely impressed.

“Solid as they come,” he affirmed, clinking his cup gently against mine in a quiet toast before we made our way back to the clinic.

As we walked, I couldn’t shake the feeling that Travis Brooks was an enigma—a tapestry woven with threads of playfulness and depth, loyalty and independence. And for reasons I couldn’t quite nail down, I found myself wanting to unravel more of his story, thread by tantalizing thread.

We sipped our coffee in comfortable silence, the afternoon sun casting shadows on the sidewalk. My thoughts churned, trying to bridge the gap between Travis’s history and my own. “You know, I had it pretty good growing up. Two loving parents, siblings to play with, a big backyard to run around in, all the typical Midwestern family stuff.”

“Sounds nice,” Travis replied, his blue eyes reflecting genuine interest.

“It was, but it was also Ohio. Not exactly a hotbed of progressive values.” I paused, the memories of feeling different bubbling up. “Being gay wasn’t... well, let’s just say it wasn’t celebrated.”

Travis nodded, his expression softening. “But you had your family.”

“Yeah. They were great—supportive, loving. But outside of our home? It was tough.” I exhaled, a little shakier than I intended. “David was the only other gay kid at school that I knew of. We clung to each other like lifelines.”

“High school sweethearts, huh?” He took a slow sip, then set his coffee down on a nearby bench.

“Something like that.” The blush crept up my neck, and I busied myself with adjusting the lid on my cup.

“Let me guess,” Travis said, leaning back, his athletic form casual but somehow still commanding. “He’s the only guy you’ve ever been with?”

The question hit me like a sudden gust of wind, unexpected and disarming. I met his gaze, feeling exposed, yet strangely safe. “Yes,” I confessed, feeling the heat in my cheeks now undeniable.

Travis whistled lowly, and I decided to turn the tables on him. “So, what about you? From what I gathered last night, you’ve got a rather colorful reputation. Given your—expertise,” I ventured, “what’s the craziest thing you’ve ever done, sexually?”

“You really want to know?” I nodded immediately. For a moment, he looked at me as if weighing the wisdom of sharing such an intimate detail. Then, with a mischievous smirk, he leaned in closer. “There was this one time with a married couple. She wanted to watch her husband with another man.”

His words sent a jolt through me, my imagination painting vivid pictures of Travis, all muscles and sweat, lost in passion. My body reacted instinctively, desire pooling low in my belly, an embarrassing hardness making itself known.

“That was a fun night for sure, but the thing is,” Travis continued, his voice dropping to a huskier tone, “those random hookups have started to feel empty. Pointless, even.”

“Really?” I asked, surprised by the confession.

“I blame my friends. They’re all in love and happy and they think everyone else should be too,” he grumbled.

“The nerve of them!” I retorted playfully. “But seriously, you’re a great guy. Anyone would be lucky to have you.”

“Thanks, Parker,” he said, a soft smile lighting on his lips.

The dim lighting in the quaint French restaurant cast a romantic glow over our table, but as David and I settled into our seats, our conversation naturally veered toward the familiar territory of work—the patients we’d seen, the challenges we’d faced.

“Did I tell you about the little boy who came in with abdominal pain?” he asked.

“The one that swallowed a tiny rubber ball? He’s lucky it didn’t get stuck on the way down,” I said, taking a sip of my wine. “How’d he do with the surgery?”

“Good, good. He’s recovering quite well,” David replied.

I nodded, but a part of me longed for a topic outside the walls of the clinic or hospital. We used to be able to talk about anything, but lately, all we ever talked about was work. “Enough,” I announced, reaching for his hand across the table. “No more talk about work. Tonight is supposed to be about romance, about us.”

“You’re right. I’m sorry. What would you like to talk about?” David gave me a soft smile as he locked our fingers together.

I took another sip of wine, racking my brain to come up with another topic. “Paint!” I practically shouted.

“Paint?” he asked, startled by my outburst.

“Uh, yeah. Our apartment is so dingy. I was thinking that a coat of paint might brighten it up some. What do you think? Maybe a light blue or a soft yellow?”

David smiled at me indulgently. “You pick. I’m sure whatever you decide will look great. Although, I’m not sure how much I’ll be able to help, what with this schedule the hospital’s got me on.”

My smile wavered at the reminder of his busy schedule and how many nights I’d spent alone. His job in Cincinnati had been busy too, but I’d been hoping the move would mean a fresh start for the two of us, one where we made sure to carve out time for one another. Instead, we seemed to be drifting even further apart.

After dinner, we walked hand in hand to the nearby theater, the night air balmy against my skin. Settling into the plush seats, I leaned closer to David as the lights dimmed, hoping to sneak in a moment of intimacy, a taste of what he could look forward to once we got home. My lips found his cheek, trailing a path to the corner of his mouth, but he turned his face away with a weary sigh.

“Sorry, I’m just tired,” he murmured, and the rejection stung more than I expected.

I sat back, a hollow sensation settling in my chest. When was the last time we’d truly connected? The thought lingered uncomfortably as the movie played on, a backdrop to my spiraling doubts.

The sudden glare from David’s phone screen broke the darkness. He checked the message, his expression shifting to one of apology. “I’m sorry to cut our date short,

but I have to go in to work,” he whispered. He was out of his seat and sliding past the row of people before I’d even had time to process his words.

Outside, under the harsh glare of streetlights, our whispers escalated to heated words—words that had been simmering beneath the surface for far too long. “I can’t believe you’re leaving me in the middle of a date!”

“What would you have me do? It’s my job. They need me to come in, I go in.”

“I’m well aware it’s your job but there’s more to life than work. I moved here to be with you, but I barely see you anymore, David,” I said, my voice thick with emotion.

David’s jaw tightened, his eyes mirroring my own frustration. “You know my job isn’t a nine-to-five gig, Parker.”

I knew the demands of being a doctor, of course, but understanding didn’t quell the growing chasm between us. A sense of loss enveloped me, a chill that settled deep in my bones. We used to be inseparable. Unable to keep our hands off each other, we’d sneak any moment together we could. Now, arguments were our most frequent exchanges, each one chipping away at the foundation we’d built together.

A taxi pulled up alongside the curb. “Go,” I urged, my voice breaking. “Your patients need you.” He hesitated, a flash of something like regret crossing his features before he turned and climbed into the back seat.

Alone on the dark sidewalk, I shoved my hands into the pockets of my jeans. The taillights of the cab with David in it had disappeared around the corner. The urge to reach for my phone, to find solace in a familiar voice, was almost unbearable.

I could just imagine Travis’s warm, teasing tone, his laughter like a balm to the sting of the argument David and I had just had. But no, I couldn’t—shouldn’t—make that

call. It wasn't fair to either of them, to use Travis as an emotional crutch every time David and I hit a rough patch. Besides, the thought that Travis might be with someone else, skin glistening with sweat as he lost himself to pleasure, twisted my stomach into knots.

Fuck, why did that image make me feel like I'd been sucker-punched? "Get it together, Parker," I muttered to myself.

Travis was probably tangled up in some stranger's sheets, chasing after whatever fleeting connection he could find. And here I was, tormented by the idea while being committed to another man—a man I loved. I do love David—don't I?

The question echoed hollowly in my mind as I trudged down the street, the rhythmic tap of my shoes against the pavement keeping time with my racing heart. Love shouldn't feel like this; it shouldn't be riddled with doubt and punctuated by solitude.

A couple brushed past me, their laughter a stark contrast to the silence that clung to my skin. They were wrapped up in each other, sharing the kind of look that spoke of inside jokes and shared secrets—the look I used to exchange with David before the distance crept in between us. Where had that version of us gone?

I finally reached the apartment we shared, its familiar doorway offering no comfort tonight. The key turned in the lock with a soft click, and I stepped into the silent darkness. No light greeted me, no warmth of a welcome home kiss. Just the echo of my own footsteps as I moved through the empty space.

The bed felt too big as I lay there, staring at the ceiling, the weight of my thoughts pressing down. I missed David, but was it him I missed or the memory of what we used to be? As sleep eluded me, the realization dawned that happiness was more than just being content with what you have. It was about feeling alive, cherished, and connected. I yearned for those sparks of joy that seemed so elusive now, save for

moments stolen with a friend who was slowly becoming something more. More confused than ever, I closed my eyes on a sigh, the silence of the room amplifying the disquiet in my soul.

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Chapter Seven

TRAVIS

The scent of wildflowers and the rustle of leaves underfoot created a symphony of summer that surrounded Parker and I as we hiked along the winding trail. A sheen of sweat glistened on both our foreheads, evidence of the exertion and the heat, but neither of us seemed to mind.

“Man, this is great,” I panted, my breath catching up with the pace we had set.

“Absolutely,” Parker agreed, his eyes reflecting the vast expanse of blue above us. “David’s not much for physical stuff like this. It’s nice to have someone to share it with.”

I glanced at him, noting how the sunlight played across his dark hair, making it gleam with hints of auburn. “Yeah, I get it. All my buddies are...indoor kind of guys.”

“Then it would definitely be hard for them to keep up with you,” Parker added with a laugh. His laughter was contagious, and I found myself chuckling along with him.

“Exactly! But you, man, you’re keeping pace like a champ.”

We reached a clearing, and the view unfolded before us—a tapestry of greenery spread beneath us, dotted with the vibrant colors of wildflowers and the distant shimmer of a lake. We took a moment, side by side, to drink it all in. The breeze carried the fresh scent of earth and water up to us, and I felt something swell

within—a sense of contentment and peace.

“David would’ve been done halfway up,” Parker said after a while, his voice softening. “Not that I blame him. Medicine’s his thing, not hiking.”

“Everyone’s got their passions,” I replied, nudging him playfully with my elbow. “Mine just happen to align with yours right now.”

“Guess I’m lucky then,” he said, flashing me a smile that sent an unexpected jolt through my system.

We continued our hike, the conversation flowing as easily as the trail beneath our feet. Talk eventually turned to another passion we shared, sports. “Must be pretty cool getting to work with athletes from the Cubs,” Parker commented.

“I’m looking forward to it. They’re a great group of guys,” I said with a shrug, downplaying the pride I felt in my work. “Helping people get back on their feet, literally, that’s the real win for me.”

“Can’t argue with that,” Parker said, nodding in agreement.

Our conversation ebbed and flowed with the terrain, and I found myself savoring every word, every shared laugh. It wasn’t often I met someone who could match my energy, both physically and verbally. It was refreshing, thrilling even, and a part of me wondered what it would be like to have this kind of connection with someone all the time.

“Hey, check this out!” I called, veering off the path where a cluster of wild berries hung temptingly from a bush. “Nature’s snack bar.”

“Are those safe to eat?” Parker asked, a hint of skepticism in his tone.

“Sure, I used to eat these all the time as a kid,” I assured him, popping a few into my mouth. “Sweet with a little tang. Try some.”

He hesitated a moment longer before joining me, and I watched as his expression shifted from wary to pleasantly surprised. “Not bad, Brooks.”

“See? Adventure has its perks.” I grinned, feeling oddly victorious.

“We should probably head back soon,” Parker mentioned reluctantly as we resumed our hike. “Don’t want to overdo it on our first outing.”

“Agreed,” I said, though a part of me wished we could stretch the day into infinity. “Race you to the bottom?”

“Ha! You’re on,” he accepted, and suddenly we were both sprinting down the path, laughter trailing behind us like little kids.

We reached the base, breathless and grinning like fools. There was a camaraderie between us now, a bond forged through shared sweat and soil. The sun began its descent, casting long shadows across the ground, signaling the end of our adventure.

The glow of the sunset painted a soft backdrop over the Chicago skyline as Parker and I returned from our hiking excursion. The fast pace of the city welcomed us back to civilization, a stark contrast to the natural serenity we’d just left behind.

“Man, I’m all grimy,” Parker chuckled, swiping at his forehead. “Nothing like a good sweat, though.”

“Definitely. Hey, why don’t we hang out at my place? We can order some dinner, and catch a movie or something,” I suggested, hoping he’d agree. “That is, unless you need to get home to David.”

“Nah, he’s working another double. I’d love to hang out, but I’d kill for a shower first,” he admitted, a little sheepishly.

“Got you covered.” I drove us back to my condo and pulled into the parking garage. “Follow me,” I said as I shut off the engine. I led him into the lobby of my building, the modern decor giving way to an even sleeker elevator.

My place was on the eighth floor, newly remodeled with expansive windows that offered a picturesque view of the city. The open-concept living area boasted a minimalist aesthetic—cool grays and crisp whites offset by warm wooden accents. It was clean, uncluttered, and masculine.

“Nice digs, Travis,” Parker whistled appreciatively, taking in the sight.

“Thanks,” I replied, feeling a swell of pride. “Make yourself at home. I’ll grab you some clothes.”

I fetched a pair of gray sweatpants and a plain white t-shirt from my bedroom, laying them out for Parker. “Bathroom’s right there when you’re ready.” I pointed it out.

“Appreciate it,” he said, disappearing behind the door.

While he showered, I ordered Chinese food, opting for the usual favorites: kung pao chicken, beef and broccoli, two orders of fried rice, and an extra order of egg rolls. My stomach growled in anticipation.

As I set out plates and silverware, I heard the bathroom door open upstairs, and a few seconds later, Parker emerged. The sight of him nearly knocked the breath from my lungs. He was—stunning. The clothes I’d lent him hung in all the right places, accentuating his athletic build. His hair was damp, curling slightly at the ends, and he smelled like the fresh, clean soap I kept stocked in my shower. God, he looked good

enough to eat.

“Feeling better?” I managed to croak out, despite the dryness in my throat.

“Much, thanks,” he smiled, unaware of the effect he was having on me.

“Food should be here soon,” I replied, trying desperately to sound nonchalant.

“Great.” Parker settled onto the couch, seemingly at ease.

Excusing myself, I darted to the bathroom for a much-needed shower. The second the door clicked shut, I locked it and leaned against the cool tile, my heart racing. My body had reacted instantly to Parker’s presence, and now, trapped in my own arousal, I knew I had to deal with it quickly or spend the night with blue balls.

I stifled a shriek as I stepped under the icy spray. Goose bumps skittered across my skin and my teeth began to chatter, but it had the desired effect and soon, my erection was a thing of the past. I quickly washed away the dirt and sweat of the day then shut off the water. My toenails were blue as I toweled myself off, but at least I’d be able to go back out there and face my friend without embarrassing myself.

I dressed quickly, choosing comfort over style, and rejoined Parker in the living room. The evening stretched ahead of us, filled with the promise of good times, but certain what-if questions kept popping up in my mind. What if Parker was single? What if he felt the same pull towards me that I did towards him? What if every day could be like this? What if he were mine? The doorbell rang, announcing the arrival of our dinner and pulling me back to the present. Time to focus on the friendship before me and leave those dangerous what-ifs out of the equation. Despite my rioting thoughts, I played it cool, sauntering over to the door to collect our dinner.

“Chinese is served,” I declared, setting the array of containers down on the coffee

table with a flourish. The rich aromas of garlic, ginger, and soy sauce filled the room, mingling with the clean scent that lingered around Parker since his shower.

“Perfect timing,” he said, his stomach growling audibly as he moved to help unpack the bags. “I’m starving.”

“I’m going to get some water. Why don’t you pick a movie for us,” I suggested. I grabbed two bottles out of the fridge then scooped up the plates and silverware and carried it all back to the living room. Parker had the remote and was browsing through the movie selections.

“Ah, how about this one?” he suggested, settling on an action flick with explosions dominating the preview screen. “Vincent Wilder is incredible in these roles.”

“Vincent, huh?” I teased, taking a bite of kung pao chicken and trying to seem nonchalant. “Good choice. He’s actually married to my friend, Garrett.”

The look on his face was comical, and he nearly dropped the remote. “Oh my God! I didn’t know your Garrett was THAT Garrett! The two of them are on the covers of every magazine.”

“Yep, that’s him,” I confirmed, chuckling at his reaction. “They’re both great guys, really down to earth. You’d never guess Vincent, or Dean as we call him, is a big movie star when you meet him.”

“Wow, that’s—that’s just wild,” Parker marveled, shaking his head in disbelief. “The world’s so much smaller than we think.”

“Tell me about it,” I agreed.

We filled our plates, relaxing on the couch as we ate. Parker had hit play on the

movie, but neither of us spent much time watching it. Instead, we talked, our conversation flowing naturally, effortlessly. We talked about everything and nothing—our favorite foods, music, embarrassing moments—each story spinning into the next. Laughter came easily, punctuated by comfortable silences that weren't awkward, just peaceful.

It wasn't until the credits rolled and the screen faded to black that Parker glanced at his watch and let out a surprised noise. "Is it really that late?" he asked, though there was a hint of reluctance in his voice.

"Time flies," I murmured, hesitant for the night to end. "Come on, I'll drive you home."

"Actually, I'll just grab an Uber," Parker replied, reaching for his phone. "Don't want to put you out any more than I already have."

"Hey, it's no trouble at all," I insisted, but he was already typing away, securing his ride. We tidied up the remnants of our meal. The app chimed, indicating his ride was outside, and Parker stood, stretching in a way that made the fabric of my shirt tighten across his chest. I swallowed hard, forcing my gaze upward.

"Thanks for tonight, Travis," he said softly, a smile touching his lips. "It was a lot more fun than spending the evening alone again."

"Yeah, it can get lonely sometimes with no one else around," I replied, sharing a truth that I'd never told anyone else. My friends all thought I was out every night, living it up, and for a long time, that's what I'd done, but somewhere along the way, something had changed for me, and those wild nights no longer held the same appeal. Still, it was nice having someone to talk to rather than watching TV by myself all night.

He hesitated at the door, looking like he wanted to say more, but instead, he just clasped my shoulder briefly before stepping out into the hallway. I watched from the doorway as he disappeared around the corner, the warmth of his hand still lingering like a promise.

Closing the door, I leaned against it, the silence of the condo enveloping me. Outside, the city buzzed with life, but inside, something palpable was missing—the sound of Parker’s laughter, the light in his smile, the companionship that had filled the space so completely just minutes before.

I pushed off from the door and wandered over to the window, peering out at the city lights below. Chicago was alive, a constant thrumming heartbeat that matched my own erratic pulse. People were out there living, laughing, loving—and here I was, standing alone in the aftermath of an evening that had shifted something inside me.

“Damn it,” I muttered, raking a hand through my hair. It was strange, this ache for company. For his company. Because it wasn’t just anyone I missed—it was Parker, with his soft-spoken words and thoughtful gray eyes that seemed to see right through my playful facade. He’d laughed at my jokes, indulged in my stories, and for a few hours, made me feel like I was part of something more than just a passing connection.

In the solitude of my condo, I could almost imagine him still here—a ghostly figure on my couch, head thrown back in laughter at some ridiculous anecdote I’d shared. I let out a humorless chuckle. This was new territory for me, craving the echo of a laugh, the warmth of a gaze, the easy companionship that had come as naturally as breathing.

I moved mechanically around the room, turning off the TV that we’d barely watched, gathering up the empty water bottles. Each action felt deliberate, an attempt to bring order to the chaos of emotions swirling inside me.

But as I looked over at the bathroom door, remembering the steam that had seeped out earlier, the vision of Parker emerging fresh and somehow even more irresistible in my clothes—“Shit,” I swore softly.

Independent. That was what I was—what I prided myself on being. Yet, the thought of that door opening again, of Parker strolling out with a smile meant just for me, sent a jolt of longing through my veins that was anything but independent.

The night had felt so right, so damn perfect, and now the absence of him was a cold contrast that seeped into my bones. Parker just fit, at work, with my friends, in my home. Like he was a piece I hadn’t known was missing from the puzzle of my life. But there was one problem, and it was a major one. He wasn’t mine. His heart belonged to someone else.

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Chapter Eight

PARKER

The subway car jostled rhythmically, a comforting end to the exhaustive bustle of another long week. I leaned against the window, watching the blur of dark tunnels lit intermittently by passing fluorescent bulbs, and let out a sigh that fogged up the glass before me. My fingers danced over my phone screen, initiating a call to a number I knew by heart.

“Hey, Mom,” I said when she answered, the warmth in her voice instantly soothing my frayed nerves.

“Parker! How’s the city treating you?”

“Can’t complain,” I replied. “Work’s good, the people are nice. And I joined a softball team.”

“Look at you! Making friends and staying active,” she cheered.

I smiled. “How’s everything there?”

“Everyone’s doing well,” she continued, launching into a lengthy description of everything she and my dad had been up to, including the dance classes they’d decided to take. “I swear, that man may have two left feet, but he can still make my head spin. But anyway, enough about us. We miss you terribly, honey.”

“I miss you guys too.” The words were simple but heavy with truth.

“And what about David? How’s he doing with his new job?” Her question, innocent and motherly, scratched at an irritation I’d buried beneath layers of understanding and patience. But my patience was wearing thin, as evidenced by yet another argument that morning.

“David is—always working.” The words slipped out, laced with annoyance I hadn’t intended to reveal.

