



Say You'll Be Jasmine

(Boyfriend Café #6)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: The semester hasn't even started and I've already spent a night at my own student's house. And I know they want more.

Diego

Leaving my small town in Wisconsin for a big university was terrifying. Breaking down in front of a student's house was even more terrifying. The attraction between that student and myself is the most terrifying thing of all.

Avery is beautiful, intelligent, bold and non-binary. They're unlike anyone I've ever known, and I'm hopelessly drawn to them despite my best intentions.

When Avery drags me out to a drag show, the change of scenery, the darkness, the club music — it weakens my defenses. Once I finally give in, is there any going back? Or is Avery a temptation I simply can't resist?

Avery

My plate is beyond full. I'm taking care of my friend's house, running the Boyfriend Café, trying to finish my degree — oh, and crushing on my hot new TA.

I really don't need to make my life even more complicated, but when the guy whose car breaks down in front of my house turns out to be my TA, there's no going back. I can't help flirting with Diego, but he's terrified of crossing the line.

I am not.

I'm going to convince this man to give in to what he wants, no matter how hard I have to work for it.

Say You'll Be Jasmine is a TA/student MX romance with a non-binary main character, some firsts, a slight age gap and spicy open door scenes.

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Chapter One

Avery

THE KEY IN my hand weighs me down like an anchor. A single house key shouldn't feel as dense as a boulder, but when it drops into my hand I tilt forward like it might topple me to the ground.

"Are you sure?" I say.

The tall, dark-haired man before me nods. Albert Carrington never does anything halfway. He never says anything he doesn't mean. But I still press him for reassurance.

"I can't afford this," I say.

I shoot a nervous look at the house we stand before. Two stories. Three bedrooms. A basement we've transformed into a thriving café for students from the nearby university. Even if I wasn't a sophomore at City University of Montridge, there's no way I could afford this place.

"I don't require payment," Albert says.

"But..."

"The mortgage is paid off," Albert says. "I'll have the utilities forwarded to my new address. But regardless of your answer, I won't be living here. Either the home will

stand empty, or it will have a caretaker, and I'd vastly prefer it have a caretaker."

"Albert, I'm not a caretaker. I'm just a student. I can't live in your house."

"Why not? It will save you money, and it will save me worry. And I presume you mean to host the café here, so someone will need to occupy the home. It ought to be you."

As usual, Albert's logic is unassailable. But I still hesitate to accept his offer. It's a house . Like, an entire freaking house . Who just hands that to someone?

Albert Carrington, that's who.

The guy has so much money that he never has to worry about money. He's also at least half of the reason the Boyfriend Café exists at all. When Rhett dreamed up a café where charming servers drank tea with university students and talked them through their worries, he went right to Albert to ask to use his basement to host it. Since then, Albert has become the official legal owner of the café, even after graduating from the university. He hung around here this year while his boyfriend, David, finished up his degree as well. But with both of them now graduated, Albert has no reason to stay.

None of them have had any reason to stay.

The entire original crew of the Boyfriend Café is gone. They've all graduated. And they've left me behind as their chosen successor. Next year, my junior year, will be my first year running this place without any of them around to help me, and I'm freaking terrified.

Now I have to be the caretaker for Albert's house too?

It's just one more responsibility added to the heap, and it makes the key in my palm weigh a thousand pounds instead of a few grams.

I close my fingers slowly over the key. The Boyfriend Café is mine now. I'm the one who has to make sure the legacy keeps going. No matter how scared and stressed out I am, I have to keep this thing alive. Living in the house above the café could certainly make some of that easier.

"Alright," I say. "I'll do it."

I SPEND THE entire summer getting ready to take over the Boyfriend Café at the start of my junior year at City University of Montridge. My brother Gabriel and his friends have been preparing me for this since before I even officially enrolled at the university, but it's one thing to know I'll take over someday and it's another to actually have to do it. We have new servers this year, a new manager I brought on to help me with administrative tasks, new customers, new teas, new everything.

A few days before my junior year of college begins, I sit in Albert's — no, in my — basement and address the four anxious faces watching me.

I run my dark ponytail through my hand, a nervous tic I've never managed to shed. I look down at the notes I jotted on my phone, but I've reread them so much I have them memorized.

"So," I say, "are we clear?"

I've already run through the schedule. I've already done some practice sessions with the newest server, Henry. I've already cleaned the whole basement twice over, talked to my new manager, assigned everyone their tables, double checked our scheduling for our opening week. I have done every single thing I can to prepare us for this, but some piece of me fears it's not enough.

The four similarly anxious college students before me nod.

“One question,” a guy named Cameron says. He has dark eyes and even darker hair. I brought him in last year, despite some reservations, but his brooding bad boy thing turned out to be a hit.

“Yes?” I say.

“Why do I have to be next to him ?” He jabs his thumb at the guy next to him, a perky blond who’s all smiles. Julian might seem oblivious to Cameron’s ire, but I learned last semester that he’s well aware of how much his step-brother (or whatever the hell they are to each other) doesn’t like him. He simply enjoys the bickering too much to stop it.

I sigh and pinch the bridge of my nose. “I really don’t have time for this right now, you two. Please go fight about it somewhere else.”

Cameron folds his arms over his chest and grumbles. Julian chuckles, which doesn’t help with Cameron’s sour mood. I resolve to ignore both of them. Whatever family spat they have going on, it’s not my problem, especially not when I have so much else on my plate this semester.

“Is that all?” I say.

Thankfully, the other two members of the café say nothing, and I dismiss everyone, telling them I’ll see them in a few days for our official opening night. I slouch forward in my chair before they even leave. I’m exhausted and the school year hasn’t even begun, but what can I do about it? My brother and everyone else left me behind to carry on the legacy of the Boyfriend Café. I’ve had to find a brand new crew, a brand new manager, a brand new bakery to partner with for the treats we sell alongside the tea. If it falls apart it’ll be entirely my fault. I don’t have time to not be

exhausted.

“Drink,” someone says .

I jerk upright and find the new manager, Mia, sitting beside me with a hot cup of tea in her hands. I accept, and immediately the gently floral scent of jasmine tea wraps around me like a warm blanket.

“How did you know this is my favorite?” I say.

“Because you served it when you interviewed me,” Mia says. She has a dark ponytail, much like mine, but her eyes match her hair, where mine are far lighter. “Are you okay?”

“Are you interviewing to be a server now?” I say.

She chuckles. “No way. I don’t want to deal with customers all night. Sounds stressful. Leave me to my spreadsheets, please. I just wanted to make sure you’re doing alright.”

I plucked Mia out of C U of M’s business school at the end of last year. She worked with me all summer to get us organized well before our opening night in a few days, and as a result, I’ve become pretty close with her. But I didn’t expect to have her checking in on me like this.

“I’m fine,” I say.

“Are you sure? Classes haven’t even started and you have bags under your eyes.”

I pull at the skin around my eyes. “Oh God, do I? Stress will demolish my skincare routine.”

Mia rolls her eyes. “As though you aren’t the most gorgeous bitch in this basement every night.”

Even in my stressed out state, I can’t help but wave a hand to indicate my fashionably slinky sweater and long skirt. It’s a look that definitely draws attention, but I’ve been out as queer and non-binary since high school; I’m used to drawing attention. Besides, my loose, long, soft skirt is super comfortable, and I’m not sacrificing my comfort so other people can feel better about what I’m wearing.

“But I’m serious,” Mia says. “You’re taking on a lot this year. I’ll have your back as much as I can, but you have to let me help you, Avery. You have to tell me what’s going on.”

“I promise you, you know everything that’s going on,” I say. “I’m not hiding anything from you. I just can’t stop worrying about all of it. I really need this year to go well. Otherwise all of the original Boyfriend Café guys will hate me for ruining this.”

“They would never hate you,” Mia says. “One is your brother. I’m sure they’d want you to have fun and enjoy your college experience instead of working yourself to the bone.”

I roll my eyes. “Yeah, as though I have time to ‘enjoy my college experience.’”

Mia shoves my shoulder. “You should make time. We won’t be young forever. You can’t spend your best years doing nothing but working.”

“God, I hope this isn’t my best years,” I grumble.

Of course, Mia hears me .

“You know what I mean,” she says. “You should be going to parties, meeting people, hooking up. All that college stuff.”

“When in the world would I have time for ‘hooking up?’” I say.

“I don’t know. Make time. What are you, a nun?”

“Ew, no. But who am I going to meet? One of our customers? Those are the only people I see besides you and the guys, and I’m not dating one of my servers. Some of us don’t have time for the ‘college experience,’ and that’s just how it is.”

Mia scowls, but we’ve been through this debate plenty of times before, and thankfully tonight it seems like she’s tired enough to let the matter drop.