“Sweetheart, have you talked to him about how you’re feeling?”

“I can’t, Mom. He’s doing important work. Anything I say would just sound selfish.” I pressed my forehead against the cool window, seeking some relief.

“Your happiness is important too, Parker. You both need to find balance. Life isn’t just about work.” Her voice held that gentle firmness that had guided me through countless troubles growing up.

“That’s what I told him, but maybe I need to try again,” I murmured, mulling over the wisdom she’d gifted me without even trying.

“Life’s too short to be anything but honest with your heart. Remember that.” With those parting words, she ended the call, leaving a silence that seemed louder than the rattle of the train.

I pocketed my phone and exhaled slowly, letting her advice sink in. The train pulled into my station, and I stepped off, carrying the weight of the conversation that needed to happen. I just hoped we could manage to have it without it turning into another argument. Either way, I could no longer afford to tiptoe around our issues. It wasn’t fair to either of us.

A strange scent greeted me as I stepped into the apartment, the smell reminding me of my mother's flower garden back home. I paused, my hand still on the doorknob, as my senses were further assailed by the gentle strains of some acoustic melody floating through the air. My eyes took a moment to adjust to the dimmed lighting, but when they did, the sight before me was as disarming as the unexpected smells and sounds.

"David?"

He emerged from the kitchen, a steaming casserole dish cradled in his mitts, a sheepish yet hopeful smile tugging at his lips. There, in the middle of our modest living room, a table for two had been meticulously set—a tablecloth, candles flickering softly, and fresh flowers bursting with color, the source of the scent I'd picked up on.

"Surprise," David said, with a nervous chuckle, his eyes roaming over the romantic setup. "I know it's been—a lot, lately. With work and everything."

The words lingered, heavy with an unspoken apology. My throat constricted at the sight—this effort, this gesture. It was so intrinsically David, yet so foreign after the weeks of distance that had settled between us like an unwelcome guest.

"What's all this for?" I asked, my voice barely rising above the music coming from the speakers.

David set down the dish with care, as if it bore the weight of his confession. "I've been working a lot," he admitted, meeting my gaze with an intensity that seemed to strip away some of the strain we'd been experiencing. "And I know I've been neglecting you, Parker. I'm sorry. I want to make it right. I want to make you happy."

His words were like a balm, soothing yet jarring against the rawness of my recent

thoughts. Before I could sift through the tangle of emotions and form a coherent response, he caught me off-guard. Bending down on one knee, he produced a small velvet box, flipping it open to reveal a ring that sparkled with promise and pretense. “Parker, will you marry me?”

Sunlight spilled through the blinds, dragging me out of a restless sleep. I reached for David’s side of the bed, finding only the cold rumpled sheets as evidence that I was alone. The empty space where he should have been felt like an echo of last night’s proposal—a question hanging in the air, unanswered.

The clock on the nightstand read just past eight. No note, no text—David was already consumed by his work at the hospital. I let out a sigh and scrubbed a hand over my face, the weight of the ring he’d offered feeling like an anchor around my heart.

I’d stood there, dumbfounded as David had leapt back up to his feet and pulled me into his arms. Then he’d led me over to the table where he’d served me a generous helping of the casserole he’d made. Dinner had been mostly quiet, neither of us sure what to talk about with work off the table. Afterwards, we’d curled up on the couch and started a movie, but halfway through, David’s snores drowned out the dialogue between the main characters. It was only once I’d sent him to bed and was turning off the lights that I realized I’d never actually given him an answer.

My phone buzzed on the bedside table, a welcome distraction from the quiet apartment. It was Travis. Hey, you and David want to come to the Cubs game today? I’ve got extra tickets.

David’s absence answered for him. He’s at work , I typed back, the words causing bitterness to rise in my throat.

Too bad. You up for it, though? Could use some company.

I hesitated, thumb hovering over the screen. I really should stay home and try to figure out what in the hell I was going to say to David the next time I saw him, yet the thought of being alone, trapped with my thoughts and the memory of David on one knee, was suffocating.

Sure , I replied, a pulse of recklessness urging me on. Pick me up?

Awesome. See you in an hour.

An hour and a half later, I found myself amidst the cheers and chatter of Wrigley Field, the roar of the crowd a stark contrast to the silence of my apartment. Travis's enthusiasm was infectious, but even the crack of the bat couldn't shatter the confusing thoughts that circled on an endless loop inside my brain, refusing to give me even a moment's peace.

"You okay?" Travis asked during the seventh-inning stretch, his blue eyes searching mine, full of warmth and concern.

"Yeah," I lied, managing a half-smile. "Just tired, I guess."

Travis gave me a look that said he didn't quite believe me, but he didn't push. Instead, he grinned and said, "Well, we can't have that. Time for some ballpark therapy."

He disappeared into the crowd, returning several minutes later, laden down with a large bag of popcorn, cotton candy, four hotdogs, and a beer for each of us. The sight was so ridiculous, so utterly indulgent, that I couldn't help but laugh.

"Doctor's orders," Travis said with a wink, handing me a hot dog and a beer.

As we dug into the treats, I felt something loosen in my chest. The tension that had

been coiled tight since the night before began to unwind, melting away like cotton candy on my tongue. Travis regaled me with outrageous stories from his college days, his animated gestures punctuating each punchline. Before I knew it, I was laughing so hard my sides ached, the weight of my unresolved engagement momentarily forgotten.

The crowd erupted into cheers as the Cubs clinched their victory, the energy palpable as fans jumped to their feet. Travis and I high-fived, caught up in the excitement. As people began filtering out of the stadium, Travis turned to me with a mischievous glint in his eye.

“Hey, want to see something cool?” he asked, a grin spreading across his face.

“Sure,” I replied, curiosity piqued. “What did you have in mind?”

Travis leaned in close, his breath warm against my ear as he spoke over the noise of the departing crowd. “How about we go meet the team?”

My eyes widened in surprise. “Meet the team? Are you serious?”

He nodded, looking pleased with himself. “Perks of being their physical therapists next season. We’ve got access to the locker room. What do you say?”

The excitement of meeting the Cubs players momentarily overrode my inner turmoil. I found myself nodding eagerly, a grin spreading across my face to match Travis’s. “Lead the way,” I said, my heart racing with a thrill I hadn’t felt in far too long.

Travis grabbed my hand, pulling me through the thinning crowd. His touch sent a jolt through me, both familiar and dangerously new. We wove our way down to field level, Travis flashing his credentials at security checkpoints. With each step closer to the locker room, the noise of the stadium faded, replaced by the low hum of post-

game activity.

The locker room door swung open, and suddenly we were surrounded by the Cubs themselves. The air was thick with the mingled scents of sweat, deodorant, and victory. Players moved about, some still in uniform, others freshly showered, all riding the high of their win. Travis moved through the space with an easy familiarity, greeting players and staff alike. I hung back, slightly overwhelmed by the surreal nature of the moment.

“Parker, come here,” Travis called, waving me over to where he stood chatting with the first-base coach. “This is Coach Napoli. Mike, this is Parker, the new PT I was telling you about.”

His handshake was firm, his smile genuine. “Nice to meet you, Parker. Travis says you’ve been a real asset to his team. We look forward to working with you.”

I felt heat creep up my neck at the compliment, acutely aware of Travis’s gaze on me. “Thanks. I’m looking forward to it too,” I managed to reply.

Travis introduced me to more of the team and I felt a surge of admiration for him. He moved through this world with such ease, making everyone feel comfortable and valued. It was a skill I’d always admired in him, but seeing it in action here was something else entirely.

As we made our way through the locker room, I found myself relaxing, swept up in the excitement and camaraderie. Players shared jokes, rehashed key moments from the game, and discussed plans for celebrating their win. It felt like being part of something bigger, a world away from the doubts and uncertainties waiting for me at home.

Travis’s hand on my shoulder brought me back to the present. “Ready to head out?”

he asked.

I nodded, suddenly aware of how long we'd been there and how late it was getting. As we said our goodbyes and made our way out of the stadium, the energy from the locker room seemed to linger, crackling between us like static electricity.

"That was amazing!" I said enthusiastically. "Thanks for introducing me."

His grin was contagious. "No problem. I figured it was time they meet the other therapist who will be working with them. Plus, I was kind of hoping to put a smile on your face and I'm happy to see it worked. Now, what do you say we grab a pizza?"

The neon sign of "Luigi's Pizzeria" cast an artificial glow over the sidewalk, inviting us in from the windy evening. The day had been a whirlwind of excitement and emotion, but now, as we settled into a booth by the window, exhaustion was creeping up on me like an unwelcome shadow.

"Two slices of deep-dish should hit the spot, right?" Travis said with his characteristic grin, sliding into the seat across from me. His energy seemed endless, his eyes as bright as the city lights outside.

"Sounds perfect," I murmured, trying to muster enthusiasm, but my attempt fell flat even to my own ears.

Travis ordered for us both, his voice carrying easily to the counter. Then he turned back to me, his expression shifting to one of concern. "Hey, I don't want to pry, but you've been quiet all day. Are you sure you're okay?"

My gaze was fixed on the checkered tabletop, tracing the patterns absently. "Yeah. I just have a lot on my mind." I lifted my eyes to meet his. "Sorry I'm not very good company."

“Are you kidding? You’re great company, Parker,” he said earnestly. “And honestly, I look forward to our time together more than you might realize.”

His hand reached across the table, covering mine, and I was startled by the contact, by the sincerity in his voice. It was such a simple gesture, yet it sent warmth spiraling through me.

“Thanks for today. I really needed this,” I admitted.

Travis’s smile was warm, genuine. “Anytime, Parker. That’s what friends are for, right?” But as he said it, something flickered in his eyes—a depth of emotion that made my breath catch.

The server arrived just then with our pizza. Travis gave my hand a gentle squeeze before pulling away so she could set the food down. We ate mostly in silence, the melty cheese and tangy sauce filling up the spaces between us. But inside, I was all tangled thoughts and confusion, the warmth of his touch replaying in my head.

When I finally made it back to the apartment, the door swung open to reveal David, already home. He looked up from the medical journal he’d been reading. “Where’ve you been?”

“Out with Travis,” I answered, watching him closely for any flicker of reaction.

“That’s good. I’m glad you’ve got a friend to hang out with.” His smile was brief as he returned his attention to his journal.

I stood there, keys still dangling from my fingers, watching David’s eyes scan the pages in front of him. The soft rustle of paper as he turned a page seemed to echo in the stillness of our apartment. I waited for—something. A question about my day, perhaps. Or maybe a hint of curiosity about why I was out so late. But nothing came.

Annoyance bubbled up inside me, a feeling I couldn't quite place or justify. Why should I be annoyed that David trusted me? That he didn't interrogate me about my whereabouts or company. Isn't that what a healthy relationship looked like? And yet, a small, traitorous part of me wished he would look up. That he would notice the lingering scent of stadium hot dogs and cheap beer clinging to my clothes. That he would care enough to ask about the day I'd spent with another man.

I cleared my throat. "So, how was your day?"

David looked up again, his eyes taking a moment to focus on me, almost as if he'd forgotten I was there. "Oh, busy as usual. We had a tricky appendectomy come in, but it went well."

I nodded, unsure how to respond. The distance between us felt insurmountable, despite standing just feet apart. The ring he'd offered last night weighed heavily in my pocket, where I'd stashed it this morning, unable to slip it onto my finger.

"That's good," I replied, my voice sounding hollow even to my own ears. "Well, I'm going to head on into bed. I'm tired."

"G'night," he responded absentmindedly over his shoulder, his nose already buried back in his medical journal. With a heavy sigh, I turned and headed towards the bedroom.

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Chapter Nine

TRAVIS

The moment I'd pulled up to Parker's place on Saturday, I could tell he was off. It wasn't anything overt—his smile was still in place, his greeting warm—but there was a tension in his shoulders that didn't sit right with me.

"Hey, man," I'd said, trying to keep it light. "Ready for the game?"

"Sure," Parker replied, but his voice lacked its usual luster.

As we drove, I'd snuck glances at him, watching the sunlight flicker over his features. He'd caught me looking once and raised an eyebrow, a silent question lingering in the air between us. I'd shrugged it off with a grin, not quite ready to admit even to myself why I couldn't tear my gaze away.

"Chicago Cubs aren't ready for us, huh?" I'd attempted humor, nudging his arm with my elbow.

"Let's hope they're ready for the Yankees," Parker quipped back, and the corner of his mouth twitched up—a real smile that time.

I'd felt this swell of something in my chest, like pride or maybe joy. Hell, I don't know—it was warmth, pure and simple, knowing I'd managed to coax that smile out of him. But here's the thing: as much as I love hanging with Akio, Jasper, and Garrett, what I feel for Parker—it's just not the same. I've never craved their

touch—never watched them like some cheesy rom-com lead pining after the one who got away. I’ve never felt the urge to brush away a strand of hair falling into their eyes or wondered if their lips were as soft as they appeared under the dim bar lights.

With Parker, though, it seemed to be all I think about. It was like there was some gravitational pull that I couldn’t fight, drawing me in, begging me to reach out and learn the texture of his skin, the curve of his fingers intertwined with mine. The thought alone sent a jolt through me, like electricity sparking down my spine.

And that was the problem, wasn’t it? Because nothing could happen. Parker was taken—he loved David, and I wasn’t the kind of guy to step on another man’s turf. I respected boundaries, no matter how much it might sting to do so.

So instead, I was stuck in a limbo where I’d rather spend my nights watching shitty sitcom reruns with him than prowling Whipped for my next fix. Jesus, when did I start choosing cuddles over casual sex?

I tried to shake the thoughts from my head, focusing on my reflection in the mirror as I changed out of the sleep pants and t-shirt I’d been lazing around in all day. My hands moved automatically, fixing my hair, tucking in my shirt, but my mind kept replaying every interaction with Parker—every shared glance, every accidental brush of our hands.

“Get it together, Brooks,” I muttered to myself, my tone edged with frustration. “He’s just a friend.” A friend who’s been taking up way too much of my mental real estate lately.

“Fuck,” I exhaled sharply, resting my palms against the cool bathroom counter. The tiles beneath my feet were solid and sure, grounding me. I lifted my gaze, meeting my own blue eyes in the mirror, searching for answers in the familiar reflection. “Can’t fall for someone who’s already in love,” I remind myself firmly.

But the heart's a stubborn bastard, and mine seemed hell-bent on making a fool of me. It didn't care about the rules or the complications. It just knew that when Parker laughed, it was the best sound in the world. When he was hurting, I wanted to be the one who put things to right. And when he smiled—well, his smile felt like coming home.

“Shit,” I cursed under my breath, a resigned sigh escaping me. I was so totally screwed.

The prospect of facing him the next day, of keeping my feelings under wraps, loomed over me like heavy storm clouds. But I'd do it—I had to. Because even if I couldn't have Parker the way I wanted, I refused to lose him altogether.

“Friends,” I repeated, my voice barely above a whisper, as if by saying it out loud, I could make it true. “Just friends.” And with that fragile resolve, I pushed away from the counter and strode out the door, ready to face another day pretending that's all I'd ever need him to be.

The crunch of gravel under my tires was a soothing rhythm as I pulled up to Akio and Morgan's cabin. It sat nestled among towering pines, their needles whispering in the gentle breeze that blew across the clearing. The place was postcard-perfect, a testament to the quiet, happy life they'd built together just outside the city.

“Travis!” Akio greeted me with his trademark grin, enveloping me in a bear hug as soon as I stepped out of the car.

“Hey, man,” I replied, the familiar warmth of friendship easing some of the tension I hadn't realized I'd been carrying in my shoulders.

Morgan joined us, his smile more reserved but no less genuine. “Good to see you,” he said, leading the way inside.

Their home was as warm and inviting as they were—full of rich woods and soft fabrics that made you want to curl up and stay awhile. We settled into the living room, catching up on the little things—the latest series we’d binged, the ever-entertaining antics of Jasper’s dog, and the new hutch Morgan was building.

“Speaking of relationships,” Akio ventured, a playful lilt to his voice, “you’ve been spending quite a bit of time with Parker, huh?”

I shifted uncomfortably on the plush couch, my heart rate inexplicably picking up. “We’re just friends and we work together,” I said, perhaps too quickly.

Akio raised an eyebrow, giving me that look that said he wasn’t buying it for a second. “All I said was that you two have been spending time together, but your reaction tells me there might be something more going on. So, what is it?”

“Nothing,” I said, trying to sound casual, but the word came out more like a defense than a statement.

“Trav.” Akio’s tone was gentle now, coaxing. “Talk to us.”

I let out a breath that felt like I’d been holding for days, weeks even. “It’s—complicated,” I started, avoiding both of their gazes. “Parker’s great, you know? And yeah, we’ve been hanging out a lot. He—he makes me laugh.”

“Travis,” Morgan prompted softly, waiting for the rest.

“Damn it,” I cursed under my breath, not sure if I was ready to put words to it all—to make it real. But it was Akio and Morgan. If I couldn’t be honest with them, then who? “Alright,” I started, plucking at a loose thread on the arm of the couch. “How did you two know for sure? That what you had was more than friendship?”

Morgan's eyes softened as they met Akio's, a silent conversation passing between them before he turned back to me. "I knew Akio was someone special the first day we met. He yelled at me for startling him."

"Sounds like love at first sight," I teased, but my heart wasn't in it.

"Hardly." Morgan laughed, but then his voice grew warm with the memory. "But beneath that frustration, there was this—passion, a fire in him that I'd never seen in anyone else. It made me want to get to know him better, to understand what fueled that intensity."

Akio snorted, shaking his head fondly at the recollection. "And I knew Morgan was different because, even when we'd argue, no matter how annoyed we got with each other, he still held doors open for me. Even angry, his care and respect for me outweighed everything else. No one had ever put me first like that." Their gazes locked, and for a moment, the world outside their loving bubble ceased to exist.

"Damn," I murmured, watching them gaze at each other with such undisguised affection. It was enough to make any cynic believe in true love.

"Travis," Akio's voice cut through the moment, bringing me back to reality. "Are you falling for Parker?"

The question hit me like a line drive to the chest. I closed my eyes, sifting through the jumbled emotions—joy, fear, longing—all circling back to one person: Parker. With a deep breath, I opened my eyes and admitted the truth. "Yeah, I think I am," I confessed, feeling a weight lift and another settle in its place. "What am I going to do?"

"Travis," Morgan said, leaning forward, elbows resting on his knees, concern etched into his features. "You're going to have to let those feelings go. Parker has a

boyfriend.”

I felt my stomach drop at Morgan’s words, even though I knew he was right. “I know,” I said, running a hand through my hair. “Trust me, I know. It’s just—easier said than done, you know?”

Akio’s brow furrowed. “Have you thought about talking to Parker about how you feel? Maybe if you get it out in the open, it’ll be easier to move past these feelings.”

I shook my head vehemently. “No way. I can’t risk messing up our friendship or our working relationship. Plus, what would I even say? ‘Hey Parker, I know you’re happily committed to David, but I can’t stop thinking about you’? Yeah, that’d go over well.”

Morgan eyed me seriously. “Whatever you decide to do, just promise you’ll be careful.”

My teeth clenched tightly. “I’m not going to do anything to ruin his relationship.”

“I meant be careful with your heart. We don’t want to see you get hurt,” Morgan said gently.

My shoulders slumped, my anger disappearing as quickly as it had flared. “You guys are the best. I don’t deserve you.”

“That’s what I keep telling Akio,” Morgan deadpanned.

It took a second for his words to hit me and then I threw a pillow at his head. He dodged it easily, grinning proudly at his own joke as Akio laughed.

“Alright, assholes. I’m gonna head out.”

“Hey! I was being nice. Why am I an asshole?” Akio argued as we all stood up.

I grabbed him up in a big hug. “I’m sorry. You’re not. You’re just married to one.”

Morgan gave my arm a playful punch and pulled his husband to his side. “Don’t tell him that. It might scare him away.”

Akio wrapped his arms around Morgan’s waist and stared up at him adoringly. “Nah. I’m afraid you’re stuck with me.”

I made gagging noises as the two of them kissed, but I was only teasing. Where I used to feel that such overt displays of affection were revolting, now, I just felt jealous. Jealous that they were free to be with the person they cared about most in the world, free to show their true feelings.

I said goodbye then stepped outside. The laughter and warmth from Akio and Morgan’s house receded with each step I took away from it, leaving me to confront the cold truth—I liked Parker, really liked him. Not just as a friend or a co-worker, but in a way that made me want to be there for his every frown and smile.

With every stride towards my car, memories of time spent with Parker played like a highlight reel in my mind—the way his eyes sparkled when he laughed, how his voice softened when he shared stories of his small-town life. Those were the happiest times of my life, yet they felt like borrowed moments now, knowing he belonged to someone else.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath, jamming my hands into my pockets. My friends’ advice echoed in my ears: back off. I knew they were right, but it didn’t make the realization any less painful. Parker had a boyfriend, a life built with another man. There was no future for us, not even a sliver of possibility.