“Fine,” she says. “But I’m getting you out of this basement at least a couple times this semester. There are a couple queer bars around here where you can get in before you’re twenty-one. You just can’t drink.”

“What’s the point then?”

“To dance? To meet someone? To see a drag show? There are plenty of reasons to go to a bar besides drinking.”

“Won’t they check ID?”

“Not if you go to the performance area where they put on shows and not the bar area. Anyway, stop arguing with me about a hypothetical night out that hasn’t even happened. The point is, you need to do more than stress about this damn café.”

I sigh, but don’t argue. Part of me knows she’s right. Part of me dreads looking back on my college years with regret for all that lost time. But I simply can’t fathom how

I'm going to get my degree, keep the café alive, and "hook up" all at the same time.

I gulp down the rest of my tea while Mia goes over a couple minor points with me. Then we finally leave the café behind. I turn off the fairy lights strung across the ceiling and lock the basement door behind me. Mia and I follow the path that curls from the backyard around the side of the house. But when we reach the front lawn, we both pause, startled to find a car parked in front of my house.

"Expecting a guest?" Mia says. "Damn, maybe I was wrong about you, Avery. Inviting guys over before the semester has even begun."

"Whatever, Mia."

The guy in front of my house seems startled to see us. The hood of his car is open, and he's clearly stuck where he parked.

"I think he broke down," I say. "I'll see if he needs help, but I'm sure it's fine."

"What if he's a creep or something?" Mia says.

"I'll be okay. Go home, alright? We can't both be exhausted before the semester begins. "

"Fine," Mia says. "But don't forget what I said. I'm getting you out of that basement this year. We're going to have fun, no matter what."

"I don't think ultimatums are typically fun."

"Avery," Mia says in warning.

We hug, and she heads to her car. I wait until she drives off, then turn my attention to

the stranger stranded outside my house. Because it's not enough for me to have my own personal disasters to take care of. Apparently I'm going to help strangers through their disasters too. Well, that is kind of the ethos of the Boyfriend Café. A cup of tea and a friendly face to listen to your woes.

My work has already begun.

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Chapter Two

Diego

THE GAS STATION is the first sign of human civilization that I see in hours. My drive began in Wisconsin and continued almost due east with precious little to break it up.

Not that I'm complaining. The stretch of I-90 that took me past Chicago was perhaps the most terrifying driving experience of my life. I got out of the city as quickly as I could and retreated to the wide open spaces of more Midwest farmland. I cut the drive in half, staying in a motel last night before continuing my journey today. My perilously empty gas tank is the only reason I'm happy to spot the gas station sitting just off of a lonely exit on the highway.

I get out and pop my gas tank open. I've just fitted the nozzle into the tank and started the pump when someone strolls out of the convenience store attached to the gas station. The guy gives me a quick, disinterested look, then heads for his truck, but I call out before he reaches it.

"Excuse me, do you know how far it is to the city?" I say.

The guy cocks his head to one side. "New York? Three or four hours, I think. Philly's a little less."

"Not New York or Philadelphia," I say. "Montridge."

The guy's eyebrows raise. "Montridge ... New Jersey?"

"Yes, I'm headed to the university."

"That's not a city. It's barely a town when the university is on a break. Should be about three hours though. Maybe less if traffic is good."

"Thanks."

I let the guy go, hoping to hide my dismay until his truck rumbles out of the station and lumbers down the road.

Montridge, New Jersey, is several times the size of the town I grew up in. It's more than enough city for me. But apparently even to folks living in rural Pennsylvania, it's barely a blip.

My stomach knots around itself, the dread I've been pushing down since I got my acceptance letter welling up all over again. I've put my graduate degree off for years because of this. I was able to go to a pretty small school not that far from home for my undergrad, but there aren't too many places offering masters degrees in Gender and Sexuality Studies, and Montridge is one of the best. I thought because it's not New York or San Francisco or some huge, overwhelming city like that I could handle it, but the closer my destination looms, the more I doubt that conviction.

The gas pump clicks, and I have little choice but to continue on my journey. I put news on the radio instead of playing music. It's calming and quiet. Besides, all those stories about crime and the environment and protests always felt so distant to me, big city problems for big city folks. Now, I suppose they'll be my problem, so I should probably find out what I'm in for.