Determined to shake off the melancholy clinging to me like a second skin, I pointed my car to the one place I knew could distract me—Whipped. The club's neon sign hummed a siren song, beckoning me inside. The bass throbbed through the walls, a pulse that promised oblivion. I snagged a drink at the bar, the liquid courage barely making a dent in the lump lodged in my throat. It wasn't long before I found myself on the dance floor, the thrum of music vibrating through my bones.

That's when he sidled up to me—a tall guy with sharp features and a come-hither smile. His hands found my waist, guiding me to the rhythm. I let myself get swept up in the dance, his body pressed flush against mine. He moved with confidence, his fingers tracing the lines of muscle down my back. For a moment, I closed my eyes and surrendered to the fantasy—the idea that it was Parker behind me, whispering sweet nothings with a voice that sent shivers down my spine.

“Imagine what I could do to you off this dance floor,” the man murmured, his breath hot against my ear.

My eyes snapped open, and reality crashed over me. I peeled myself away from the stranger, his touch leaving a cold void as I stepped back. The room spun slightly, the strobe lights and colored beams creating a kaleidoscope of confusion that mirrored the turmoil inside me. I needed air, space, something solid to ground me. My feet carried me through the sea of writhing bodies and out into the cool night.

“Shit,” I muttered under my breath, rubbing the back of my neck with a shaky hand. The alley behind Whipped was empty except for a few scattered cigarette butts and the distant echo of laughter from the street beyond. I leaned against the cold brick wall, letting its roughness press into my skin.

It's just a crush, Travis. It'll pass. But even those words sounded hollow now. With a deep sigh, I pushed off the wall, climbed into my car, and started the drive home. My thoughts kept drifting back to Parker. How could someone who was only supposed to

be a colleague, a friend, sneak into every corner of my mind?

When I finally reached my condo, I was exhausted. I ran a hand through my hair before collapsing onto the couch. In the dark, the outlines of my furniture were familiar shapes in a world that suddenly felt very unfamiliar. “Get it together,” I whispered into the emptiness around me. But there was no conviction behind the words.

Closing my eyes, I tried to conjure up images of past flings, of nameless faces and fleeting moments of pleasure, but they all paled in comparison to the memory of Parker’s shy smile. The way he’d hesitate before speaking, like he was choosing his words carefully, not wanting to waste a single one. It was endearing, frustrating, and absolutely maddening.

“Damn it.” I pressed the heels of my palms into my eyes, willing away the image of him.

Sleep didn’t come easy that night. Each time I closed my eyes, I saw Parker—Parker at work, Parker laughing at some dumb joke I’d made, Parker looking at me with something that I dared hope was more than friendship. Tossing and turning, I wrestled with the sheets and my conscience until the first light of dawn crept in through the blinds.

“Today’s going to be hell,” I muttered to the ceiling. Facing Parker at work without betraying my feelings felt like an impossible task. I couldn’t keep pretending nothing had changed because everything had changed. I cared about him, more than I’d planned, more than I should.

“Maybe I can avoid him,” I thought out loud, knowing full well how ridiculous that sounded. We worked together; avoidance wasn’t exactly an option.

The shower did little to wash away the frustration clinging to my skin. As water cascaded over me, I tried to strategize how I could keep my distance, stay professional, but every scenario ended with me either confessing everything or acting like a complete idiot.

“Great choices, Travis,” I scoffed at my reflection in the foggy mirror. My blue eyes stared back, looking just as lost as I felt. Pulling on my clothes, I braced for the day ahead. There was no easy solution, no magic fix for the mess I’d gotten myself into. All I knew was I had to protect my heart from the inevitable hurt that loomed on the horizon.

“Let’s do this,” I said, grabbing my keys and heading out the door, the weight of my unspoken words heavy in my chest.

Chapter Ten

PARKER

The cardboard jungle that had taken over the living room had barely been touched, a monument to procrastination and avoidance. I stood in the doorway, feeling a knot tighten in my stomach. It was almost as if the boxes were mocking us for our domestic neglect.

“Three months,” I murmured to myself, running a hand through my short, dark hair and letting out a sigh that seemed to carry the weight of all our unspoken conversations.

I took a step forward, making light work of navigating the maze of boxes. Each one was labeled haphazardly in David’s neat doctor’s scrawl: Kitchen stuff , Books , Random crap . But they might as well have been tagged Indifference or Silence for all the attention we’d paid them since we left Cincinnati.

My heart raced with the knowledge that something needed to change. I couldn’t keep living with this hollow mimicry of love, where conversation had dwindled to the occasional text about groceries or whose turn it was to pay the electricity bill. We were supposed to be partners, lovers—but when did we start playing house instead of building a home?

“Fuck,” I whispered, as a wave of realization crashed over me. Other than the night he’d sprung a proposal on me, we didn’t even eat together anymore. Our meals had become solitary rituals, carried out in the silence of our different schedules. And

sleep? The bed we once shared was now just a place where I'd sometimes find the residual warmth of his body, nothing more than a physical reminder that we were still technically sharing a space.

Lost in thought, I tripped over a box marked Photos and caught myself against the couch, my hands sinking into the plush fabric. When did we stop looking at each other like we were the only ones in the room? When did "I love you" become something that was said instead of something that was felt?

"Shit," I cursed softly, straightening up and glancing at the clock. Any minute now, the front door would open, and in would walk David—the man I'd once dreamed of growing old with. Yet now, I struggled to remember the last time I looked at him and felt that familiar spark, that undeniable pull that had drawn us together in the first place.

"God, what happened to us?" The question was a whisper lost in the expanse of our too-quiet apartment. I watched the dust motes dance in a shaft of light, their gentle movements a stark contrast to the stillness inside me. I knew what needed to be done, could feel the truth of it heavy in my heart, but fear clung to me like a second skin. How do you tell someone you've loved for years that your forever is no longer with them?

My fingers absentmindedly dipped into my pocket, tracing the cool band of metal that symbolized a promise for the future. The engagement ring felt heavier now, burdened with silent questions and unspoken truths. I pulled it out and held it between my thumb and forefinger, watching it catch the fading light. As I rolled the band over in my hands now, I couldn't help but wonder if David had noticed its absence from my finger. He hadn't said anything. Maybe he was too caught up in his own whirlwind at the hospital or maybe—maybe he didn't really see me at all anymore.

My mind drifted back through years of memories. David and me, the high school

sweethearts who had dared to bring our love into the light of a small Ohio town which was stuck in the dark ages. Our first kiss under the bleachers, shy and tentative, yet setting off fireworks in my heart. Homecoming games spent holding hands. Prom night—the night we first made love, when the world outside vanished, and it was just him and me learning the feel of each other’s bodies and discovering even more about our own.

We were young, fearless, and wildly in love. But somewhere along the line, our relationship started to feel more like a comfortable routine than a passionate journey. We became two people moving parallel to each other but never intersecting. The spark that once burned so bright had dimmed to an ember, struggling to stay alight.

I was roused from my reverie by the sound of keys jangling, announcing David’s arrival. I shoved the ring back in my pocket. “Time for honesty, Parker. It’s now or never.”

As the door creaked open and he stepped into our shared space, I knew it was time to unpack more than just these neglected boxes. It was time to unpack our hearts, lay everything bare, no matter how much it might hurt. Because love wasn’t just about holding on; sometimes, it was about letting go.

David shut the door behind him then looked up, finding me sitting on the couch. His shoulders slumped with exhaustion, the lines on his face deeper than I remembered. He managed a weary smile in my direction before discarding his jacket on a nearby chair.

“Hey,” he greeted, voice heavy with fatigue.

“Hey,” I echoed, unable to keep the tremor from my own. “We need to talk.”

“Can it wait? I’m beat. I just want a shower and to hit the sack,” he sighed, already

heading toward the bedroom.

“No, David. It can’t.” My voice, firmer now, stopped him in his tracks. He turned to look at me, a question in his eyes. The ring in my pocket suddenly felt scorching hot, a token of a commitment we were failing to uphold.

“Okay,” he relented, the resignation in his tone mirroring the defeat I felt. He joined me on the couch, leaving a careful space between us.

“David, when was the last time we really talked?” I began, my heart hammering against my ribcage. “Not about work or mundane things we need to do around here, but about us?”

He ran a hand through his hair, a familiar gesture when he was stressed. “I don’t know, Parker. It’s been a while.”

“Exactly. And it’s not just talking. I can’t even remember the last time we made love, or showered together, or even made it through an entire movie together. When did we stop making us a priority?” My voice quivered, betraying the hurt that lay beneath my calm exterior.

“Somewhere between the move and the midnight shifts, I guess. “I’m sorry,” he whispered, his voice cracking. “I should have tried harder. I got so caught up in the hospital, in proving myself—I neglected us. Maybe if I’d made more time, if I’d been more present?—”

I shook my head, cutting him off. “No, David. This isn’t on you. It’s not anyone’s fault.”

“But I could do better,” he insisted, leaning forward, his eyes pleading. “I could take fewer shifts, we could plan date nights, maybe even take that trip to the beach we

always talked about. I promise I'll try harder, Parker. We can fix this." The earnestness in his voice tugged at my heart, but I knew it wasn't enough. We'd been drifting apart for so long, the flame had burned out and no amount of date nights or beach trips could bring it all back.

"David," I said softly, reaching out to take his hand. His fingers were cool against my palm, familiar yet somehow foreign. "I don't think we can fix this. At least, not in the way you mean."

His face fell, a mix of hurt and realization dawning in his eyes. "What are you saying, Parker?"

I took a deep breath, steeling myself to say the words I knew would change everything. "I'm saying that I think we've grown apart. We're not the same people we were in high school, or college, or even when we moved here. We've changed, and—I think our love has changed too."

David was quiet for a long moment, his eyes fixed on our joined hands. When he finally spoke, his voice was barely above a whisper. "I think I've known for a while. I just—I didn't want to admit it." His expression turned sheepish. "That's why I blindsided you with a proposal out of the blue. I think I was just trying to hold on."

I nodded, feeling a lump form in my throat. "I get it. I've known things were different for a while now." We sat in silence, the weight of our admission hanging heavy in the air. Outside, the Chicago skyline twinkled, oblivious to the small heartbreak unfolding in our living room.

"Do you remember that summer after graduation?" David asked suddenly, a wistful smile playing on his lips. "When we drove to the lake and camped under the stars?"

I couldn't help but smile too, the memory warming me from within. "How could I

forget? We were so in love, so full of dreams.”

“We were,” he agreed, his thumb absently stroking the back of my hand. “And it was beautiful while it lasted, wasn’t it?” David’s voice was soft, tinged with nostalgia and a hint of regret.

I nodded, feeling tears prick at the corners of my eyes. “I love you. A part of me always will. You know that, right?” I needed him to understand.

“Of course I do. And I love you too, but—” He hesitated, searching for the words. “But we’re not in love, are we?”

It was the question neither of us wanted to ask, but both knew the answer to. I nodded slowly, a single tear escaping down my cheek. “No, we’re not.”

“God, this hurts,” he whispered, and I could see his own eyes glistening. We weren’t angry, just two souls recognizing the end of a chapter.

“I know it does, but we deserve more, David. We both deserve someone who makes us feel alive, who reignites those flutters and the passion we’ve lost,” I said, feeling a strange mix of relief and anguish.

“Someone who’s our priority,” he agreed, voice thick with emotion.

I nodded. “Are we—are we saying we’re better off as friends?”

“Looks like it,” David confirmed, reaching for my hand again. His touch was warm, familiar, and heartbreaking.

“Friends,” I echoed, allowing the word to settle into the space between us.

“Friends,” he affirmed, giving my hand a gentle squeeze before letting go.

We sat in companionable silence for a few moments, both lost in memories of happier days. The weight of our impending separation hung heavy in the air, but there was also a sense of relief. We were finally being honest with each other, and with ourselves.

“So, what happens now?” he asked, his eyes meeting mine.

“David,” I choked out between sobs, my voice barely above a whisper, “I think it’s time for me to move out.”

His eyes, red-rimmed and swimming with emotion, met mine in a silent nod. He understood; there was no need for more words. I reached into my pocket, feeling the cool metal of the engagement ring against my trembling fingers. With every ounce of strength I had left, I placed the ring in David’s palm—a symbol of a dream that would never come true—at least for us. His hand closed around it, and something inside me fractured.

“Keep it,” I murmured, “or don’t. It’s yours now.”

He nodded again, his Adam’s apple bobbing as he fought back more tears. There was nothing more to say.

I walked to our room, grabbing a duffel bag and tossing in a few clothes and toiletries—just enough to get by. The rest of my belongings could wait; they felt like ghosts of a life we’d never live. My heart thrummed painfully against my ribs, the finality of the moment crackling in the air like static.

“Bye, Parker,” he said as I reached for the door handle.

I spun back around and threw my arms around him, hugging him tight. He held me just as tightly. “Goodbye, David,” I whispered, the words tasting like ash on my tongue.

The neon lights of a nearby bar called out like sirens to my shattered soul. Inside the crowded establishment, I drowned myself in drink after drink, each one numbing the pain a little more until the edges of reality blurred. Time lost meaning as I sat there, ignoring the bartender’s concerned glances.

“Another one,” I slurred, pushing my empty glass across the sticky counter.

“Last call, man,” the bartender said with a sympathetic tilt of his head.

“Fuck.” I fumbled with my phone, my vision swimming as I tried to focus on the screen. I needed someone, anyone. My thumb found Travis’s name and without a second thought, I hit call.

“Heyyy, Travvvvis,” I drawled when his voice came through the speaker, steady and clear.

“Parker? What’s wrong, you sound wasted.” Travis’s voice was laced with worry.

“‘Cause I am,” I informed him with a hiccup.

“What happened, Parker? Why are you drinking?”

“Me and David—we’re done,” I stated, thankful for the copious amounts of alcohol I’d consumed which helped dull the pain.

“Shit, Parker. Why?”

I shrugged my shoulders as if he could see me. “Spark’s gone,” I slurred, the liquor loosening my tongue. “Stopped getting that—that little tickle in my belly when I saw him. Not like—” My drunken thoughts flitted in and out of my head, gone before I was able to give them voice.

“Where are you? I’ll pick you up and take you home,” he insisted. I could hear keys jangling through the phone and then a door shutting. It sounded like he was outside now.

“Can’t go home,” I mumbled, suddenly overwhelmed by the weight of the night. “Don’t live there anymore.”

“Then I’ll bring you back here. Either way, give me the name of where you are.”

I turned bleary eyes on the bartender. “Where am I?”

The man shook his head. “Lucky Jack’s,” he replied.

Travis must have heard because he cut in before I could relay the name of the bar to him. “I know where that is. I’m coming to get you, Parker. Just stay put.”

“Kay,” I managed to say before my world tipped sideways and darkness crept in at the edges of my consciousness.

Travis found me slumped over the bar, my world spinning, overwhelming emotions causing tears to stream down my cheeks. He didn’t judge, didn’t ask any questions. He just picked up my bag, paid my tab then scooped me up like I was something precious and helped me out into the night.

Streetlights blurred past as Travis’s car hummed steadily. I leaned my head against the window, the glass cooling my alcohol induced flushed skin. The night had taken

its toll, the alcohol in my veins a bitter reminder of the day's heartache.

"Drink this. All of it," Travis instructed, handing me a bottle of water from out of the cupholder. His tone was gentle, yet firm, as if he knew just how much to push without breaking me further. I took it with a nod, the weight of it in my hands grounding me back to reality.

"Thanks," I murmured.

A few minutes later, he pulled into the parking garage of his building and shut off the engine. "Come on, let's get you inside." He guided me out of the car with an arm that felt both protective and familiar.

His condo was just as warm and inviting as I remembered, the dim lighting a stark contrast to the harsh fluorescence of the bar I'd left behind. Each step towards the guest room felt heavier than the last, my legs barely cooperating as gravity seemed to have it out for me tonight.

"Here." Travis offered me a couple of Tylenol, which I accepted with a clumsy gratitude, my fingers brushing against his palm. Even through the haze, I couldn't help but notice the strength in his touch, the certainty in his movements. I felt safe with him, cared for. It was exactly what I needed, but also too much, his kindness bringing fresh tears to my eyes.

"Thanks," I repeated thickly.

He helped me into the bed, taking off my shoes and tucking the covers around me with a care that was almost meticulous. There was something so effortlessly kind about him; it made my chest ache with a longing I couldn't quite place.

"Travis," I mumbled, the edges of sleep creeping in, numbing the edges of my pain.

“I really—I like you so much.”

His chuckle was soft, a sound that seemed to fill the room with a warmth all its own.

“You’re just drunk, Parker. Sleep it off, okay?”

But even as sleep pulled me under, I knew there was a truth in my slurred confession, a spark that flickered in the darkness, waiting to be kindled. And as I drifted off, I couldn’t help but feel like I was finally somewhere I belonged.

Chapter Eleven

TRAVIS

The sun had just begun to peak through my blinds, but consciousness pried my eyes open regardless. A dull ache pulsed at the back of my skull from a night spent listening for any signs of distress from the guest room. I rolled over, feeling the weight of exhaustion like a lead blanket on my shoulders, and rubbed my hands over my face in an effort to scrub away the remnants of a sleepless night.

Parker Reyes—kind-hearted, soft-spoken Parker with those soulful gray eyes that seemed to see right through me—was just a wall away, sleeping off the remains of too much cheap whiskey and heartbreak. The image of him stumbling into my arms last night, slurring confessions about his breakup with David, played on a loop in my head.

“Me and David, we’re done,” he’d said, or something close enough to send my mind spiraling.

But what did “done” really mean? These things could be complicated—a fight blown out of proportion, words thrown like daggers in the heat of the moment without the intent to kill. Maybe it was just another lovers’ spat, soon to be patched up with kisses and half-hearted apologies. Yet the way Parker had clung to me, the despair in his voice when he’d said, “I don’t live there anymore,” sounded too definitive to be just a quarrel. Could he have been confused, though? He was drunk enough to mistake my spare bedroom for a spinning carnival ride.

Shit, this was all sorts of messed up. I tossed the sheets aside and sat up, stretching my limbs as if the motion could somehow shake free the thoughts tangling in my brain. As a physical therapist, I dealt with pain and healing every day—muscles torn, and bones broken—but this was different. This was the kind of hurt that couldn't be massaged away, couldn't be eased with ice packs or gentle stretches.

A sigh escaped my lips, and I stood, padding my way across the cool hardwood floor towards the window. Pushing the blinds aside, I squinted against the pale morning light that spilled into the room. It was going to be another sunny day in Chicago, the kind that would usually have me lacing up my running shoes or going rock climbing. But today, my plans boiled down to one thing: making sure Parker was okay.

I pictured him curled beneath the blankets, his chest rising and falling with the deep, steady breaths of someone who desperately needed the escape of sleep. Even in his most vulnerable moments, there was something undeniably captivating about him. Something that pulled at me, urging me to be closer than perhaps I should allow myself to be.

“Focus, Travis,” I muttered under my breath. “He needs a friend right now, not whatever mess is going on in your head.”

Shaking my head, I moved to my en suite bathroom and turned on the water in the shower. I brushed my teeth and peed while I waited for it to warm up and then I climbed in. The water cascaded down my back, the steam fogging up the glass of the shower door. I stood there longer than necessary, letting the heat seep into my muscles, pulling some of the stress from my tired body and washing it down the drain. There was an ache in me, one that wasn't from a night on a basketball court or a day at the clinic, but something deeper, more complex. Almost as if Parker's pain had become my own.

I finished getting ready then stepped out into the hallway. I stole a quick glance at the

guest room door, the pull to go in there, to check on him was great, but I forced myself to leave him be. He needed as much rest as he could get. Instead, I went downstairs to confront the day, but first things first, coffee—or maybe something stronger, because damn, I was going to need it.

Dressed in sweats and a well-worn t-shirt, I padded into the kitchen, my thoughts still circling Parker. I was putting bread in the toaster when the soft thud of a closing door upstairs told me Parker was on the move. I glanced up at the ceiling, waiting. The sound of water running through pipes soon followed and I looked back down. Breakfast. He'd need something solid in his stomach after last night's bender. Without conscious thought, my hands went to work frying bacon, whisking eggs, and toasting bread—the familiar motions grounding me.

The aroma of sizzling pork fat filled the kitchen, mingling with the rich scent of brewing coffee. It was a comforting blend, the kind of smell that spoke of lazy Saturday mornings and no obligations. Except today wasn't about relaxation; it was about being there for a man I cared for very deeply.

Parker emerged just as I was plating the food, his appearance rough around the edges, hair damp and disheveled, his clothes wrinkled from being shoved into a bag, but somehow it only added to his appeal. His eyes were clouded, the aftermath of alcohol and heartache etched onto his face. Yet, even now, he looked sexy as hell—something about his vulnerability mixed with his inherent strength stirred a warmth within me.