I squeeze the steering wheel tightly and strengthen my resolve as the border between

Pennsylvania and New Jersey looms. City University of Montridge will give me an opportunity to do the research I've always yearned to do. It will introduce me to people and resources I couldn't access otherwise. Besides, my specialty is gender and sexuality, and up to this point, that's mostly been a theoretical pursuit. There was a gay bar a few towns over that I would visit, but everyone there was like me, the lone queer person in their small town. A setting like Montridge could finally place me in the heart of my own community. I should be ecstatic, but as I get closer and closer to my destination, that dread in the pit of my stomach hardens.

I pull onto the shoulder of the road when I suspect I'm getting close. My phone is far too old to have the battery life to present me with directions for the duration of this journey. And my car is far too old to charge the phone. So I relied on simply following I-90 and 80 east for most of this, saving my phone for when I got close enough to need specific direction to my new apartment.

An apartment I'll share with a complete stranger.

Okay, deep breaths. People do things like this all the time. And my roommate is like me — a grad student at C U of M. Besides, my savings and my employment as a TA at the university are not enough to furnish a lavish lifestyle, not when I also have my own classes to pay for. I had to get a roommate in order for this to work at all. It'll be fine. It'll be great. I'm a twenty-six-year-old adult and I can move to a city that isn't even a city and have a roommate and experience new things and I will not die of shock or fright in the process.

Probably.

I nearly drop my phone in my efforts to program in my new address. The device informs me I'm less than an hour away. I should have enough gas to get there. Smooth sailing. If I simply keep on driving I will have no choice but to meet my exciting and terrifying new life head on.

It takes more effort than I care to admit to convince myself to pull back onto the road and continue my journey. My clunky old car grumbles, as though it's just as displeased as I am with having to clamber closer to our destination. In fairness, my little two-door has been with me a long, long time, well past its expiration. I've kept repairing it instead of getting a new car, but the repairs are starting to outweigh the cost of upgrading.

I'll worry about it later. This car only needs to last me from here to Montridge, and that is an increasingly short distance.

Houses and neighborhoods cluster in the farther I go, like a crowd closing in around me. Even in the safety of my car, it starts to feel claustrophobic. The wide open spaces of the Midwest are gone, thoroughly banished by New Jersey's dense East Coast sprawl. Even on the highway, I don't feel alone anymore. Gone are the sleepy exits boasting hardly more than a lone gas station.

My hands are sweating on the steering wheel. This is so different from everything I grew up with. It was hard being both the only queer kid and the only non-white kid in my town, yes, but it was my town. I knew it. I came to like it. That open, largely unpopulated place is all I've known until this moment of my life, and the longer I drive the more it feels like I'm diving into the depths of the ocean in a submarine I don't know how to pilot, delving into some alien landscape I know nothing about.

Traffic slows my progress. I turn off the radio, listening to nothing but my shaky breaths and rattling vehicle. I need to do this. I want to do this. The opportunity to do my graduate studies at C U of M is a dream come true. I didn't really believe someone like me would get accepted when I applied, so I was beyond stunned when the letter arrived. But the reality is setting in with every mile that passes, and part of me isn't sure I'm ready for this.

I pass a sign proclaiming the next exit is for Montridge. I turn on my blinker

automatically and get into the right lane. An angry driver honks at me and speeds around me, but I'm going the speed limit. What does he want from me? Maybe this is another one of those East Coast things, aggressive drivers. Can I even drive among these people?

I very nearly relax when I make it safely to the exit and get off the highway. But then the sign at the bottom of the ramp rears up in front of me: Montridge.

I'm here.

I almost miss my turn. My car gives a lurch, clunking and clattering at my jerky insistence. There's stuff everywhere. Stores line the road. And even when I turn off it onto a smaller street, there are houses standing sentinel along it. They're so close together you could probably shout out of the window and talk to your neighbor. Where I grew up, it was a decent walk at best to reach a neighbor. How do these people live so close together? Don't they go crazy this way?

My map app takes me down what I assume is a main street. I mean, it's literally called Main Street, but it also looks like a main street. There are cute decorative light poles lining the road. The shops have signs written in flowing cursive and plants sitting on the sills. I nearly slam on my brakes at a crosswalk where pedestrians fearlessly stroll into the road without waiting to see if I'll halt for them.

And this isn't the city?

New York City is only an hour away, from what I understand, but it's like a mountain looming in the distance. I can't see it, but I can feel it. It's in the way these people cross the street. It's in the closeness of the buildings. It's in the city-ness of this supposed town.

My directions take me off of the main road at last. I breathe a little easier as I cruise

down an arterial packed with houses. The homes are large but cute, with colorful paint jobs and narrow lawns and towering oaks with branches that sprawl over the street.

I'm just thinking to myself that this part of it isn't so bad. It's just a neighborhood, even if it's all close together and squashed. Then my car splutters again, far more angrily this time. Something clicks. Something shudders. And suddenly I'm pulling over toward the curb as quickly as I can.

"Shit," I hiss. "Shit, shit, shit."

My car made it almost a thousand miles and gave up when we had just one left.

I turn off the engine and fold forward, groaning and leaning my forehead against the steering wheel .

"No. Please, please no. Come on. Come on."

I turn the key, and while the car turns on, it does so with such a churning, metallic grumble that I turn it right back off. I'm no car guy. I have no idea what those sounds mean. But there's no way any of them are good.

"Okay. I'm fine. I can do this. Cars break down. It happens."

I force myself out of the car and into a cool night. The air smells wrong, too full of stuff , like it's just as busy and crowded as the rest of this place.

I walk around my car and pop open the hood, then stand there as though I have any freaking clue what I'm looking at. Looks the same as always to me. Whatever's wrong, it's not obvious, and I'm clearly going to need to call a mechanic. But it's way too late at night for any of them to be open. Which means I'm completely

stranded on this random side street.

I'm contemplating calling some kind of taxi or rideshare to transport me that final mile to my apartment when two people come around the house I'm parked in front of.

And one of them walks straight toward me.

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Chapter Three

Avery

THE GUY AT the curb straightens when he notices me approaching. He almost looks scared, but that's ridiculous. I'm not a large human. Who would be scared of me ? Yet the closer I get, the more it feels like this guy is doing everything he can not to turn and run.

"Hey, need some help?" I say long before I reach him, hoping to set him at ease.

"Yeah, I think so," he says.

I take that as a cue that I can get closer. Once I step off the sidewalk and into the street with the stranger, I notice how much taller than me he is. The streetlights turn his rich brown eyes almost golden behind his glasses. Dark stubble sits like a shadow on his brown cheeks, and his deep black hair sweeps back from his forehead .

Well, lucky me. If I have to be helping a stranger when I'd rather be snuggled in bed, at least he's a gorgeous stranger.

"Car trouble?" I say.

He startles, like he forgot I was there and is surprised to find me beside him. "Oh, yeah. I mean, I think so," he says. "I don't know. It made some weird noises and then gave up on me."

His eyes sweep up and down me, but with my high ponytail and choice of clothing, I'm not exacting giving "grease monkey" right now.

"Sorry, I don't know anything about cars," I say, confirming his assumptions. "Do you need to use a phone?"

"No, I have one," he says. "I just don't have anyone to call. You wouldn't know of an auto shop that's open around here, would you?"

"Not at this time of night. You won't be able to get anyone until morning."

The stranger heaves a huge sigh and slams his hood shut, but he seems more defeated than angry.

"Great," he grumbles. "A mile from my apartment and I break down."

I can hear Mia, and my brother, for that matter, telling me I'm going to get axe murdered for doing this, but the stranger broken down in front of my house is so sad that all my Boyfriend Café instincts kick in all at once.

"You know," I say, "I live right here. I don't have a car, but I do have a spare bedroom. You can crash and then call someone first thing in the morning to fix your car."

The stranger has his hands planted on the roof of his car, his head hanging between his shoulders. When he glances over at me, some of that pitch black hair has fallen across his forehead, like he's the windswept protagonist of a movie or something. I can't pretend even in my own head that that look isn't a large part of the reason I want him to accept my offer.

"Really?" he says. He seems to study me, those golden brown eyes sharper all of a

sudden. I don't hate the attention, not when it's coming from a handsome stranger.

"Really," I say.

"I didn't think people did that kind of thing out here," he says.

"What? Help each other?"

"Let strangers into their homes. Isn't that dangerous in cities?"

I burst into laughter before I can stop myself. "Montridge isn't a city. And even if it was, look around you. Not exactly a frightening place."

I wave at the residential homes and tall oaks. How anyone could be scared of a place like this is beyond me. When the college empties out during breaks, the population is mostly geriatric.

"Anyway," I say, "you don't have too many other options, do you? I guess you could get a rideshare, but it's going to be super expensive, and you probably want to save that cash for your car. This way, you can wake up in the morning, call whatever shop is open, and get them out here first thing without having to travel back and forth."

"I..."

The guy seems reluctant, so I step even closer and stick out my hand.

"I'm Avery, by the way."