“Morning,” I said gently, sliding a plate in front of him as he sat down on one of the island barstools across from me. “Eat up.”

He eyed the bacon and eggs warily, his stomach probably doing somersaults. “Man, I can't. My stomach is too upset.” His voice was soft, roughened by the remnants of sleep and booze.

“Trust me, the grease will help with the hangover, and the protein will give you some energy,” I urged, keeping my tone light. “At least try, okay?”

With a resigned sigh, Parker picked up his fork and took a tentative bite. We ate mostly in silence, the scraping of cutlery against plates replacing conversation. I watched him from the corner of my eye, the way he slowly pushed food around on his plate before surrendering to the need to eat.

Finally, with half his breakfast conquered, Parker leaned back, the lines of exhaustion more pronounced on his face. He raked his fingers through his hair, then dropped his head into his hands. “I suppose you want to know what happened,” he murmured into his palms, his voice muffled.

“Hey,” I said gently, reaching across the island to nudge his arm. “You don’t owe me an explanation. Only share if you feel like it.”

Parker lifted his head, his gaze meeting mine. There was gratitude there, and what looked like trust. Or perhaps it was just my hopeful imagination painting what I wanted to see. “Thanks, Travis,” he said, and though his smile didn’t quite reach his eyes, it was a start. And right now, a start was enough.

I watched his shoulders slump as if bearing the weight of the world. Silence stretched between us and I could tell he was gathering his thoughts. Despite my insistence that he didn’t owe me any details, it was clear he needed to talk—to purge whatever pain he was holding inside.

“David and I—” His voice broke off, a frail thread lost in the vastness of the room. He swallowed hard, his Adam’s apple bobbing. “We ended things. It’s over. God, it hurts even saying those words.”

I moved around the island and sat down next to him. “I’m sure it does hurt. You love

him,” I said, trying to keep my tone neutral.

Parker nodded, his gaze fixed on the cold coffee in his mug. “I do, but not the way I should. Not the way he deserves.” He paused, his breath catching in his throat. “And he doesn’t love me that way either.”

“Shit, Parker.” I cursed softly, my mind racing with both concern and a selfish spark of hope. “How did you guys come to realize that?”

He looked up at me, eyes clouded with sadness. “You know when you wake up one day and everything feels like—like you’re just going through the motions? Well, it was more than just a moment for us. We’d both been feeling it for a long time, but neither of us wanted to admit it. I We still care about each other and want to be friends, but all the passion, the intensity we once had—it wasn’t there anymore.”

“Damn,” I muttered, pushing the empty cup aside. I wanted to reach out, to comfort him, but I held back, unsure if my touch would be welcome or another reminder of what he’d lost.

“But love isn’t only about fiery moments, is it?” Parker continued, his voice steadier now. “It’s about the everyday things too. It’s about building a life together and finding peace in the quiet. And we couldn’t find that peace together anymore. Instead of growing together, we grew apart.”

Inside, I was a mess of conflicting emotions—a whirlwind of relief and excitement tempered by the sight of Parker’s raw vulnerability. He was free; the man I’d been harboring feelings for was no longer tethered to someone else. But celebrating that fact felt wrong when he sat across from me with shadows under his eyes and a heartache that resonated in the space between us.

“Hey,” I said, my voice softening. “Sometimes things don’t work out no matter how

hard you try, and it fucking sucks. Especially when you still care about the other person. But you will get through this, and you will find happiness again.”

“Thanks, Travis.” He offered a small smile—forced, but it was something. “For listening. For picking me up last night. I’m sorry I was such a mess.”

“You don’t have anything to apologize for. I was glad you called me, although I hated the fact that you were hurting. But I’m always here for you, no matter what,” I replied, my chest tightening. I wanted nothing more than to pull him into my arms, to tell him everything would be okay—that maybe, just maybe, there was something better waiting for him. Waiting for us. But I held back, knowing that right now, he needed a friend, not a hopeful suitor.

“Let’s just stay in and take it easy today, huh?” I suggested, standing up to clear our breakfast remnants.

“Sounds good,” he said, but the weariness in his voice was unmistakable.

As I busied myself with the task of cleaning up, I couldn’t help but feel the weight of the moment—the pivotal point where everything could change. But for now, I’d be the friend he needed.

I flicked on the TV, scrolling through Netflix as Parker settled into the corner of my worn leather couch, his body curled inward as if trying to make himself smaller. The silence between us felt thick, heavy with raw emotions.

“How about a mindless action flick?” I suggested, pausing on some generic blockbuster that promised plenty of explosions.

Parker shrugged, a non-committal gesture that spoke volumes about his state of mind. “Sure, whatever you want.”

I hit play, more for the background noise than anything else, and settled in next to him, careful to maintain a respectful distance. As the opening credits rolled, I snuck a glance. His eyes were fixed on the screen, but I could tell he wasn't really seeing it. His mind was elsewhere, likely replaying the events that led to his breakup with David.

As the movie progressed, I found myself paying more attention to Parker than the plot. Every sigh, every shift of his body, every absent rub of his thumb against the fabric of his sweats—it all spoke louder than the dialogue blaring from the TV.

Halfway through the movie, Parker's breathing had evened out, his head lolling against the back of the couch. I watched as his eyes fluttered closed, exhaustion finally claiming him. Without thinking, I reached for the throw blanket draped over the arm of the couch and gently covered him.

As I tucked the blanket around his shoulders, he stirred slightly. His eyes opened, unfocused and bleary with sleep. "Travis?" he mumbled, his voice thick and low.

"Shh, it's okay," I whispered, my hand lingering on his arm. "Just rest." He nodded, his eyes already drifting shut again. But before sleep could fully reclaim him, his hand found mine, fingers intertwining with a grip that was both desperate and comforting.

My heart stuttered in my chest. I knew I should pull away, that this wasn't the time or place for anything more than friendship. But the warmth of Parker's hand in mine, the vulnerability etched on his sleeping face—it all made my resolve crumble.

I stayed there, my hand in his, watching the rise and fall of his chest as he slept. The movie played on, forgotten background noise to the riot of emotions coursing through me. Part of me felt guilty, like I was taking advantage of his vulnerable state. But a larger part reveled in this fact that when he'd needed comfort, it was my hand he'd

reached for.

As the credits rolled, he stirred again, his grip on my hand tightening briefly before relaxing. His eyes fluttered open, confusion clouding them for a moment before recognition set in. “Oh,” he murmured, slowly withdrawing his hand from mine. “I’m sorry, I didn’t mean to fall asleep on you.”

I tried to ignore the sudden emptiness in my palm. “No worries,” I said, keeping my voice light. “You needed the rest.”

Parker sat up straighter, running a hand through his tousled hair. “How long was I out?”

“A couple of hours,” I replied, glancing at the clock. “Feeling any better?”

He nodded slowly, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. “A little, yeah.”

“You know what? I think we need some proper comfort food,” I declared, reaching for my phone. “How about we order in from that little pizza place down the street? Their garlic bread could probably cure cancer.”

A hint of a smile played on Parker’s lips. “That does sound good,” he admitted.

“Then it’s settled. We’ll order a feast fit for kings—or at least two guys with nothing better to do on a lazy afternoon.”

As I placed our order—enough pasta, pizza, and garlic bread to feed a small army—Parker browsed through the movie selection. The tension in his shoulders seemed to have eased a bit, his posture more relaxed as he scrolled through the options.

“How about this one?” he asked, pausing on a quirky indie comedy. “I’ve heard it’s pretty good.”

I grinned, settling back onto the couch. “Perfect. Nothing like a good laugh to chase away the blues.”

As the movie started, I couldn’t help but sneak glances at Parker. The afternoon light filtering through the blinds cast a soft glow on his face, highlighting the curve of his cheekbone, the slope of his nose. Even in his sadness, he was breathtakingly beautiful.

The movie turned out to be a gem—full of witty dialogue and absurd situations that had us both chuckling despite ourselves. As the main character stumbled through one ridiculous scenario after another, I found myself savoring the moments when his laughter broke through the melancholy he had been shrouded in all day.

The doorbell chimed, announcing the arrival of our food. I paused the movie and jumped up, returning moments later with arms laden with fragrant paper bags. My stomach growled in anticipation.

“Alright, let’s see what we’ve got here,” I said, spreading the containers across the coffee table. “We’ve got spaghetti carbonara, margherita pizza, garlic bread, and—because I believe in balanced meals—a token salad.”

Parker’s eyes widened at the spread. “Travis, this is enough to feed an army!”

I grinned, handing Parker a plate. “Well, consider us a two-man army then. Dig in!”

We loaded our plates, the movie forgotten for the moment as we savored the first bites. The carbonara was creamy perfection, the pasta cooked to al dente brilliance. “Oh my god,” Parker moaned around a mouthful of garlic bread. “This is amazing.”

I couldn't help but chuckle at his enthusiasm. "Told you. It's practically medicinal."

As we ate, the heaviness that had hung over us all day seemed to lift slightly. We chatted about inconsequential things—favorite TV shows, the change in seasons, the merits of pineapple on pizza—Parker was for, I was vehemently against. It wasn't earth-shattering conversation, but it felt normal, comfortable, like every other meal we'd shared together.

As we polished off the last of the garlic bread, Parker leaned back, patting his stomach with a contented sigh. "I can't believe I ate that much," he said, a lazy smile playing on his lips.

"Food coma incoming," I teased, gathering up the empty containers. "You up for finishing the movie?"

Parker nodded, settling back into the couch as I cleaned up. When I returned, I noticed he'd pulled the throw blanket over his legs, looking cozy and at home. My heart did a little flip at the sight.

Hours later, the room had grown dark, illuminated only by the flickering light of the TV screen. We'd long since abandoned the movie, instead flipping through channels aimlessly, a comfortable silence settling between us.

I glanced over at Parker, his face bathed in the soft blue glow of the television. His eyes were heavy-lidded, exhaustion etched in the lines of his face, but there was a peace there that hadn't been present earlier. The tightness in his shoulders had loosened, his posture more relaxed as he sank deeper into the couch cushions.

"Hey," I said softly, nudging his foot with mine. "You look beat. Maybe we should call it a night?"

He blinked slowly, as if coming out of a trance, then he turned to look at me, his eyes soft in the dim light. “Yeah, I guess you’re right,” he murmured, stretching his arms above his head. The movement caused his shirt to ride up slightly, revealing a sliver of toned stomach that made my mouth go dry.

“Thanks, Travis,” he said, his voice low and sincere. “For everything. I don’t know what I would’ve done without you.”

I swallowed hard, pushing down the surge of emotions his words evoked. “That’s what friends are for,” I replied, hoping my voice didn’t betray the turmoil inside me.

Parker stood up, swaying slightly on his feet. Without thinking, I reached out to steady him, my hand on his arm. The contact sent a jolt through me, like a low current of electricity humming beneath my skin. Parker didn’t pull away, instead he stared down at my hand for a moment.

“You okay?” I asked, my voice barely above a whisper.

He nodded, his eyes meeting mine. “Yeah, just a little dizzy. Guess I’m more tired than I thought.”

We stood there for a beat too long, my hand still on his arm, our bodies close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating off him. The air between us felt charged, heavy with unspoken words and—possibilities?

Parker was the first to break the spell, taking a small step back. “I should probably head to bed,” he said, running a hand through his hair.

“Right, of course,” I replied, dropping my hand to my side. “You remember where everything is?”

He nodded, a small smile playing on his lips. “Yeah, I think I can manage. Thanks again, Travis.”

As he turned to head upstairs, I found myself calling out, “Hey, Parker?”

He paused on the first step, looking back at me with those beautiful gray eyes. “Yeah?”

I hesitated for a moment, my heart pounding. There were so many things I wanted to say, so many feelings I wanted to express. But now wasn’t the time. Instead, I simply said, “Sleep well, okay?”

A soft smile touched his lips. “You too, Travis. Goodnight.”

I watched as he climbed the stairs, disappearing into the guest room. The sound of the door clicking shut echoed in the quiet house, leaving me alone with my thoughts. Sighing, I began to clean up the living room, my mind replaying every moment of the day. The way Parker’s hand had felt in mine, the sound of his laughter during the movie, the vulnerability in his eyes as he thanked me. Each memory sent a wave of longing through me, tempered by the knowledge that he was still very raw from his breakup.

I retreated to my own bedroom, closing the door softly behind me. As I got ready for bed, I couldn’t shake the feeling that something had shifted between Parker and me today. Whether it was the beginning of something new or just the deepening of our friendship, I wasn’t sure.

Lying in bed, staring at the ceiling, I found sleep elusive. My mind kept drifting to Parker, just a wall away. Was he sleeping peacefully, or lying awake replaying the events that led him here? The urge to go to him, to offer comfort, was almost overwhelming. But I knew I had to resist. He needed time and space to process

everything.

Instead, I let my imagination wander, indulging in thoughts of what could be. I pictured lazy Sunday mornings with Parker, sharing coffee and laughter. I imagined the feeling of his hand in mine, not out of desperation or comfort, but because he wanted it there. The warmth of his body pressed against mine as we watched movies, no need for the pretense of separate seats on the couch.

But reality crashed back in, cold and sobering. He was fresh out of a long-term relationship. He was vulnerable, hurting. Any move I made now would be a dick move. No, I had to be patient. Be the friend he needed right now and nothing more. I just hoped someday, I might get the chance to be more.

Chapter Twelve

PARKER

The knot in my stomach tightened as I pulled up outside my old apartment and turned off the engine. I had rehearsed what I would say when I saw David again, how I'd keep my voice steady and my hands from trembling, but now, I wasn't so sure I'd be able to. It had been a month since we'd ended things—a month of long nights tossing and turning and replaying every moment of our relationship in my head.

I climbed out of the car, thankful Travis had let me borrow it so I could get the rest of my stuff. To be honest, I had a lot more than just that to thank him for. Travis had been my rock ever since he came and got me from the bar, giving me a place to stay, patiently listening for hours on end as I talked about my history with David, putting his arm around me when I cried. Breaking up with David was the hardest thing I'd ever had to do, and I didn't know what I would have done if I hadn't had Travis by my side.

The crisp autumn air nipped at my cheeks, the wind trying to steal the colorful leaves off the trees. I walked up the front steps and paused, my hand hovering over the buzzer. What if things were awkward between us, or worse, what if David was angry with me now? The thought made my stomach churn. Taking a deep breath, I pushed the button.

"Come on up." His voice sounded tinny through the ancient speakers. "Hey, Parker," he greeted me with a warmth I hadn't heard in a long time, a smile that actually reached his eyes. His hair was tousled in that just-out-of-bed look I'd found

irresistibly charming once upon a time.

“Hey,” I replied, my voice steadier than I anticipated. But then, there’s something about seeing someone you cared about looking healthier, happier, that soothes the sting of loss. We moved through the apartment with practiced ease, David helping me grab the boxes of my things and carrying them out to the car. There were no lingering touches or sorrowful glances; instead, there was this unspoken understanding between us, a mutual respect for the love we once shared.

“So, how have you been?” I asked on our final trip down to the car.

His smile seemed genuine. “Good. It was rough for a while, but I’m slowly getting better.”

I nodded. “Same here. Got to take it one day at a time, right?”

“Exactly.” I shoved the box I had inside the trunk and turned to take his.

“So, uh—Dr. Martinez asked me out,” he said nervously as he handed me a box filled with various keepsakes—a mix of cinema ticket stubs and seashells from vacations past. His gaze refused to meet mine.

“Martinez?” I echoed, trying to place a face to the name before realizing it didn’t matter. I clutched the cardboard box a little tighter, a myriad of emotions swirling within me. “What did you say?”

David shrugged awkwardly, leaning against the side of the car. “I don’t know. I’m not sure if I’m ready.”

I took a deep breath, steadying myself before I responded. “You deserve to find happiness, David.” The words felt heavy on my tongue, but they were true. Our

relationship may have changed, the love we shared fizzling out, but one thing had never changed. David was my friend. He and I had been friends long before he became my boyfriend, and with any luck we'd find a way to remain friends after. I really hoped so. I couldn't imagine not having him in my life at all.

"Thanks, Parker." He smiled, and it struck me just how much I missed that smile—the unabashed, full-wattage grin that used to light up my darkest days. "And you? Are you happy?"

I paused, considering the question. The truth was, I wasn't sure. "I'm working on it," I admitted.

He clapped me on the shoulder. "You'll get there. I know you will. You're one of the good ones, Parker Reyes. You deserve someone who will always put you first," he said, his words laced with sincerity.

With the car loaded up, we said goodbye and I watched David until he'd disappeared inside the building. I lingered on the sidewalk, taking one last look at the place we had shared—the place we had hoped to make into a home. With a deep breath, I realized it was okay to leave pieces of your heart in the places and people that shaped you. That's how we grow.

As I drove away, the city unfolded before me—bustling and alive, full of endless possibilities. And somewhere in the hustle and bustle, I knew I'd find my own version of happiness. Maybe it was waiting for me at the clinic, wrapped up in the warm, easy smiles of Travis, or maybe it was still hiding, tucked away in the corners of tomorrow.

But for now, at least I had a sense of closure, a feeling that everything was going to be alright. And in that moment, with the remnants of the day melting into night, I was content in the knowledge that both David and I were on our paths to finding what we

truly needed.

“Hey, Parker?” Travis called from his office door, snapping me out of my reverie. “You ready to call it a night?”

I glanced up from the last of my patient reports and nodded, returning his easy smile. “Yeah, just give me one sec to finish this up.”

“Take your time,” he said, leaning against the doorway with a grace that seemed innate to him. His casual stance, the way his blond hair fell just right, the perpetual tan that made his blue eyes stand out—it all painted the picture of a man who had never known a moment of self-doubt.

“Done,” I declared, clicking save on the document before pushing back from my desk. The clinic was quiet, the hushed sounds of the city outside filtering through the walls. It felt intimate, this shared space at the end of the day when everyone else had gone home.

Travis met me as I stepped into his office, his athletic build outlined by the soft light from his desk lamp. “So, what are you thinking for dinner? We could grab a bite somewhere or pick something up to take home?”

“Either sounds good,” I replied, feeling a flicker of warmth at the thought of spending the evening with him. “Your call.”

“Let’s go out,” he suggested, a playful tilt to his lips. “I could use some fresh air after being cooped up in here all day.”

“Sounds perfect.”

Travis steered us towards a cozy Mexican restaurant tucked away on a side street, its

warm glow spilling onto the sidewalk like an invitation. As we stepped inside, the tantalizing scent of sizzling fajitas and spices enveloped us, transporting us from the chilly Chicago evening to a vibrant cantina south of the border.

The hostess led us to a secluded booth in the corner, illuminated by the soft flicker of a candle nestled in colorful glass. Travis slid in across from me, his knee brushing mine under the table. That simple touch sent electricity coursing through my body, and I had to take a steadying breath.

“So, Travis said, his eyes twinkling in the candlelight, “what's your poison? They make a mean margarita here.”

I couldn't help but grin. “A margarita sounds fantastic,” I replied, grateful for the suggestion.

Our server arrived promptly, and we took turns ordering. As we waited for our drinks, a comfortable silence settled between us. I found myself studying Travis's face, noticing details I'd somehow missed before—the slight crinkle at the corners of his eyes when he smiled, the way his hair caught the golden light of the candle.

“What?” he asked, catching me staring.

“Nothing,” I said, feeling my cheeks flush. “Just thinking about...my last patient.”

He chuckled, clearly not buying my excuse. “Your last patient, huh? Must have been quite the case.”

I laughed, grateful for his easygoing nature. “Okay, you caught me. I was just thinking how nice this is. Us, here, unwinding after work.”

“It is nice,” he agreed, his voice softening. “I'm glad you're here, Parker. Not just at

dinner, but—you know, working with me, staying at my place.”

Our margaritas arrived, the salt-rimmed glasses glistening in the candlelight. I took a sip, savoring the salty tartness on my tongue. “I’m enjoying it too. I appreciate you giving me a place to stay, but I know you must be getting sick of me invading your personal space.”

The look on his face was fierce. “Not at all. I like having you around. As far as I’m concerned, you can stay as long as you’d like. Unless—you want to leave?”

I smiled softly, once again thanking the heavens for putting this man in my life. “No, I like it at your place, spending time with you.”

His shoulders relaxed as he leaned back in his seat. “Good, then it’s settled. No more talk about you being in my way.”

As we settled into conversation, the noise of the restaurant faded into the background. Travis regaled me with stories from his college days, his animated gestures and infectious laughter drawing me in. I found myself leaning closer, captivated by the way his eyes lit up when he talked about his friends.

“—and then Jasper, bless his heart, tries to convince the bouncer that he’s actually a forty-year-old man trapped in a college kid’s body,” Travis chuckled, shaking his head at the memory.

I laughed, picturing the scene. “Did it work?”

“Not even close,” Travis grinned. “We ended up at a twenty-four-hour diner instead, plotting our revenge on the kid that sold us the fake IDs.”

Our food arrived, steaming plates of enchiladas and fajitas filling the air with mouth-

watering aromas. As we dug in, I couldn't help but notice the way his fingers deftly wrapped around his fork, or the little hum of pleasure he made with each bite. The candlelight danced across his features, highlighting the strong line of his jaw, the scruff of his five o'clock shadow, and the warmth in his gaze.

"So, Parker," Travis said, leaning in slightly, "tell me more about your hometown. What's it like there?"

I took another sip of my margarita before responding. "It was your typical small town, I guess. Festivals and parades each year to celebrate Fourth of July, Memorial Day, and Homecoming. Friendly rivalries between the only three schools in the county, store owners who greeted you by name when you went in because they'd 'known you since you were knee high to a grasshopper.'"

Travis laughed, the sound resonating within me and making me smile. "Sounds perfectly quaint. Do you ever think about moving back?"

I paused, considering. "Not anymore. Chicago feels like home now. I'm happy here."

His lips curved into a smile, his eyes softening as he held my gaze. "I'm glad to hear that," he said, his voice low and warm. "Chicago's lucky to have you."

The sincerity in his tone made my heart skip a beat. I found myself leaning in, drawn by the intensity of his gaze. "I think I'm the lucky one," I murmured.

For a moment, everything else faded away. It was just Travis and me, suspended in a bubble of candlelight and unspoken possibility. The moment stretched between us, electric and charged with potential. I found myself holding my breath, caught in his intense gaze. The sharp clatter of a dropped plate nearby made us both jump, startling us back to reality.

Travis blew out a long breath, like he'd been holding it in. Did he feel it too? This crazy chemistry that had been building between us, the intense longing to touch and be touched? He cleared his throat and ran a hand through his hair. Before he could say anything, our server appeared, cheerfully asking if we were ready for our bill and effectively ruining the moment.

The ride back to Travis's condo was filled with a charged silence, the air between us thick with unspoken tension. As we stepped into the elevator, I could feel the heat radiating from his body, standing so close I could catch the faint scent of his cologne. My fingers twitched with the urge to reach out and touch him.

The soft ding of the elevator reaching our floor startled me out of my thoughts. Travis fumbled with his keys, his usual grace momentarily absent as he unlocked the door. The condo was bathed in the soft glow of the city lights filtering through the floor-to-ceiling windows, casting long shadows across the sleek hardwood floors.

"I'm gonna grab some water," he said, his voice slightly husky. "You want anything?"

I shook my head, watching as he made his way to the kitchen. The sight of him moving through the space we'd been sharing stirred something deep within me. I followed him, drawn like a magnet.

He was leaning against the counter, water glass in hand, when I entered. His eyes met mine, and the intensity I saw there made my breath catch. "Parker," he said softly, setting down his glass. "I?—"

I closed the distance between us in two quick strides. Before I could second-guess myself, I cupped his face in my hands and pressed my lips to his. For a heart-stopping moment, he stood frozen, not kissing me back. Then, with a low groan, he came alive under my touch. His fingers gripping me by the shirt and pulling me flush against his

body as he deepened the kiss.

It was electric, passionate, everything I'd been imagining and more. I dove into the kiss, slipping my tongue between his open lips and coaxing his into a dance. My heart soared and my pulse began to race. I was so lost in the kiss that it took a few seconds for me to realize Travis was no longer kissing me back and the hand that had been clutching the front of my shirt was gently pushing me away.

I stumbled back, my cheeks burning with embarrassment as reality came crashing down around me. The warmth of his lips still lingered on mine, but his eyes were wide with emotion I couldn't quite place. My stomach twisted into knots as I realized I had completely misread the situation.

"Oh god," I mumbled, running a shaky hand through my hair. "I'm so sorry, Travis. I thought—I mean, I felt like there was something between us, but clearly, I was wrong. I'm such an idiot."

The silence that followed was deafening. I could hear my own heartbeat pounding in my ears. The kitchen suddenly felt too small, too intimate. I wanted nothing more than to disappear into thin air, to erase the last few minutes from existence.

Travis stood there, his expression unreadable, one hand still pressed against his lips. The silence stretched between us, thick and oppressive. I felt my face burning with shame, my stomach churning with regret. How could I have misread things so badly?

"Parker, I—" he began, his voice low and strained.

I held up a hand, unable to meet his eyes. "No, please. You don't have to say anything. I'm so sorry. I'll just...I'll get out of here." I turned to flee, desperate to escape the suffocating tension of the kitchen. My vision blurred with unshed tears as I stumbled up the stairs. How could I have been so stupid? I'd ruined everything—our

friendship, our working relationship, the comfortable routine we'd fallen into.

"Parker, wait!" Travis called after me, his footsteps echoing behind me. I froze, my hand on the doorknob of the guest room, my heart pounding so loudly I was sure he could hear it. I couldn't turn around, couldn't bear to see the pity or disgust in his eyes.

"Please," he said softly, his voice closer now. "Can we talk about this?"

I squeezed my eyes shut, willing the floor to open up and swallow me whole. The silence stretched between us. Finally, I mustered the courage to turn around, keeping my gaze fixed on the floor. "I'm so sorry," I whispered, my voice cracking. "I completely misread everything. I thought—God, I'm such an idiot."

"Parker, look at me," he said, his voice gentle but firm. I reluctantly raised my eyes to meet his, bracing myself for the worst. But instead of disgust or anger, I saw a mix of emotions swirling in those blue depths—concern, affection, and something else I couldn't quite place.

"I like you, Parker. I like you A LOT, which is why I can't just be a rebound guy for you."

His words hit me like a punch to the gut, leaving me breathless and confused. "A rebound guy?" I echoed, my brow furrowing as I tried to process what he was saying.

He ran a hand over his jaw. "Look, you just got out of a long-term relationship. And I'd be lying if I said I haven't thought about this—about us." He took a deep breath, his eyes never leaving mine. "But I can't be a simple fling for you, Parker. I care about you too much for that. And I'm worried you're not ready for anything serious yet."

My heart raced as I processed his words. He hadn't turned me away because he didn't want me, he'd pushed me away because he wanted something more, something real. Travis liked me. He actually liked me. But he thought I was just looking for a rebound.

"Travis," I said softly, taking a step closer to him. "You're not a rebound. Not even close."

His eyebrows raised slightly, a flicker of hope crossing his features. "I'm not?"

I shook my head, gathering my courage. "Travis, I've seen men and women fall all over themselves to get your attention; servers, patients, even that little old lady that lives down the hall from you. You could never be someone's rebound guy. You're the one they're rebounding from. And besides—I like you too. A lot." I emphasized the last part the way he had.

His eyes softened, a small smile tugging at the corners of his mouth. "Really?"

I nodded, my heart pounding. "Really. Being around you these past weeks, it's like—I don't know, like I'm finally waking up. Seeing things clearly for the first time."

He took a step closer, close enough that I could feel the warmth radiating from his body through his clothes. "Parker," he said softly, his voice low and husky. "Are you sure about this? Because if we do this, I don't want there to be any doubts or regrets. I don't think I could stand it if you regretted something we did. And I think we should go out. Properly."

"Oh my God! Is Travis Brooks actually asking me out on a date?" I teased. "But wait, I thought you never dated."

His eyes softened, a vulnerability I'd never seen before flickering across his features. He rubbed the back of his neck, a faint blush creeping up his cheeks. For a moment, the confident, carefree man I knew was replaced by someone almost shy, uncertain.

"I haven't," he admitted quietly, his gaze dropping to the floor before meeting mine again. "But that's only because I never met anyone I wanted to be with like that." He took a deep breath, as if steeling himself. "But you're different. You're—Fuck, Parker, you're everything."

My heart stuttered in my chest as he reached out, his fingers ghosting along my cheek. The touch was feather-light, but it sent electricity coursing through my body. "I want to take you out," he continued, his voice low and earnest. "I want to show you how special you are to me. I want to do this differently, because you're different. I want to do it right."

I leaned into his touch, my eyes fluttering closed for a moment as I savored the feeling of his hand on my skin. When I opened them again, Travis was looking at me with such intensity that it took my breath away. "Okay," I whispered, a smile tugging at my lips. "Let's do this right."

His face lit up with a grin that could outshine the sun. "Yeah?"

"Yeah," I nodded, feeling giddy and lightheaded. "But Travis?"

"Hmm?" He hummed, his thumb tracing gentle circles on my cheek.

"Can I kiss you again? Just once more before we start doing this properly?"

He chuckled, the sound low and warm causing a swirling sensation deep in the pit of my stomach. "I thought you'd never ask."

This time, when our lips met, it was slow and tender, a promise of things to come. Travis's hands gripped my hips, pulling me closer as I slid my hands up his chest to rest on his shoulders. The kiss deepened, and I felt myself melting into him, all the tension and uncertainty of the past few minutes dissolving away.

When we finally parted, both slightly breathless, he rested his forehead against mine. "Wow," he murmured, his blue eyes sparkling.

"Yeah," I agreed, unable to keep the smile off my face. "Wow."

We stood there for a moment, just holding each other, reveling in this new understanding between us. Then Travis pulled back slightly, a mischievous grin spreading across his face. "So, Parker Reyes," he said, his voice playful, "would you like to go on a date with me tomorrow night?"

I couldn't help but laugh, feeling giddy and lightheaded. "I'd love to, Travis Brooks," I replied, matching his playful tone. "What did you have in mind?"

His eyes twinkled with mischief. "Oh, that's for me to know and you to find out. Just be ready at seven."

I raised my eyebrows. "Should I be worried?"

"Nah," Travis grinned, pulling me close again. "Trust me, okay?"

I nodded, my heart racing at his proximity. "I already do."

He brushed a soft kiss against my forehead before stepping back. "Now, as much as I'd love to keep kissing you all night, I think we should probably get some sleep. Big day tomorrow and all."

I reluctantly agreed, already missing the warmth of his arms around me. As we parted ways to head to our separate bedrooms, I couldn't wipe the smile off my face. The anticipation of our upcoming date mixed with the lingering sensation of Travis's lips on mine, created a heady cocktail of excitement and nerves.

Sleep didn't come easily that night. I tossed and turned, replaying every moment of our kiss, every word Travis had said. When I finally drifted off, my dreams were filled with blue eyes and gentle touches.

Chapter Thirteen

TRAVIS

I paced back and forth across Jasper's living room, my heart racing like I'd just sprinted up twenty flights of stairs. What the hell was wrong with me? I never got nervous about going out, but this wasn't just some random hookup, this was a date—with Parker.

"Dude, you're gonna wear a hole in the floor," Jasper said from his spot on the couch. "Relax."

I shot him a glare. "Easy for you to say. You've got Maks. You don't have to worry about first dates anymore."

Akio chuckled. "Never thought I'd see the day Travis Brooks was a nervous wreck over a guy."

"I'm not a nervous wreck," I protested weakly, even as I wiped my sweaty palms on my jeans for the millionth time.

"Sure, and I'm straight," Jasper quipped. I flipped him off, but there was no real heat behind it.

Garrett's face appeared on Akio's phone screen as the FaceTime connected. "How's our boy doing?" he asked with a grin.

“Oh, you know, totally chill,” Akio said dryly. “Not freaking out at all.”

I groaned and collapsed onto the chair across from them. “I hate all of you.”

“No you don’t,” Jasper said. “You love us. And we love you, which is why we’re here to help you not fuck this up.”

“Gee, thanks for the vote of confidence,” I muttered.

“Travis.” Garrett’s voice was gentle. “We’ve never seen you like this over anyone before. It’s a good thing. Parker must be really special.”

I felt my cheeks heat. “He is,” I admitted softly. Just thinking about Parker made my stomach do flips. His gorgeous body, that crooked smile, the way he bit his lip when he was concentrating.

“Earth to Travis!” Akio’s voice snapped me out of my Parker-induced daze.

“Sorry,” I mumbled.

“Don’t apologize,” Garrett said. “It’s adorable. Our little Casanova is growing up.” I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help smiling. As much as they teased me, I knew my friends were genuinely happy for me.

“Alright, enough mush,” Jasper declared. “We need a game plan. First things first—outfit.”

Akio’s eyes lit up. “Ooh, yes! I’ll take you shopping. We’ll find the perfect first date look.”

I groaned. “Do we have to? Can’t I just wear jeans and a nice shirt?”

“Absolutely not. You’re not hitting the clubs,” Akio said firmly. “This is a special occasion. You need to go all out.”

“Fine,” I grumbled, knowing it was useless to argue. Akio had impeccable taste, so there was no doubt I’d be in good hands.

“Great, that’s settled,” Jasper said. “Now, where are you taking him?”

I hesitated. “I—hadn’t really thought about it yet,” I admitted sheepishly.

Garrett and Jasper exchanged a look. “Leave it to us,” Garrett said. “We’ll come up with the perfect romantic spot.”

“Nothing too cheesy,” I warned.

Jasper snorted. “Please. Have you met us? We’ve got this.”

As they started tossing out ideas, I felt a mix of excitement and terror swirling in my gut. This was really happening. I was going on a real, honest-to-God date with Parker. The guy I hadn’t been able to stop thinking about for months.

“You okay?” Akio asked softly, noticing my faraway look.

I took a deep breath. “Yeah. Just—what if I mess this up? I’ve never done the relationship thing before. What if I’m terrible at it?”

He squeezed my shoulder. “You won’t be. Just be yourself. That’s the beauty of starting out as friends first, Parker already knows you and likes you for who you are.”

“But what if?—”

“No what ifs,” Jasper interrupted. “You’ve got this, Trav. And we’ve got your back every step of the way.”

I looked around at my friends—my family—and felt a wave of gratitude wash over me. “Thanks, guys. I don’t know what I’d do without you.”

“Crash and burn, probably,” Garrett teased.

I laughed, some of the tension finally easing from my shoulders. Whatever happened with Parker, I knew I’d always have these guys in my corner. And somehow, that made everything seem a little less scary.

I stared at my reflection in the bathroom mirror, fidgeting with the collar of my crisp blue button-down shirt. My usually confident demeanor had vanished, replaced by a bundle of nerves I barely recognized.

“Get it together, Brooks,” I muttered, running a hand through my carefully styled hair. My heart was racing, palms sweaty as I checked my watch for the hundredth time. 6:55. Five minutes until I was supposed to pick up Parker. From my own guest room. God, this was weird.

I took a deep breath, trying to channel some of my usual swagger. It was just Parker, right? The same guy I’d been hanging out with since he moved here. The same guy whose laugh made my stomach do backflips and whose smile—Nope. Not helping.

With trembling hands, I grabbed the bouquet of flowers from the counter. Roses felt too cliché, so I’d gone with a mix of colorful wildflowers I hoped he would like.

“You can do this,” I told my reflection. “It’s just a date. No big deal.” But it was a big deal because it was Parker. And for the first time in my life, I actually cared about not screwing things up.

At exactly seven o'clock, I found myself standing outside the guest room door, shifting my weight from foot to foot. I raised my hand to knock, then hesitated. Should I have texted first? Was knocking too formal? Before I could spiral further, I forced myself to rap my knuckles against the wood. Three quick taps.

The door swung open, and suddenly there was Parker, looking absolutely gorgeous in dark jeans and a forest green sweater that made his eyes pop. My breath caught in my throat.

"Hey," he said softly, a warm smile spreading across his face.

"Hi," I managed, thrusting the flowers forward like an awkward teenager. "These are for you."

Parker's eyes widened in surprise as he took the bouquet. "Travis, they're beautiful. Thank you."

I rubbed the back of my neck, feeling heat creep up my cheeks. "Is it too cheesy? Garrett told me I should bring flowers, but he's a romance author, so he's always a little over the top when it comes to this stuff."

His smile grew even wider. "It's perfect. I can't believe you asked your friends for advice. That's—really sweet."

"Yeah, well." I shrugged, trying to play it cool despite the warmth blooming in my chest at his words. "I wanted to make sure I did this right."

As I followed him down to the kitchen to put the flowers in water, I couldn't help but admire the way his jeans hugged his ass. When he caught me staring, a mischievous glint appeared in his eyes. "You know, we could always stay in if you'd rather?—"

The heated implication in his voice sent a jolt of electricity through me. For a split second, I was tempted. But no. I had a plan, dammit. “No way,” I said firmly, even as my body screamed in protest. “I told you I wanted to do this right, and that’s exactly what I plan on doing.”

Parker’s expression softened, a mix of admiration and something deeper flickering in his eyes. “Alright then, Mr. Brooks. Lead the way.”

As we headed out, I sent up a silent prayer that I wouldn’t completely blow this. Because for the first time in my life, I had found someone worth taking a real chance on. And I was determined not to let him slip away.

I led Parker out of the condo, my hand resting gently on the small of his back as we made our way to my car. I marveled over the fact that I was allowed to touch him that way now. The night air was crisp, carrying the faint scent of autumn leaves and possibility. As we drove, I couldn’t help but steal glances at Parker, marveling at how breathtaking he was.

“So, where are we headed?” he asked, curiosity evident in his voice.

I grinned, feeling a surge of confidence. “It’s a surprise. But I think you’ll like it.”

We pulled up to a secluded spot along the Chicago Riverwalk. I’d arranged for a private candlelit dinner on one of the docked boats. As we stepped onto the gently rocking vessel, I watched Parker’s eyes widen in awe.

“Travis, this is—incredible,” he whispered, taking in the twinkling lights reflecting off the water.

My heart swelled. “I wanted it to be special.”

Over dinner, our conversation flowed as effortlessly as it always did and with each passing moment, I felt myself falling deeper. This wasn't like our casual hangouts at work or grabbing beers after a long day. This was different. Electric. Real. This night was important—hopefully, the start of something new.

“You know,” Parker said, his eyes soft in the candlelight, “I’ve never met anyone quite like you, Travis.”

I swallowed hard, vulnerability creeping in. “Is that a good thing?”

He reached across the table, his fingers intertwining with mine. “It’s the best thing.”

As the night wore on, I found myself wishing it would never end. For the first time in my life, I wasn't thinking about the next conquest or the easiest way to get someone into bed. I was thinking about a future—movie nights, lazy weekends, building something special together. It terrified and thrilled me in equal measure.

Later, as we drove back home, our arms brushed against each other on the armrest. Without thinking, I reached for his hand, lacing my fingers through his. Parker looked up at me, a soft smile playing on his lips, and I knew I was done for. Whatever happened, this man already owned me.

At his door, I hesitated. “Did you have a good time?” I asked, hating how unsure I sounded.

His smile widened. “I had a wonderful time. I can’t remember the last time I felt like such a priority to anyone. You promised to make me feel special, and you certainly did.”

Relief and joy coursed through me. “Good,” I murmured. “That’s good.”

I leaned in, intending a gentle goodnight kiss. But the moment our lips met, something ignited between us. Parker's hands tangled in my hair as I pressed him against the door, our bodies molding together. As things heated up, hands wandering, exploring, I suddenly pulled back, gasping for air.

"I've always heard you're not supposed to put out on the first date," I panted, every instinct screaming at me to keep going.

His expression darkened with desire. "Well," he said, voice husky, "that's too bad. Because I do."

I couldn't hold back any longer. With a groan, I captured his lips again, more urgently this time. My hands roamed his body, relishing the firm muscles beneath his shirt. Parker fumbled with the door handle, and we stumbled into the guest room, a tangle of limbs and heated breaths. "God, you're gorgeous," I murmured against his neck, trailing kisses along his jaw.

His fingers deftly unbuttoned my shirt. "You're not so bad yourself," he quipped, but his voice was breathless.

We fell onto the bed, a mess of wandering hands and discarded clothing. I paused, hovering over his body as I drank in the sight of him. His eyes were dark with desire, his breathing labored, his lips swollen from our kisses. A part of me couldn't believe this was happening.

"You sure about this?" I asked, giving him one last chance to back out.

Parker's response was to pull me down for another searing kiss. "I've never been more sure of anything," he whispered against my lips.

My heart soared. I kissed my way down his chest, reveling in the small gasps and

moans I elicited. When I reached the waistband of his pants, I looked up, seeking permission. He nodded, lifting his hips to help me shimmy his pants and underwear down his legs and off. I tossed them onto the floor then quickly shed my own. The sight of Parker, flushed and wanting beneath me, nearly undid me. I'd had plenty of hookups before, but this—this felt different. Important. It felt like more.

“Travis,” he begged, reaching for me. “Please.” I didn't need to be asked twice. Settling between his legs, I took us both in hand, stroking slowly. The sensation was incredible, and judging by his sharp intake of breath, he felt the same.

“Oh god,” he moaned, his hips bucking up into my hand.

I set a steady rhythm, watching his face contort with pleasure. It was the most beautiful thing I'd ever seen. As our breathing quickened and his moans grew louder, I knew we were both close.

“Travis, I'm gonna?—”

“Me too,” I gasped. “Together.”