He takes my hand gingerly, as though he doesn't have several inches and at least twenty pounds on me.

“Diego.”

“Nice to meet you. Can we please go inside now instead of standing out in the dark and cold? I’ll make you some tea.”

“I have all my stuff here,” Diego says.

I never actually looked inside his car, but when I do, I see it’s full of suitcases. At my insistence, we fit all of the ones we can into his trunk. We each carry one toward the house.

“I can’t believe I’m spending my first night in Montridge in some strange guy’s house,” Diego mutters to himself as we approach the house.

“Not a guy,” I say. It’s almost a reflex at this point. I know what people see when they look at me. At first, I wouldn’t say anything, would just let them continue being wrong. But I forced myself over time to speak up for myself and correct the misconception, as uncomfortable as that usually is.

Like right now. When the hot guy following me into my house looks at me with utter confusion and says, “Huh?”

I point at myself with my free hand. “Not a guy. You’re not going to a strange guy’s house. I’m non-binary.”

His eyebrows shoot up, but it’s not the look I’m used to, the look of mingled annoyance and anger that suggests I’m placing some burdensome imposition on this person. Diego’s gaze holds mostly genuine surprise, like he’s a nature photographer glimpsing a rare bird he never expected to encounter in the wild.

“I’m so sorry,” he says. “I should have asked.”

“It’s okay,” I say. “Most people get it wrong the first time. Just remember for the future.”

I wink, trying to lighten the mood, and if it weren’t so dark I would be absolutely positive that heat is sizzling in Diego’s cheeks. But there’s no way. That’s far too much to hope for out of a chance encounter.

I get Diego inside. We set his suitcases near the door so I can lead him to the kitchen and get started on some tea for both of us. While it’s brewing, he scrolls through his phone, likely looking up auto shops. When I set two cups of tea on the kitchen table, Diego looks up. He blinks like he’s seeing me for the first time.

“You’re young,” he says. “Sorry. Wait. That wasn’t supposed to be out loud. I’m just surprised. This is your house?”

“It used to belong to a friend,” I say, “but he moved and asked me to stay here and look after it for him. Plus, it houses the café I run.”

“You run a café?”

I grin. “Yeah. The Boyfriend Café. We basically do, well, this. Sort of. Tea and conversation. It’s a refuge for the students at the university nearby. A lot of them come to us when they’re stressed out and just need a calming environment for an hour.”

“The literature didn’t mention a café.”

“Literature?”

“About the university.”

“Are you a student also?” He looks a little older than most of the student body, but maybe it’s just the stubble.

“Yes,” he says, then quickly adds, “grad student. I’ll be a TA starting in a few days. Well, I’m supposed to be a TA anyway. That all hinged on me getting to my apartment tonight, but as you can see, that sort of went awry.”

“That’s a coincidence. I’m a student. You’re actually only a block from the university itself right now.”

Diego laughs nervously, cupping his tea in both hands. “A student. It’s probably inappropriate for me to be in your house.”

I wave the comment away. “The semester hasn’t started. And anyway, I don’t think it’s inappropriate for me to offer to help you out, right? The odds that you’re a TA for any of my classes has got to be super low. I don’t think we actually need to worry about that.”

“You’re probably right,” Diego says. “Well, either way, it’s fortunate for me. Thank you again for all this. I’ll get out of your way as soon as I can.”

“Don’t stress it,” I say, even though what I want to say is that he can stay as long as he wants. In fact, the moment he mentioned being a TA, I couldn’t help hoping I would run into him in one of my classes. Staring at Diego for a semester sounds a lot better than staring at some crusty old professor.

Diego sips his tea, and his shoulders ease away from his ears.

“This is such a mess,” he mumbles.

“Hey, don’t stress yourself out before the semester has even begun. You’ll have your

tea, I'll show you the spare bedroom, and in the morning you can get this all sorted out. No big deal."

"Thank you. That..." He looks between his tea and me. "That weirdly does make me feel better."

I flash him my best Boyfriend Café smile. "That's what we do best here. You're getting the Boyfriend Café experience for free."

Thanks to the lights in the kitchen, I can see it this time when heat flushes into Diego's cheeks. It makes me realize what I just said to a person who is technically a teacher at my university .

"Oh. Shoot. I mean," I scramble. "I just mean because of the tea and everything."

"I ... I understand," Diego says, but he looks into his tea instead of up at me.

"Anyway, um, would you like to see your room?"