With a few more strokes, we tumbled over the edge, crying out each other's names. I collapsed on top of him, both of us panting heavily. As we lay there, coming down from our high, a thought struck me. This wasn't just sex. This was the beginning of something. And for once in my life, that didn't scare me at all.

Chapter Fourteen

PARKER

It felt like the leaves were putting on a show just for us, a stunning display of reds, oranges, and yellows that swirled overhead as we drove. We'd left the city behind, its towering skyscrapers replaced by the towering pine, oak, and maple trees of the countryside. I could feel the tension slipping from my shoulders, replaced by an excited fluttering in my stomach as Travis and I ventured towards our little weekend adventure.

"Hey, check out those colors," he said, his voice warm with the same excitement that was coursing through me.

"Mother Nature's really showing off, isn't she?" I replied, leaning back into the seat and watching the way the sunlight danced across his face through the windows.

"Best time of the year for a camping trip," he added, shooting me that heart-stopping grin that never failed to make my pulse race. "You ready to leave the concrete jungle behind and get wild with me, Parker?"

"Wild doesn't even begin to cover it," I said, returning his grin with one of my own. It wasn't just the prospect of nature that had me on edge—it was the newness of this, us, something budding between two people who'd only known each other professionally until very recently. There was something incredibly thrilling about exploring these uncharted territories together.

A couple of hours later, we pulled into the campsite, a picturesque clearing that looked like it had been ripped straight from a postcard. The air was crisp, carrying the earthy scent of pine and damp soil that filled my lungs and seemed to cleanse away any remnants of city smog.

“Here we are,” Travis announced, killing the engine and surveying our home for the weekend with a satisfied nod. “Home sweet temporary home.”

“Looks perfect,” I said, stepping out of the car and stretching my legs. The ground was soft beneath my feet, a carpet of fallen leaves rustling with each movement.

“Let’s get this gear out,” he suggested, opening the trunk and revealing an impressive array of camping equipment. “I brought the works. You’re not sleeping on the ground on my watch.”

“Always the gentleman,” I teased, grabbing the tent bag and a couple of foldable chairs. “Where do you want to set up?”

“Right there looks good.” He pointed towards a flat area not far from where we’d parked, close enough to hear the gentle babble of a nearby stream.

“Race you,” I said playfully, hoisting the tent over my shoulder and breaking into a light jog.

“Hey, no fair!” He laughed, but he was quick on my heels, the sound of his footsteps crunching right behind me. We reached the spot at the same time, dropping our load onto the ground and panting lightly from the short sprint.

“Teamwork makes the dream work, right?” Travis said as we began unpacking the tent, his fingers deftly unraveling ropes and extending poles. Despite his playful exterior, I could tell he was serious about creating a comfortable space for us to share.

“Absolutely,” I agreed, unfolding the fabric and helping him lift the structure until it stood proudly amongst the trees. “It’s like our own little fortress.”

“Only the best for my—ahem—for us,” he corrected himself, a soft blush creeping onto his cheeks. It was endearing to see that confident demeanor crack ever so slightly, revealing the anticipation he felt about the weekend ahead.

“Thanks, Travis. It means a lot,” I said, feeling warmth bloom in my chest. I watched as he secured the final stakes into the ground, his muscular body moving with purposeful grace.

He caught me staring and winked. “Admiring the view?” he asked, standing up and dusting off his hands.

“Can you blame me?” I shot back, unable to help the laughter spilling from my lips. He joined in, and for a moment, everything else faded away—there was just us, the forest, and the promise of what was to come.

“Let’s get the rest of the stuff,” he suggested after a moment, his tone shifting back to the task at hand. “Then we can relax and soak all this in.”

“Sounds perfect,” I said, and we worked together in an easy rhythm, unloading sleeping bags, a portable stove, and all the other essentials for our weekend escape. The camp began to take shape, a cozy little spot in the midst of nature’s grandeur.

Once everything was settled, I stepped back to take it all in—the tent nestled among the trees, a fire pit waiting to be lit, our seats positioned just so to face the eventual sunset. It was serene, idyllic even, and I couldn’t have imagined a better way to spend a weekend. Especially with the company I had.

“Want to take a walk?” he asked, brushing his hands on his jeans.

“Lead the way,” I said with a contented sigh, falling into step beside him.

We set off at a leisurely pace, the forest floor soft beneath our steps, the air around us free of any smog. Birds chirped above us, flitting from branch to branch, while the occasional squirrel scampered across our path, bushy tails swishing happily.

“It’s beautiful out here, so relaxing and peaceful. The city has nothing on this.”

“Nothing beats the great outdoors.” He took a deep breath, his chest expanding beneath his fitted shirt. “And nothing beats sharing it with you.”

Our eyes met, and there was a warmth there that had nothing to do with the mild fall weather. My heart did that fluttery thing it seemed to reserve just for him. I reached for his hand. “Come on. Let’s see what’s around that bend.”

The trail wound through the forest, a dirt ribbon that led to possible untold discoveries. We talked about everything and nothing, our conversation flowing as easily as the light breeze whispering through the branches.

“Hey,” Travis suddenly burst out, stopping short and pointing ahead. “You see that?”

“See what?” I squinted, trying to follow his line of sight.

“The waterfall,” he said. “It’s just up ahead. I bet it’s amazing. Race you there?” Challenge laced his words, but his smile softened the competition into something fun and exhilarating.

I arched an eyebrow. “I don’t know. You seriously think you can beat me?”

“Absolutely. Ready—set—” Without finishing the countdown, he took off, his laughter trailing behind.

“Cheater!” I called out, but I was already sprinting after him, my breath coming in quick bursts. The forest became a blur of color and motion as I pushed myself, trying to catch up to that confident stride of his.

He glanced back, a taunting smile on his face. “Gotta be quicker than that, Reyes!”

My feet pounded the path, and I felt alive in a way that was electrifying. This was more than just a race; it was a chase, a game, a dance of sorts between two people who were still discovering all the ways they fit together.

Closer now, I could hear the waterfall’s roar. I put on a burst of speed, and for a second, I thought I might actually catch him. But then, with a laugh, Travis reached the waterfall first, throwing his arms up in victory. “I win!”

“Only because you cheated!” I arrived beside him, panting and grinning.

“Ah, but did you see your face?” he teased, his chest rising and falling in quick succession. “Pure determination. I admire that about you.”

“You do, huh?” I nudged him playfully, feeling a rush of affection for this man who could turn even a simple hike into a memory I’d cherish.

“Absolutely,” he confirmed, pulling me close. His kiss tasted wild, of freedom, and something that felt suspiciously like home.

“Next time, I’m setting the terms of the race,” I said once we parted, both of us gazing at the majestic waterfall before us.

“Deal,” he agreed, squeezing my hand. “But right now, how about we enjoy the view?” We stood side by side, hands clasped, hearts racing not from the run but from the sheer joy of being together.

After a while, we continued our walk, our voices blending with the sounds of nature. It wasn't long before we stumbled across a small wooden shack adorned with colorful signs that read "Kayak Rentals" in bold, adventurous letters.

"Hey, look at that," I said, pointing towards it. A gentle stream flowed nearby, leading into a wider body of water that sparkled under the sun's generous rays.

Travis followed my gaze and his eyes lit up with that familiar spark of spontaneity. "You ever been kayaking?"

"Once or twice," I replied. "How about you?"

"Let's just say water and I get along pretty well." His grin was infectious, and I found myself already nodding before he even suggested it.

"Let's do it."

Inside the rustic hut, where the smell of damp wood mingled with the scent of river water, we were greeted by a wall of paddles and life vests. The attendant gave us a brief rundown—a formality for Travis who seemed more at ease here than anywhere else.

"Race you on the water too?" he teased, fastening the straps of his life vest with deft fingers.

"Let's not make everything a competition." I laughed, but the challenge had already set my heart racing with anticipation.

Out on the water, the world transformed. The water was smooth and clear as we moved in sync with the gentle currents, the occasional splash of our paddles punctuating the serene silence. "Look at you go," Travis called out from his kayak,

which glided effortlessly alongside mine. “I’m starting to think you’ve done this more than ‘once or twice.’”

“Maybe I’m just a natural,” I shot back playfully, unable to keep the pride from my voice as I navigated a particularly tricky current with a skillful twist of my paddle.

“Or maybe you’re just showing off for me.” There was that laugh again, warm and delighted, carried across the water.

“Can you blame me?”

“Trust me, I’m already thoroughly impressed by you,” he replied, causing my cheeks to heat up despite the cool breeze that swept over us.

We paddled on, sometimes talking, sometimes simply enjoying the shared silence. The physical exertion was a welcome burn in my arms, a reminder of the strength I’d honed through my work as a physical therapist—strength Travis admired openly when he caught sight of my biceps flexing with each stroke.

“Damn, Parker,” he whistled appreciatively. “Someone’s been doing their exercises.”

“Occupational hazard,” I joked, though the flush of pleasure at his words was undeniable.

“Remind me to have an ‘accident’ so I can be put under your care,” he said with a wink, making me snort with laughter.

“Let’s hope it doesn’t come to that,” I replied, though the idea of taking care of Travis, of being the one he turned to in need, sent an unexpected thrill through me.

“Wouldn’t be the worst thing,” he said, almost as if he were talking to himself, and I

wondered if he realized how much weight those words carried.

The water soon opened up into a calm, wide expanse that allowed us to drift closer together. Our kayaks bumped gently against each other, and Travis reached out to steady mine with a hand that held on for perhaps a moment longer than necessary. Our eyes met, and the world around us faded—the trees, the water, the sky—all of it paled in comparison to the depth I found in his blue gaze.

“Having fun?” he asked, his voice low and intimate over the short distance between us.

“More than I thought possible,” I replied honestly, my hand finding its way atop his on the side of my kayak.

“Good,” he said, his thumb brushing over my knuckles in a touch that was feather-light but filled with intent.

We resumed paddling, enveloped in quiet contentment. Every stroke was a stroke towards something new, something beautiful. And as the sunlight waned, casting elongated shadows upon the water, I knew without a doubt that this weekend was merely the beginning of countless adventures to come—with Travis by my side.

The last of the day’s light was giving way to twilight as we made our way back to our campsite, our laughter still echoing in the cool air. The physical exertion from kayaking had left an enjoyable burn in my muscles, a testament to the day’s adventures.

“Alright, let’s get this fire started before it gets any darker,” Travis suggested after we’d both washed up.

“Right behind you,” I replied, watching as he expertly navigated around the campsite,

picking up twigs and branches with an efficiency that told me he'd done this many times before.

There was something deeply satisfying about collecting firewood together, a sense of teamwork that went beyond the mere act. It was as if each branch we added to our pile symbolized a building block of the relationship we were forging—one that was warm, natural, and full of potential.

“Think this is enough?” I asked, dropping another armful onto the growing pile.

“Perfect. Now watch the master at work.”

I watched as he began arranging the wood into a perfect pyramid structure, the kindling nestled at its heart. He struck a match, his movements deliberate and focused, and the small flame caught, casting a warm glow over his face. His eyes flicked up to meet mine, and there was that spark again—the one that seemed to ignite something far deeper than the fire in front of us.

“Fire’s not the only thing heating up around here,” I teased, unable to resist the pull of his gaze.

“Keep your compliments coming, Parker. They might just earn you the first bite of whatever I whip up for dinner,” he replied with a wink.

With the fire crackling merrily, our campsite was intimate, romantic, and so damn right that I couldn’t help but feel a swell of contentment rise within me. “Wait until you see what I’ve got planned for dinner,” he said, pulling a cooler closer and opening it to reveal a selection of meats and vegetables. “Hope you’re hungry.”

“Starving,” I confessed. My stomach growled in agreement, eager to taste whatever magic he could conjure over an open flame.

“Good. You’re about to witness the culinary talents of Travis Brooks.” He rolled up his sleeves, revealing forearms that were well toned with sparse blond hair. It was hard not to stare, not to appreciate the way his muscles flexed as he skewered pieces of marinated chicken and bell peppers onto metal rods.

“Is there anything you can’t do?” I asked, half-joking but entirely serious. Travis was a man of many layers, each more intriguing than the last.

“Can’t seem to stop thinking about you,” he retorted smoothly, and my heart did that funny little skip-beat dance it had perfected since meeting him.

“Flirt,” I accused, though my tone was fond, affectionate even. “It’s no wonder you never went home alone from the clubs.”

His movements stopped, his eyes locking on me. “You’re the only one I want to go home with now,” he promised, and I believed him.

The aroma of grilled meat began to mingle with the smoky scent of the fire, creating a mouthwatering mixture that played upon all my senses. Travis moved with a grace that belied his size, turning the skewers with precision, the flames making his skin look like it was glowing.

“It’s ready,” he announced after a while, plating the food with care. It looked like something out of a gourmet magazine, and I was once again struck by the depth of his abilities.

“Wow, this looks amazing,” I said, genuinely impressed as I took the plate he offered.

“Wait until you taste it.”

And taste it I did. The flavors burst on my tongue—smoky, savory, with a hint of

sweetness that made my taste buds sing. Watching him cook had been a treat, but this was another level of enjoyment.

“Damn, Travis. When you said you could cook, I didn’t realize you meant you could out-cook professional chefs.”

“Guess I’m just full of surprises,” he replied, his lips quirking into that familiar, cocky smile that I found so endearing.

“Keep them coming,” I said, my voice softer now, edged with the vulnerability that comes from opening one’s heart. “I’m starting to think there’s nothing better than being surprised by you.”

He reached across the small space between us, his hand finding mine, his touch sending a current through me that was as vital as the warmth from the fire. “Get used to it, Parker, because I’m not going anywhere.”

Surrounded by the beauty of nature and the man who was quickly becoming my everything, I felt a profound sense of peace. This weekend was shaping up to be more than a simple escape—it was a journey towards something real and lasting. And I was ready to savor every second of it.

“Seriously, that was amazing,” I said as I scooped up the last bite and shoved it into my mouth. “You’ve got magic hands, Trav.”

“Good to know you think so,” he teased, winking at me. The innuendo hung in the air between us, light and playful. He finished eating, then leaned back in his chair, looking contented. “But enough about my cooking. Tell me something real, Parker. What’s one dream you have that you’ve never told anyone?”

The question caught me off guard, a pleasant prickle of nervousness dancing up my

spine. I swallowed, not just the food, but also the sudden lump of vulnerability. “Okay—well,” I started, my gaze drifting up to the canopy of leaves above us. “I’ve always wanted to write a book. Nothing fancy, just—stories that matter, you know? Stories that might help someone feel less alone.”

“Wow.” He sounded genuinely impressed, and it warmed me more than the fire could. “That’s beautiful, Parker. You know, Garrett’s an author. If you ever decide to give it a try, I’m sure he would be happy to help you.”

“Thanks,” I murmured, feeling my cheeks flush with a mixture of gratitude that he hadn’t laughed at me. Not that I’d thought he would. If anyone would understand my ambitions, it was him. “What about you? Any hidden dreams in that confident exterior?”

A soft smile graced his lips, as warm as the embers crackling before us. “I guess—sometimes I think about having a family. You know, the whole package. Sort of like I had with my parents before they were taken from me. A partner who gets me, a couple of kids running around, maybe even a dog.”

“Sounds pretty perfect,” I replied softly, the image of it blossoming in my mind—Travis, with laughter-filled eyes, chasing after a pair of exuberant toddlers and scooping them up in his strong arms.

“Yeah, it does,” he agreed, his eyes locking onto mine. In them, I saw something deep and earnest, and it struck a chord within me.

We talked on, delving deeper into the topic of fears and aspirations. His concerns about being the last single man in his group of friends echoed my own worries of finding someone who truly understood me. We shared the yearning for connection, for a love that was both a shelter and a celebration.

As the sun began its descent, the sky transformed into a canvas painted with a talented artist's brush. The day's warmth lingered, but the coming night promised to be cool. Travis stood abruptly, brushing crumbs from his jeans. Taking my empty paper plate with his, he tossed them into the fire then turned to me, holding out his hand.

"Come on, follow me," he said, his voice laced with an excitement that was contagious.

I watched, curious, as he fetched a blanket from our tent and spread it out on the grassy ground nearby. "Let's watch the stars come out," he suggested as he dropped down onto the blanket, patting the space beside him.

For someone who had never dated or been in a relationship before, he certainly seemed to know a lot about romance. I was just happy I was the person he'd decided to romance. I joined him on the blanket, the earth beneath us solid and welcoming. As we lay back, our shoulders touching, the first stars twinkled into existence above us.

"Out here, away from the city lights, it's like a whole other world," I breathed out, lost in the vastness above.

"Beautiful, isn't it?" Travis said, his voice a quiet rumble. "Makes you feel infinite and insignificant all at once."

"Exactly," I whispered back, turning to see his profile against the darkening sky—the slope of his nose, the curve of his lips.

We lay there in silence, the kind that spoke volumes, the kind that wove itself around us, drawing us closer without a single word. And as the sky deepened to a rich velvet blue, scattered with a million points of light, I felt the magnitude of the moment settle over me.

Lying next to him, under the sprawling sky, I realized the stars weren't the only things taking my breath away. I reached for his hand, and our fingers wove together effortlessly as if they'd been searching for one another in the darkness.

"Orion," I pointed upwards, "always looking for a fight."

"Typical macho man." Travis chuckled, his breath warm against my cheek. "And there—Cassiopeia, the queen on her throne." His arm stretched out above us, tracing the W shape in the sky.

We traded stories then, our words floating up to mingle with the stars. I told him about how as a kid, my siblings and me had lain in fields just like this one, making wishes on shooting stars, dreaming of a future that felt both impossibly far away and as close as our next breath.

"Did any of those wishes come true?" he asked, his tone soft, inviting me to share more than just anecdotes.

"Some," I admitted. "But sometimes what you think you want isn't what you need."

"Ah, the wisdom of hindsight," he mused.

"Exactly." I turned to look at him, his features barely visible now except for the way they seemed to catch the moonlight. "What about you? Any stargazing memories?"

"Plenty," Travis said. His thumb stroked the back of my hand as he spoke. "Aunt Lisa used to take me out driving on some back roads outside the city when she needed to escape. She joked that the stars were her therapy until she could afford real therapy. We'd park right there on the side of the road and stretch out on the hood of the car and just stare up at the stars." His voice was a gentle rumble. "She'd point out constellations, but we'd make up our own stories about them."

“Like what?” I prodded, genuinely curious about the man beside me who felt both like an old friend and a new mystery.

“See that cluster of stars?” He gestured toward a random grouping. “That was her ‘Dancing Teapot.’ She said it poured out strength and resilience into anyone who needed it.”

“Maybe it’s pouring some into us right now,” I suggested, letting the silence stretch between us, comfortable and intimate.

“Maybe,” he agreed, shifting slightly so his shoulder nudged against mine. Our bodies pressed closer on the blanket, and a warmth that had nothing to do with the mild autumn air blossomed in my chest.

“Travis—”

“Hmm?”

“Thank you for this,” I said, my voice barely a whisper. “For the stargazing, for the laughter, for making me feel...”

“Feel what?” he prompted when my words trailed off.

“Alive. Hopeful. Happy,” I finished, “in a way that I haven’t for a long time.”

He didn’t respond with words. Instead, he moved even closer, pulling the blanket snugly around us. The fabric created a cocoon that held the night’s chill at bay and amplified the heat radiating between our bodies. It was like we were the only two souls in existence, wrapped in our own little bubble.

Our conversation drifted away, replaced by a symphony of night sounds—the distant

call of an owl, the rustle of leaves in the gentle breeze, the steady rhythm of our breathing. And beneath the blanket, our hands remained entwined, a tangible connection that spoke volumes.

“Look, a shooting star!” Travis broke the silence, his voice tinged with excitement.

I followed his gaze just in time to see the bright streak fizzle out, leaving a glowing trail behind it. “Make a wish,” I said, the words coming out instinctively.

“Already have everything I wished for right here,” he murmured. He turned his face towards me, sending a shiver down my spine that wasn’t from the nighttime air.

“Me too,” I confessed, and it was true. In that moment, under the watchful eyes of countless stars, with Travis’s warmth seeping into my bones, I couldn’t imagine being anywhere else or with anyone else. This was where I belonged.

His breath was a warm whisper against my cheek, sending ripples of anticipation through me. The night had wrapped us in its velvety embrace, the only light coming from the flickering fire and the countless stars above. I could feel his heartbeat, steady and strong, through the thin layer of our shirts as they pressed together. His fingers, still interlaced with mine, tightened ever so slightly—a silent plea for something more.

“Beautiful, isn’t it?” I murmured, though I wasn’t looking at the sky anymore. My gaze lingered on his face, illuminated by the soft golden glow of the moon above.

“Nothing compares to you,” he replied, his voice husky, laced with an emotion that made my heart feel like it might burst out of my chest.

He tilted his head, closing of the small distance between us. His lips met mine in a kiss that was tender at first, hesitant—like the delicate brush of a butterfly’s wing.