Diego nods and I show him the room upstairs. It's sparse, but Albert did throw a bed and nightstand in there at some point. We haul Diego's suitcases upstairs, and I leave him there for the night before things can get any weirder. I didn't mean to imply anything with that comment about the Boyfriend Café, but Diego clearly heard the boyfriend part loud and clear.

Something clicks in my sluggish brain.

He reacted to the word boyfriend. That's not exactly what you'd expect from a straight guy. Could he be...

I shake my head at myself as I brush my teeth. It doesn't matter. Even if he is, he

works at the university. Plus, I'll almost certainly never see him again after he leaves in the morning. C U of M is a huge university. We have a ton of TAs who teach classes of all levels. Whether or not Diego is straight will soon be completely inconsequential. He'll disappear from my life, and I'll disappear from his, footnotes in each other's wild anecdotes.

I head to bed absolutely certain that this will be the first and last time I ever make tea for Diego, much less torment myself with speculation over his sexuality.

HE LEAVES EARLY the next morning. I'm not even out of bed when I hear the door downstairs open and close. Later, I find a note on my kitchen table thanking me for my kindness and assuring me he got the car looked at this morning.

And that's the end of it.

At least, I assume that's the end of it.

So it's really damn weird when I walk into a classroom a week later and find Diego of all people standing at the front of the room behind a lectern.

We both stop, locking eyes for a beat as the world goes weird and surreal around us. I blink, but he's still there, staring back at me with eyes as wide as mine feel.

I look down at my syllabus. This is definitely the right time and the right room for my Queer and Trans History class.

Which means that Diego is definitely, beyond any doubt my TA.

We're going to spend the entire semester pretending he didn't sleep in my house. Four months of acting like I never made that comment about the Boyfriend Café — and he never blushed about it.

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Chapter Four

Diego

ANYONE. I COULD be a TA for anyone except the person who just walked into this classroom. But of course I'm not. Of course the person staring at me wide-eyed is the same person who let me crash at their house after I broke down in front of it.

The start of my graduate career could not be going much worse.

Okay, wait, calm down. Just calm down. Nothing inappropriate happened. The school year hadn't started. I was a complete stranger who broke down in front of Avery's house and they were kind enough to help me out. That's all. Nothing about that story is some damning secret I need to wear like an albatross.

I try to smile and nod. There's no sense in pretending I don't recognize Avery, or that they don't recognize me in return. Their wide blue eyes calm; their face softens, and they smile back at me, but fortunately don't say or do more than that. I watch their black ponytail bobbing as they make for the back of the classroom, pretty much as far from where I'll be lecturing as possible.

Good. They get it. They understand that this is all a horrible mishap and we should forget about it and move on. It'll be awkward, but hopefully we can pretend we're strangers, as we should be.

Of course, that'll be tough in a class as small as this one. Queer and Trans History is a special class only for folks majoring in the niche subject of History of Race, Power

and Gender. Even at a university as large as C U of M, it's a rare major. It doesn't surprise me when Avery greets their classmates. They've probably had a lot of other classes with the same mix of people all interested in this subject.

It's just my luck that this subject so happens to be my specialty.

Growing up where I did, I met so few other queer people that I knew nothing about queer history. That left me gobbling up any information on the subject as soon as I realized it was lacking from my everyday life. I was insatiable, and that voracious appetite led me to my undergraduate degree. Now, it's led me here, as well, where I'm helping teach a sizable chunk of a class on queer history .

In fact, the professor plans to leave most of the lectures to me. I'll more or less run this class, which sounded exciting in theory, before I knew Avery would be one of my students.

I need to pull myself together. Nothing happened. A friendly stranger offered me help when I was in a tough spot. This whole city – town, whatever – revolves around the university. It's probably more likely I'd run into someone connected to the school than not.

All of my rationalizations are absolutely true, but none of them help me when I look up from my notes and find Avery's bright blue eyes on me. Their voice rings in my head. I can smell that cup of tea they made for me, can feel the cozy quiet of their kitchen. Their words ring in my head, especially that little quip about getting "the full Boyfriend Café experience." Did they have to say it that way?

No, that's not their fault. They're what? Nineteen? Twenty? I'm their TA. I should be the one setting boundaries instead of blushing like a kid over the name of their café.

My lack of real life experience is catching up to me faster than I thought it would. I

figured I could at least hide it at work, but Avery's cool eyes seem to see right through me as I fumble through the start of my lecture.