But the hesitation evaporated as quickly as it came, and the kiss deepened, fueled by the pent-up longing we'd both been holding back. There was a hunger in the way Travis kissed me, a fervent need that matched the urgency thrumming through my veins.

Our hands began to wander, emboldened by the passion that crackled between us like the sparks from the fire. His fingers traced the line of my jaw before threading through my hair, tugging gently, eliciting a low moan that vibrated against his lips. My own hands roamed across the expanse of his back, feeling the ripple of muscles beneath his shirt—an unspoken testament to the strength that lay beneath his playful exterior.

The kisses grew more insistent, more demanding. Our breaths mingled, ragged and hot, as we explored each other with a newfound fervor. The world beyond our small clearing ceased to exist; there was only the two of us and the fire we stoked within one another with every touch, every sigh.

“Travis,” I gasped when his lips trailed down the sensitive skin of my neck, marking a path that seared into my memory. His name on my lips was both a plea and a declaration, a sound that seemed to resonate with every fiber of my being.

“Parker,” he whispered back, the sound reverberating through me. His hands slipped under my shirt, exploring my torso with a reverence that left me breathless. The calloused pads of his fingers sent a trail of fire wherever they roamed.

There was no rush, no end goal in sight—only the desire to savor each moment, to memorize the way he made me feel: cherished, wanted, like I was the only person who mattered to him. The boundaries of friendship that once defined us melted away, leaving in their wake the thrilling realization that this—whatever this was—was real, and it was ours.

Stumbling into the tent, our laughter mingled with the rustling of nylon and the soft thud of our gear pushed hastily aside. We continued to explore each other with an urgency that had been building all evening. Travis quickly lit a lantern then turned his attention back to me.

“God, Parker,” he groaned, his voice rough with desire. His hands roamed my back before slipping beneath my shirt to trace the contours of my spine, his touch sending shivers through me despite the warmth of the tent.

“I need to feel you,” I murmured, reaching for the hem of his shirt and pulling it over his head, revealing miles and miles of taut muscles and smooth skin. My fingers danced across his chest, delighting in the way his breath hitched when I brushed over his nipples.

He mirrored my actions, stripping me of my own shirt, his eyes darkened with passion as he took in the sight of me. “Please, let me make you feel good,” he whispered as he hovered over me, kissing my lips, my chin, down the column of my throat.

“Yes,” I whispered, my voice hitching as Travis clamped his lips over my nipple. His tongue circled the tiny nub, teasing it into a sharp peak. My back arched when he gently bit down, a low moan rumbling up from my chest.

He continued his exploration, his lips brushing across my sensitive flesh, planting a trail of tantalizing kisses down my chest and over my stomach, making a detour to my navel. His tongue flicked across it, dipping in teasingly before cool breath blew across the area. My head spun as all my blood rushed south, making me achingly hard.

“Travis!” His name was a plea on my lips, but I wasn’t even sure what I was begging for.

A low growl emanated from his chest as he scooted lower, letting me know he was as turned on by what we were doing as I was. His tongue traced a line just above the waistband of my pants and then he was reaching for them, yanking them down my legs and tossing them and my shoes somewhere behind him. He quickly rid me of my socks and underwear and then he settled in between my legs as I spread them, accommodating the broad width of his shoulders.

His strong hands gripped my hips, urging me closer. I felt his breath against me before the warm wetness of his mouth enveloped me. A gasp tore from my throat, and I tangled my fingers in his silky locks. I saw stars as Travis's mouth began to work its magic along my length, his movements steady and sure, as if we'd been doing this together for years.

"Please," I cried.

"What do you need, Parker? Tell me," he urged, his tongue circling the weeping head of my cock.

"You," I answered breathlessly. "I need you, in my mouth."

Travis elicited a pleased sound, his movements quick as he stripped himself the rest of the way. He lay down naked beside me, facing the opposite direction. Someday, very soon I wanted to take my time, memorizing every glorious inch of him, but not this time. I was too close, the handle on my control stretched much too thin.

Rolling onto my side, I leaned forward and kissed the tip of his cock. He was rock hard, the head a slightly deeper color than the rest of him, the slit weeping continuously with precum. My mouth watered at the sight, and I wrapped my lips around the head, taking his length into my mouth.

I tasted him, savoring the saltiness, the very essence of Travis, as I took him deeper.

He groaned, his hips rocking gently, testing my gag reflex as his mouth worked miracles on my own cock. We moved in synch, a testament to the trust and desire that bound us. The pleasure built, a crescendo of sensation that threatened to overwhelm, but we held on, determined to make this moment last, to show with each caress how deep our feelings ran.

“Travis,” I breathed against his skin as we both neared the edge, “I’m?—”

“Me too,” he replied, his voice strained. Together we tipped over, waves of release crashing over us as we clung to each other, drinking each other down.

After, there was only the sound of our heavy breathing and the occasional crackle of the fire outside. Travis moved back up, so we were face to face, pulling me into his arms. The afterglow wrapped around us like a blanket, the night air cooling the sweat on our skin.

Travis reached up and traced my fingers with his fingertip. “I had no idea,” he whispered softly.

“What do you mean?”

His eyes swam with emotion in the light from the lantern. “I’ve had plenty of—experiences.” He winced at the reminder, so I took his hand in mine and gave it a gentle squeeze. We both had a past, but none of that mattered. All that mattered was what happened between the two of us. He cleared his throat. “Anyway, even with all of that, I never knew sex could feel like this. Like what we did was bigger than the two of us, like we were creating something new.”

His eyes closed as he drifted off to sleep, but I stayed awake long enough to put the fire out and smiling at the wonder I’d heard in his voice. “We did create something,” I whispered back. “We were making love.”

Chapter Fifteen

TRAVIS

The hum of the clinic was a familiar backdrop to my day, but today, every sound seemed amplified—the tap of fingers on keyboards, the rustle of patients shifting on treatment beds, and the soft murmur of Parker’s voice as he instructed Mrs. Henley on her exercises. I tried to focus on the chart in front of me, but my gaze kept wandering over to where he stood, the sunlight from the window casting a halo around his head, like he truly was an angel.

“Travis, are you with us?” Justin’s teasing voice snapped me back to reality. I looked up to find my office manager eyeing me with an amused smirk.

“Uh, yeah. Where else would I be,” I replied, though we both knew my attention was elsewhere. “Just reviewing the Henderson case.”

“Uh-huh,” he said, not buying it for a second. His eyes flicked towards Parker before returning to me with a knowing look. I gave him a glare that I hoped conveyed “drop it,” and thankfully, he did.

“Mr. Brooks?” The uncertain voice of my next patient pulled me out from under Justin’s scrutiny. I plastered on my best professional smile and turned toward the young athlete who had been rehabbing a knee injury for the past month.

“Right here, Jeremy. Let’s see how that knee is holding up today,” I said, all business now. As we walked towards the treatment area, I couldn’t help but steal a glance at

Parker, catching him observing us with a small, secretive smile. Our eyes met, and the connection was instant, a silent conversation in a crowded room.

“Everything feels a lot better,” Jeremy was saying, and I locked back into therapist mode. “I think I’m ready to get back on the field.”

“Let’s not get ahead of ourselves,” I cautioned, even as my peripheral vision betrayed me, drawn to the way Parker leaned down to adjust Mrs. Henley’s ankle weights. His movements were precise, his touch gentle—qualities I had become intimately familiar with.

“Focus, Travis,” I muttered to myself, turning my full attention back to Jeremy and guiding him through a series of stability exercises. I corrected his posture, praised his progress, and made a few notes in his chart. But the moment Jeremy was settled into his routine, I found myself searching for Parker once more.

Our game of covert glances continued, each look a promise of things to come, charging the air with anticipation. It was ridiculous, really—we were grown men acting like teenagers—but I didn’t care. There was something exhilarating about this secret dance we were engaged in.

As the day wore on, the clinic began to empty, the bustle giving way to a quieter atmosphere. I was finishing up some documentation when Parker knocked softly on my office door.

“Everyone’s getting ready to leave for the day,” he said, his voice low as he stepped inside and closed the door behind him.

“Is that so?” I asked, leaning back in my chair, trying to maintain a semblance of control over my overwhelming desire to pull him close.

“Yep,” he replied casually, strolling towards me. “Just thought I’d check to see if you need me to do anything else before we head out.”

“Actually,” I started, my voice thick with arousal. “There is something.”

He stopped just short of my desk, the growing tension between us, a tangible thing. Then, with a swift movement, I was out of my chair, and we collided in a heat of urgency. Our lips met in a stolen kiss, fervent and hasty, as if we were making up for lost time.

“God, I’ve wanted to do that all day,” he breathed against my mouth, and I responded by deepening the kiss, my hands finding their way into his hair.

“Me too,” I admitted, our kiss slowing, turning tender and exploratory. We savored the taste of one another, the feel of lips and teeth and tongue in a slow burn that promised more.

The sound of footsteps echoed in the hallway, and we sprang apart, each of us smoothing our hair and straightening our clothes. By the time the door swung open, we were the picture of professionalism—or so we hoped.

Justin leaned against the doorframe and shot me a knowing look—one that had my heart hitching in my chest. “Travis, you might want to take a break from ‘reorganizing your files’ with Parker,” he said, air quoting with a wry grin. The tips of my ears heated up as I glanced over at Parker, who was trying, poorly, to disguise his flustered state with a shuffle of patient charts.

“Justin, we were just—” I started, but the gleam in his eye told me it was pointless to feign innocence.

“Save it. I’ve known about you two for weeks,” he admitted, pushing off from the

doorframe and sauntering into the room. His smile was infectious, and despite the initial shock, I found myself grinning back.

“Seriously?” Parker asked, his eyes flickering between Justin and me.

“Yep, and so has everyone else.” Justin’s voice held a lilt of amusement. “In fact, we’ve been taking bets on how long it’d take for you guys to get caught.”

“Wait, there’s a betting pool on us?” I couldn’t help the laugh that bubbled up from my chest. The absurdity was too much.

“Uh-huh, and let me tell you,” he continued, pulling out his phone and tapping away. “I was pretty close to winning. I guessed three weeks. We’re at two and a half.”

“Who else is in on this?” I pressed, still reeling from the revelation.

“Who isn’t? Even Bryan threw in a guess, though he’s terrible at keeping secrets.” Justin chuckled, scrolling through what I assumed was a list of bets.

“Guilty as charged,” came a voice from the doorway. Bryan stepped in, arms crossed, looking like the cat that got the cream. “But hey, love makes you do silly things, right?”

“Like bet on your friend’s love life?” Parker quipped, finally easing into the camaraderie.

“Exactly,” Kara shot back as she joined us.

“Alright, alright, we’ve given them a hard enough time for one day,” Justin said, clapping his hands together. “Let’s get out of here and leave these two lovebirds alone.” He ushered everyone out the door then turned back, a wry smirk on his face.

“But seriously, you guys need to be more discreet, or at least lock the door.”

“Point taken,” Parker said, still looking a little shell-shocked as they all left the office, their laughter echoing down the hall.

“Guess we’re not as sneaky as we thought,” I mused, watching Parker collect himself.

“Seems like it,” he agreed, but there was a sparkle in his eye that told me he wasn’t upset. “So, what now?”

I shrugged, feeling the weight of the day melt away with the humor of the situation. “Now, we go home and finish what they so rudely interrupted.”

“I like that plan.”

The drive home was full of flirtatious banter and sly touches, each red light a chance for our hands to find each other. It was electric, the way we could barely keep our eyes on the road, the way every glance held a promise, every smile hinted at the night ahead.

By the time we made it home and I unlocked the door, we were both ready to burst. I locked the door behind us, and before I could flick on the lights, Parker’s hands found my face, guiding me to meet his eager lips. The kiss was a heady mix of urgency and tenderness, our mouths moving together as if we were trying to communicate everything we’d been holding back all day. The familiar scent of his aftershave mingled with the faint musk of his skin filled my nostrils, stoking the fire inside me.

“Travis,” he murmured against my lips, his voice low and husky, sending shivers down my spine.

“Bedroom,” was all I managed to reply, my mind singularly focused.

We stumbled through the darkened space, a trail of hastily discarded clothes marking our path up the stairs. Each piece shed was a promise, a tease of what was to come, heightening the anticipation until it was almost unbearable.

In the dim glow from the bedside lamp, we stripped each other bare. Parker's body was a landscape I was determined to explore inch by inch. His skin, smooth and warm under my touch, begged for attention. My fingers traced the contours of his muscles, reveling in the soft sighs and gasps that escaped him.

"God, you're incredible," I breathed, taking in the sight of him stretched out on my bed.

His eyes darkened with desire as I leaned down, capturing his mouth once more as I settled between his thighs. The taste of him—something uniquely Parker—was intoxicating, a taste I'd become addicted to. The feel of his stubble against my skin was a delightful contrast to the softness of his lips, urging me deeper into the kiss.

"Travis, please," he whispered, breaking away just enough to speak. It was the sweetest kind of torture, hearing my name fall from his lips like a prayer.

"Relax, let me take care of you," I said, my words punctuated with kisses along his jawline, down his neck, pausing to savor the rapid pulse beneath his skin.

I reached for the bedside drawer, retrieving the necessary supplies. My movements were deliberate, unhurried, as I coated my fingers, warming the slick substance before trailing a hand reaching between his legs to circle the ring of muscles teasingly.

Gently, I massaged around his entrance, allowing one finger to slip in, feeling him tense and then relax into the sensation. A second finger joined the first, scissoring slowly, stretching him with care and patience, knowing it had been a while for both

of us. His breath hitched, and I watched a flush spread across his cheeks, the visual imprinting itself in my memory.

“I need more. I need you,” he urged, lifting his hips in silent invitation.

“Shh, I’ve got you,” I promised, sliding the condom on and positioning myself at his entrance. “Are you ready for me, Parker?” I asked, locking eyes with him.

“Yes,” he replied, and the trust in his gaze fueled my desire to make this perfect for him.

With slow, steady pressure, I pushed forward, giving him time to adjust to the fullness. “Travis—” The sound of his voice, raw and edged with pleasure and need, spurred me on.

As I began to move, each thrust was a study in control—giving and taking, pushing and pulling. Our bodies moved together in a rhythm as old as time, yet as new and thrilling as if we were the first to discover its secrets. The sounds of our lovemaking filled the room—the slap of skin against skin, the ragged breaths, the whispered endearments. The scent of sex and sweat hung heavy in the air, a tangible reminder of our union.

“Look at me,” I commanded softly, and he did, his eyes locking onto mine as we neared the precipice.

“Oh, God! I’m—” He didn’t finish his sentence, but he didn’t need to. I felt him unravel beneath me, his body clenching around mine in the most exquisite way, triggering my own release.

We collapsed together in a tangle of limbs, our breathing gradually slowing. As I pulled him close, I felt an emotion far deeper than lust settle in my chest. It was as if

every playful glance, every shared laugh, had led to this moment—this profound connection that went beyond the physical.

“Stay with me tonight. Here, in my bed,” I whispered, nuzzling into his hair.

“There’s nowhere else I’d rather be,” he replied, his voice content and slightly drowsy.

In the quiet aftermath, with his steady heartbeat beneath my ear, I realized this wasn’t just about finding someone to fill the empty space beside me. It was about finding the person who made every hookup before them fade into insignificance. And as sleep began to claim us both, I knew that in Parker, I had found exactly that.

Chapter Sixteen

PARKER

I focused on my breathing, trying to slow my racing heart as the elevator continued its smooth ascent to the penthouse apartment where Travis's friends were all waiting.

Travis reached for my hand with a knowing look. "Hey, relax! My friends love you and Garrett and Dean will too."

I offered him a smile, though it did little to still the butterflies performing acrobatics in my stomach. "Easy for you to say. You're not about to shake hands with a movie star."

"True." He chuckled. "But I'm about to introduce my first ever boyfriend to them, so I think I win."

There was a new fluttering in my belly that had nothing to do with nerves. "Boyfriend, huh?" I asked quietly.

Travis slid in front of me and braced his hands on either side of my head, effectively caging me in. His scent surrounded me, intoxicating and sexy. Bending his head, he kissed that sensitive spot right below my ear, his warm breath sending delicious shivers up my spine. "Boyfriend, partner, it doesn't really matter what I call you. Just as long as everyone knows you're mine."

A soft whimper escaped my lips before I could stop it. "You're not playing fair,

Brooks. When you say things like that, all I want to do is get naked with you, but instead, I have to go meet the rest of your friends.”

His voice was rough when he answered. “Fuck. Is it too late to cancel?” Just then the elevator began to slow, announcing our impending arrival and answering his question. His forehead landed on my shoulder as he let out a frustrated groan. I couldn’t hide my chuckle when he quickly reached down to adjust himself. His head shot back up, one eyebrow arching as he stared at me. “You think this is funny?”

I grinned unapologetically. “Nope. Just happy to see I’m not the only one affected.”

The look on his face gentled as he took my hand in his. “Trust me, Parker, you have affected many aspects of my life in the best possible ways.”

If the elevator hadn’t dinged right then, I’m sure I would have melted into a puddle on the floor. Still, I couldn’t hide the hearts in my eyes as the doors slid open to reveal the penthouse. Before us lay an expansive living room that screamed luxury and intimacy all at once.

“Travis!” A chorus of greetings filled the air as we walked in.

A handsome man dressed in dark jeans and a charcoal gray sweater strode quickly across the room and engulfed Travis in a big bear hug. He returned the hug, laughing at something the man whispered in his ear. Travis wore a broad grin when they pulled apart and warmth flooded my chest to see him so happy.

“Garrett, this is Parker. Parker, Garrett,” Travis introduced us.

“Nice to finally meet you, Parker. We’ve heard great things,” Garrett said, extending his hand.

“Thank you. It’s good to meet you too,” I replied, feeling the warmth of acceptance beginning to thaw my nerves.

Then, there he was. Dean—Vincent Wilder—in the flesh. Silver screen charm embodied in a casual swagger as he walked up to us. My eyes probably looked like saucers as Travis introduced the two of us. “Wow, it’s—it’s an honor,” I stammered, slightly awestruck. I’d seen his films, who hadn’t? But nothing prepared me for the magnetism of his presence.

“Likewise,” Dean responded, his handshake firm and friendly. “Travis has been raving about you—and not just your therapy skills.”

I smiled shyly as Travis slipped an arm around my waist, pulling me close and kissing the side of my head. “It’s all true. He’s amazing.”

“Wow! I never thought we’d see the day when Travis Brooks was officially off the market,” Akio teased from across the room. Morgan sat beside him, one arm slung over the back of the couch.

“There are going to be broken hearts all over the city when they find out,” Jasper added with a sad shake of his head. Maks chuckled beside him.

“Okay, okay. Enough of that,” Travis said, a slight blush rising in his cheeks at his friends’ ribbing.

“Well, I for one am glad he’s off the market,” I said. He turned his face towards me and offered me a grateful kiss which I gladly accepted. My stomach knotted as I felt every eye in the room on us, but when we pulled apart, we were met with nothing but warm smiles and approving nods.

“Come on, drinks are waiting, and I’ve got to hear everything about the man who

finally managed to steal Travis's heart," Garrett chimed in, slinging an arm around my shoulders like we were old friends.

"Only if it includes embarrassing stories," Dean added with a wink, leading us further into the penthouse.

From there, the evening unfolded effortlessly. Over dinner, the guys took turns sharing stories and funny anecdotes from their earlier days. They teased each other mercilessly, but it was easy to tell how much they loved one another. It broke my heart to picture Travis as that thirteen-year-old boy who'd lost everything in one terrible accident. He must have felt so scared and alone as he went to live with his aunt who was barely more than a kid herself. But watching him now, I could tell how happy he was. These men were his brothers. They'd provided him with a family in every way that mattered, and I was suddenly overwhelmed with gratitude for them.

"Here's to new friends," Jasper raised his glass, his eyes meeting mine across the table.

"And to love that surprises us," Akio added, resting his head on Morgan's shoulder.

"May it always be as sweet as tonight," Maks concluded, and the chorus of agreement filled the room with a warmth that settled deep in my bones.

I glanced at Travis, his laughter infectious, his gaze frequently seeking mine. In those moments, I saw not just the life he'd built with these incredible men but glimpses of a future where I fit seamlessly into the picture.

"Thank you," I whispered to him later, as the evening wound down and conversations mellowed into comfortable silences.

"For what?" he asked, his brow furrowed slightly.

“For sharing all this with me. For making me feel like I belong,” I said, my voice low.

“Because you do, Parker. You belong with me, wherever I am.” His words were simple, yet they carried the weight of truth. And as I looked into his eyes, the last of my apprehension melted away, replaced by something far more potent and promising.

“Come on, let’s head home,” he suggested, standing up and offering me his hand.

“Home,” I echoed, liking the sound of that word on my lips. And it was true. Travis’s place already felt more like home to me than the apartment I’d shared with David ever had. Although, I’m sure that had a lot more to do with the people in them than the places themselves.

Hand in hand, we said goodnight to his friends, promising to see them all again very soon. As we stepped back into the elevator, I leaned into Travis, his presence a grounding force amidst the whirlwind of emotions. “Tonight was perfect,” I murmured as the doors closed, sealing us in our private cocoon.

“Only because you were there,” he replied, his voice soft but filled with an emotion that spoke volumes.

“Travis—”

“Shh. Let me get you home first,” he said, pressing a finger to my lips, his eyes glinting with promise.

The hum of the engine was a steady lullaby as Travis navigated through the streets, but my mind raced with thoughts, worries I’d tried to suppress but which kept rearing their ugly heads. When we arrived home, the familiarity of the condo wrapped around me like a warm embrace.

We moved in silence, kicking our shoes off by the door and hanging our jackets in the entryway closet. Travis tossed the keys on a small table then moved to the kitchen where he grabbed a bottle of water out of the fridge. “Do you want one?”

“No, thanks,” I replied softly, suddenly finding it difficult to look him in the eyes. I knew I was probably being ridiculous, but a part of me couldn’t help but wonder—

He set his drink aside and moved towards me, backing me up against the counter. His arms slid around my waist and his lips brushed against mine. “You’ve been quiet,” he murmured, his voice a soothing rumble. “What are you thinking?”

I hesitated, my mind grappling with fears and insecurities that his friends’ playful jabs had inadvertently stirred. “Your friends—they joked about all the broken hearts you’re leaving behind now you’re officially off the market.”

“Ah.” His chest vibrated with a soft chuckle, though his hold on me tightened just a fraction. “Is that what’s bothering you? Whether I’m sure I’m ready for a relationship?”

“Yeah,” I confessed, the word barely more than a whisper. What I didn’t say, what churned relentlessly in the pit of my stomach, was the question of whether I was enough. But when I looked up into his clear blue eyes, I saw understanding there, as if he had peered straight into the depths of my soul.

Travis brushed a stray lock of hair from my face, his touch gentle and deliberate. “Parker,” he said, his voice carrying a weight of sincerity that anchored me, “I meant it earlier when I said you were mine. But that also means I’m yours. You are everything I didn’t know was missing in my life.” His thumb traced the line of my jaw, sending warmth cascading through me. “I love you.”

His words washed over me, a tidal wave of emotion that rid me of any lingering

doubts. My eyes welled with tears, overcome with love and affection for this incredible man who for some reason, chose me. “I love you too. I love you so damn much.” My voice was steady despite the storm of emotions whirling inside me. It felt like the most natural thing in the world to say, and with those words, something shifted between us, an invisible barrier dissolving to dust.

His lips curved into a soft smile. Slowly, he leaned in, capturing my mouth with his in a kiss that was tender yet insistent, a physical manifestation of the words we’d just exchanged. My hands found their way to his chest, feeling the solid warmth of him beneath my fingertips, the steady thump of his heart syncing with mine.

Together, we moved to the bedroom where we took turns stripping each other down, kissing every inch of flesh as it was exposed. The world outside faded into oblivion, leaving only the sound of our joined breaths and the shared heat of our bodies.

“Show me how much you love me,” I whispered against his lips as he slid over me on the bed, my hands roaming the contours of his body. He responded by trailing kisses down my neck, each touch of his lips igniting sparks beneath my skin. His hands explored my body with reverence, as if committing every curve and plane to memory. I arched into his touch, craving more of him.

“God,” Travis said, his voice husky with desire. “You’re so beautiful.” His words sent a shiver down my spine, and I pulled him closer, desperate to feel every inch of him against me. I growled in frustration when he pulled back. “Don’t worry, baby. I’m not going anywhere,” he assured me, reaching for his nightstand drawer, coming back with a condom and a bottle of lube.

My heart raced as I watched him roll the condom on, his movements deliberate and tantalizing. He poured some lube onto his fingers, warming it between his hands before reaching down to prepare me. I gasped at the sensation, my body trembling with anticipation.

“You okay?” Travis asked, his voice soft and filled with concern.

I nodded, unable to form words as he worked me open with gentle, practiced motions. The tenderness in his touch was almost overwhelming. When he finally pushed inside me, we both let out a low moan. Travis paused, his forehead resting against mine as we savored the moment of connection. I wrapped my legs around his waist, urging him deeper.

“I love you,” I whispered again, the words feeling new and exhilarating and so right, like I was finally exactly where I was meant to be.

“God, Parker,” he breathed out as we moved, the intensity building in a crescendo of pleasure and adoration. “I never thought I could love someone like this, but I do. I love you so much.”

“Fuck!” I shouted as he shifted position and began hitting my prostate perfectly with every thrust. I clung to him, my nails digging into his back as the pleasure built to an almost unbearable intensity.

Travis’s movements became more erratic, his breathing ragged against my neck. “Parker,” he groaned. “I’m close.”

I gasped. “Don’t stop. I’m almost there. I just need?—”

Travis reached between us, wrapping his hand around me and giving me exactly what I needed to send me over the edge. It only took a few strokes before I was crying out, my release hitting me in waves of ecstasy. He followed moments later, burying his face in my shoulder as he shuddered above me.

We lay there for a long moment, our bodies intertwined, both of us trying to catch our breath. He peppered soft kisses along my collarbone and neck, both eyelids and the

tip of my nose, making me shiver with pleasure. I ran my fingers through his hair, savoring the weight of him on top of me and the feeling of being surrounded in love. I never wanted the moment to end.

Finally, Travis lifted his head, his eyes meeting mine with such warmth and affection that it made my heart skip a beat. “That was—” he started, trailing off with a soft chuckle.

“Yeah,” I agreed, unable to stop the wide grin spreading across my face. “It really was.”

He carefully pulled out and disposed of the condom before returning to bed with a warm wet washcloth. He lovingly cleaned me up then tossed the washcloth in the hamper before gathering me into his arms. I nestled against his chest, feeling safe and cherished. We lay there in comfortable silence, trading lazy kisses and gentle caresses.

“You know,” he murmured after a while, his fingers tracing patterns on my back, “I never thought I’d fall in love like this. It’s kind of terrifying, but in the best possible way.”

I lifted my head to look at him, my heart swelling with emotion. “You never need to be afraid because I will never hurt you,” I promised softly. “I love you and your happiness is the most important thing in the world to me.”

Travis smiled, his eyes crinkling at the corners in that way I loved. “That’s how I feel too.” He paused, his expression growing more serious. “Parker, I want you to know—I’m all in. This isn’t just some fling for me. I want to build a life with you.”

I felt tears prick at my eyes, overwhelmed by the sincerity in his voice. I cupped his face in my hands. “I want that too. More than anything.”

He leaned in, capturing my lips in a kiss that was tender and sensual all at once. When we broke apart, I couldn't help but laugh softly, feeling giddy and lightheaded. "What's so funny?" he asked, his eyes twinkling with amusement.

I shook my head, still smiling. "Nothing, really. I'm just—happy. Ridiculously, stupidly happy."

Travis grinned, pulling me closer. "Well, get used to it, babe. Because I plan on making you happy for the rest of your life."

PARKER

I woke to the gentle press of Travis's lips against my neck, his stubble tickling my skin. I smiled, eyes still closed, and snuggled back against his warm chest. "Morning, beautiful," he murmured, his voice husky with sleep. His arm tightened around my waist, pulling me closer.

"Mmm, morning," I replied, finally blinking my eyes open. I turned in his embrace, drinking in the sight of his sleep tousled blond hair and full, rose-colored lips. Even after a year, the sight of him still took my breath away.

Travis grinned, that heart-stopping smile that never failed to make my pulse race. "Happy anniversary, babe."

My heart swelled. "Happy anniversary." I leaned in to kiss him softly, savoring the familiar taste of his lips. "I can't believe it's been a whole year since we got together," I mused, tracing my fingers along his stubbled jaw. "Sometimes it feels like just yesterday we met at the clinic."

He caught my hand, pressing a kiss to my palm. "Best fucking day of my life was when I decided to hire you." His eyes sparkled with mischief. "Though I gotta say, if I'd known back then what a fox you were under those polo shirts, I might not have been able to keep it professional."

I laughed, swatting his chest playfully. "Please, you were the epitome of professionalism. I was the one struggling not to stare at your ass every time you bent over to help a patient."

“Oh really?” His eyebrows shot up, a wicked grin spreading across his face. “And here I thought I was being so subtle, bending over extra slow just for show.”

I felt my cheeks flush. “You did not!”

“Did so,” he insisted, rolling us so he hovered above me. “I wanted you so badly. Took all my willpower not to kiss you senseless right there in front of our patients.”

My breath caught as his lips ghosted along my jawline. “God, I felt it too, this undeniable pull towards you,” I admitted, tilting my head to give him better access. “I kept telling myself it was just a crush, that it would pass.”

Travis pulled back slightly, his expression softening. “I’m glad it didn’t.” He cupped my cheek, thumb stroking gently. “I love you so fucking much, Parker. This past year with you has been the happiest of my life.”

Emotion welled up in my chest, threatening to spill over. “I love you too. More than I ever thought possible. I feel like with you, I’ve found my other half.” I wrapped my arms around his neck, pulling him down for a deep, passionate kiss.

We lost ourselves in each other for long moments, hands roaming well-known territory as our kisses grew heated. Just as things were about to escalate further, his stomach let out an impressive growl. I broke away, laughing. “Sounds like someone’s hungry.”

Travis grinned sheepishly. “Can you blame me? I worked up quite an appetite last night.” He wagged his eyebrows suggestively.

I felt my cheeks heat at the memory of our rather vigorous celebration the night before. “Mmm, that you did,” I agreed, pressing one last quick kiss to his lips before gently pushing at his chest. “Come on, let’s get some food in you before you waste away and then we need to get going if we want to get ahead of the game day traffic.”

He rolled off me with a dramatic sigh. “Fine, but only if you make those blueberry pancakes I love.”

“Deal,” I said, climbing out of bed and pulling on a pair of sweatpants. I tossed Travis’s to him, admiring the view as he stretched languidly before putting them on.

Walking through the hallway, I took a few seconds to admire the many framed photos of us that hung on the wall. Vacations to the mountains, weekend trips we’d taken, the two of us at my parents’ house in Ohio, us with all of his—make that, both of our—friends. It was a year’s worth of memories, with plenty of wall space for all the years to come.

In the kitchen, I gathered ingredients while Travis started the coffee maker. We moved around each other with practiced ease, stealing kisses and touches as we went about our morning routine. It struck me how seamlessly we’d fallen into this domestic bliss, how natural it felt to share my life with him.

“Penny for your thoughts?” he asked, setting a steaming mug of coffee beside me on the counter as I poured pancake batter onto the griddle.

I smiled. “Just thinking about how different things were a year ago. How lost I felt after David and I broke up, how scared I was. Worried that I’d end up all alone, that I’d never know what true happiness felt like.”

His expression softened. He set his mug down and pulled me into a gentle embrace. “I’m so glad you decided to give me a chance,” he murmured against my hair. “I can’t imagine my life without you in it now.”

I melted into his arms, breathing in his familiar scent. “Me neither. You make me happier than I ever thought possible, Travis.”

We stood like that for a long moment, just holding each other close. Finally, he pulled

back with a mischievous glint in his eye. “So, does this mean I get extra blueberries in my pancakes?”

I laughed, giving him a playful shove. “You’re incorrigible.”

“You love it.” He grinned, stealing a quick kiss before grabbing plates from the cabinet.

We ate breakfast then quickly cleaned up the kitchen before heading to the bedroom to get ready for our day. I couldn’t help but feel a sense of contentment wash over me. This was everything I’d ever wanted—a love that felt like coming home, a partner who supported and challenged me in equal measure. Travis and I had built something beautiful together over the past year, and I couldn’t wait to see what the future held for us.

The roar of the crowd washed over me as Travis and I stepped onto the field at Wrigley. The familiar scent of hot dogs, beer, and popcorn filled the air, mingling with the electric anticipation that always preceded a big game. I inhaled deeply, savoring the moment.

“God, I love this,” he murmured beside me, his blue eyes sparkling with excitement. “Never gets old, does it?”

I shook my head, grinning. “Never.”

We made our way to the dugout, where several of the Cubs players we’d been working with, greeted us warmly. Jake, a pitcher recovering from a rotator cuff injury, clapped Travis on the back.

“Hey, doc! Here to make sure I don’t fuck up all your hard work?” he asked with a wry smile.

Travis laughed. “You better not, or I’ll have you doing extra reps next session.”

As the players began their warm-up routines, I leaned against the railing, watching them with a critical eye. It was gratifying to see how far they’d come, the fluid ease of their movements a testament to hours of grueling therapy and rehabilitation.

“They’re looking good,” I remarked to Travis. “Jake’s follow-through is much smoother now.”

Travis nodded, his expression thoughtful. “Yeah, he’s made amazing progress. They all have.”

There was something in his tone that made me glance at him curiously. He seemed off, almost as if he was nervous. Which was odd, because Travis was rarely anything but confident.

“You okay?” I asked softly, reaching out to squeeze his hand.

He startled slightly, then gave me a quick smile. “Yeah, of course. Just excited for the game to start.”

Before I could probe further, the stadium announcer’s voice boomed through the speakers. “Ladies and gentlemen, before we begin with our National Anthem, we have a special announcement from the Cubs’ physical therapy team.”

I blinked in surprise, turning to Travis. “Um—did you know about this?”

His answering grin was both mischievous and slightly hesitant. “Maybe. Come on, let’s head out to the field.”

As he grabbed my hand and led me towards the pitcher’s mound, my heart began to race. What was going on? The knowledge that thousands of eyes were on us made my

palms sweat, but Travis's steady presence beside me was reassuring.

"Travis," I hissed, "what are you doing?"

He just winked at me, that infuriatingly charming grin still in place. "You trust me, right?"

"Of course," I answered without any hesitation. I swallowed hard, my throat suddenly dry as we reached the pitcher's mound. The entire stadium seemed to hold its breath, a palpable tension in the air. Travis's hand was warm in mine, his thumb rubbing small soothing circles on my skin.

"Ladies and gentlemen." His voice rang out, amplified by the microphone he'd picked up off the ground. "I hope you'll forgive this brief interruption, but I have something important to say." He turned to face me, his blue eyes sparkling with emotion. "This man walked into my life a year ago and turned my world upside down. He's the kindest, most compassionate person I've ever met. His dedication to our patients, his unwavering support for me, and his ability to make me laugh even on the toughest days—make him everything I never knew I needed."

I felt my cheeks flush, overwhelmed by the intensity of his gaze and the sincerity in his voice. "Parker, before we met," he continued, his voice softening, "I thought I had it all figured out. But you showed me what it means to truly connect with someone, to build a partnership based on trust, respect, and love." He paused, taking a deep breath. "You've made this past year the happiest of my life. And I want nothing more than to spend every day trying to make you as happy as you've made me."

As Travis dropped to one knee, the world around us seemed to fade away. The roar of the crowd became a distant hum, the bright stadium lights dimming until all I could see was Travis's face, his eyes shining with love and hope.

"Parker Scott Reyes," he said, his voice trembling slightly as he held up a ring. "Will

you continue to make me the happiest man in the world by becoming my husband?"

Tears welled up in my eyes, blurring my vision as I nodded emphatically. "Yes," I choked out, my voice barely above a whisper. "Yes, Travis. Of course I will!"

His face broke into a radiant smile as he slipped the ring onto my finger. In an instant, he was on his feet, pulling me into his arms. His lips crashed against mine, warm and familiar, yet electrifying in this moment. I clung to him, my fingers digging into his shoulders as I poured every ounce of love and joy I felt into that kiss.

Suddenly, a deafening roar erupted around us. I broke away from Travis, startled, only to realize it was the entire stadium cheering for us. The sound was overwhelming, an outpouring of support and celebration that left me breathless. "Holy shit," I laughed, wiping at my eyes. "I forgot where we were for a second there."

He grinned; his arm still wrapped securely around my waist. "That's a good thing. Though I have to admit, I didn't expect quite this level of enthusiasm from a bunch of baseball fans."

We held hands as The National Anthem played then made our way back to the dugout. Travis suddenly nudged me, pointing up at the stands. "Look who made it," he said, his voice warm with affection.

I followed his gaze, my heart swelling as I spotted a group of familiar faces. There, sitting just above the dugout, were Travis's friends, our co-workers, and—my parents? I blinked in disbelief, wondering if my eyes were playing tricks on me.

"Mom? Dad?" I called out, waving excitedly.

They waved back, both of them beaming with pride. Next to them, I saw David, my ex-boyfriend-turned friend, sitting with a handsome man I recognized as Dr. Martinez

from the hospital. The two of them had been dating for about eight months and seemed to fit together in a way David and I never had. David caught my eye and flashed me a genuine smile, mouthing ‘Congratulations’ as we passed, and I felt a surge of warmth in my chest. It seemed like we’d both ended up finding happiness.

A wave of contentment washed over me. Here I was, surrounded by the people I loved most in the world, having just gotten engaged to the man of my dreams. I squeezed Travis’s hand, overcome with emotion. “You okay?” he asked softly, his eyes searching mine.

I nodded, unable to keep the smile off my face. “I’m great,” I replied. “Everything is perfect.”

The game flew by in a blur of excitement and stolen kisses between Travis and me. Before I knew it, we were filing into Gibson’s Grill, a swanky steakhouse overlooking the Chicago River. The warm glow of the restaurant’s lighting seemed to mirror the happiness radiating from our group.

“To the happy couple!” Jasper raised his glass in a toast. The rest of the group followed suit, a chorus of cheers and clinking glasses filling the air.

I caught my mom’s eye across the table, noticing the way she was beaming at my fiancé. God, that had a nice ring to it. “So, Travis,” she began, leaning in conspiratorially, “tell me more about how you fell in love with our Parker.”

Travis chuckled, his hand finding mine under the table. “Well, Mrs. Reyes, it all started when this incredibly talented physical therapist walked into my clinic for his first day of work?—”

As he regaled my parents with the story of our first meeting, embellishing it with his trademark charm, I couldn’t help but marvel at how seamlessly he fit into my family. My dad was laughing at Travis’s jokes, my mom was hanging on to his every word,

and I—well, I was falling in love all over again.

“I have to say, Travis,” my dad chimed in, cutting into his perfectly cooked ribeye. “It’s clear how much you care for our son. We’re thrilled to have you join our family.”

I felt a lump form in my throat, overcome with emotion. “Thanks, Dad,” I managed to say, squeezing Travis’s hand under the table. His eyes were watery as he thanked my dad.

The evening passed in a whirlwind of laughter, stories, and endless congratulations. As we stepped out into the warm summer night, my parents hugged us both tightly before heading back to their hotel. “We’ll see you for brunch tomorrow, sweetie,” my mom said, kissing my cheek.

After waving goodbye to our friends, we found ourselves alone for the first time since the proposal. Travis turned to me, his smile radiant in the city lights. “Ready to head home, fiancé?” he asked, the word sending another thrill through me.

I bit my lip, an idea forming in my head. “Actually,” I replied, feeling a surge of spontaneity that I knew came from being with Travis. “There’s something else I want to do first.”

He raised an eyebrow, intrigued. “Oh? And what might that be, Mr. Reyes-soon-to-be-Brooks?”

I grinned, tugging him closer by his belt loops. “It’s a surprise. You up for an adventure?”

“With you?” He smiled, pressing a quick kiss to my lips. “Always.”

The pulsing beat of the club enveloped us as we stepped through the doors of

Whipped, the scent of sweat and beer, familiar to all clubs, hitting my senses. Travis's hand was warm in mine as I led him through the crowd, bodies already writhing on the dance floor.

"So," he leaned in close, his breath tickling my ear, "why exactly did you want to come here?"

I turned to face him, taking in the way the flashing lights played across his chiseled features. Damn, he was beautiful. I shrugged, feeling a mix of shyness and pride. "I guess I just wanted to show off my fiancé. Let everyone here know he's really and truly off the market now."

Travis's eyes softened, a slow smile spreading across his face. He pulled me closer, his strong arms encircling my waist. The music faded to background noise as he cupped my face in his hands, his intense gaze making my heart race.

"Baby," he said, his voice low and full of emotion, "I've been really and truly off the market from the day we first met."

My breath caught in my throat. He still had the ability to make me weak in the knees and I suspected he always would. I leaned into his touch, overwhelmed by the love I felt for this man. "Travis, I—" I started, but he silenced me with a kiss that made my toes curl.

When we finally broke apart, both of us slightly breathless, I couldn't help but laugh. "You know, when I pictured bringing you here, I thought there'd be more dancing involved."

He grinned, that mischievous glint I adored appearing in his eyes. "Oh, we'll dance alright," he promised, his hands sliding down to my hips. "But first, I want to make sure everyone in this club knows exactly who you belong to." As he pulled me into his arms, our mouths connecting and our bodies moving in perfect sync, I knew

without a doubt I'd never felt happier or more loved in my entire life.

THE END