At least today is an easy one. It's the first class of the semester, so most of the class time is dedicated to describing the class itself and going through the syllabus. I throw myself into the task with far more enthusiasm than it warrants. After a brief introduction to the class itself, I pass out printed copies of the syllabus. Going through each item line by line is so dull that I notice some of my new students' eyes glazing over, but that seems an acceptable outcome when I'm so powerfully off-balance.

"That's about all there is to the syllabus," I say. "Are there any questions on any of that?"

Avery's hand goes up.

I consider ignoring them, but they're the only person in the class with a question, and it's not a huge class, so I'd only make things worse by pretending not to see them.

"Avery?" I say.

Then I realize my mistake. The students didn't introduce themselves. Even if they did, remembering twenty new names should have been a bit more of a struggle. It hasn't been an hour and I'm already messing this up. Avery doesn't say anything about it, and everyone else looks bored to tears, so I'll simply have to hope they didn't bother noticing.

"I was wondering about the research project," Avery says. "Is that the sort of thing where we can get feedback along the way? Or are we supposed to just turn in a final project at the end of the semester?"

It takes me a second longer than it should to realize that that's an entirely reasonable question and gather an answer .

"I'll be here to help throughout the semester when it comes to the research project," I say. "I know that's a big assignment, so if you have any questions along the way, feel free to ask after class or during office hours. My door will always be open to any of you if you want to talk about your ideas or get some guidance with where to look for sources."

And that is an entirely reasonable response. But saying it while looking at Avery stirs up something in my stomach that I'm trying very, very hard not to think about.

There are no further questions after that, and I move on to an introduction to the first reading assignment. They'll be doing a lot of reading and responding for this class as we work through historical documents together.

"One of the trickiest things with a field like this is that a lot of the documents we have are highly speculative," I say. "So a text might not seem queer on a first reading, but one of the things we'll be doing during class is trying to place them in the right historical context to see other interpretations beyond the words directly on the page. For a lot of history, queer people couldn't outright say they were queer, even in places like private letters, so our history can frequently be a matter of interpretation. But that's the work we're going to try to do here, culminating in your research project where you attempt to take on a related topic on your own."

It's easier to forget about Avery and do what I'm here to do when I get to the topic at hand. I truly do have a passion for this. That's why I left everything I know to pursue it. And the thought of helping folks younger than me pursue it as well only sweetened the deal for me. We have precious little in the way of research and documentation in this field. The more eager, bright minds we have researching the subject of queer history, the better, in my opinion.

I catch myself relaxing, perhaps even enjoying myself, and soon enough whatever strangeness I felt with Avery seems truly silly. I set it aside and get through class, and before I know it our time together has wound down. The students all gather up their stuff and make to leave, and I retreat to my lectern to get my notes and stow them away.

When I look up, I find Avery waiting on the other side of the lectern. That chunky plinth suddenly feels as insubstantial as gauze between us. I freeze, caught by Avery's bright, inquisitive eyes.

"Can I help you?" I say.

"I was just wondering how things went after you left my house the other day," Avery says with absolutely no hesitation or self-consciousness whatsoever. Well, sure. That's fine for them. They're the student and not the TA who will get fired and called a creep for sleeping in their student's house.

"Fine," I say. After lecturing for over an hour, all I can summon for a response is a single inadequate word .

"Good," Avery says. "You were already gone when I woke up or I would have made you more tea and breakfast. I was hoping it all got sorted out okay."

"It was fine," I say, as though "fine" is the only word I recall.

"Did they figure out what was wrong with it?" Avery says.

"Yeah. It was ... um ... some kind of belt, I think." I'm struggling to remember, and not simply because I've worked so hard to avoid thinking about the expensive car repair that set me back before I even had a chance to move into my damn apartment.

“Sounds rough,” Avery says. “I’m glad I could help out at least.”

“Yes, it was ... very kind of you.”

“It wasn’t a big deal. I’m glad I got to run into you again and make sure it all went well.”

This is a little more than merely running into each other, and the thought that it’s going to continue happening for the next several months leaves me both cold with fear and flushed with nerves. In contrast, Avery seems perfectly comfortable with all this. They even lean closer, a conspiratorial smile flitting across their mouth.

“Actually, I’m really excited about it,” they say. My heart skips several beats. “I’ve been really excited to take this class. I know it’s super nerdy, but I already know what I want to research for my final project. ”

Language abruptly abandons my overheated brain. I have no idea how to respond, even though some piece of me realizes this should be exactly the type of thing a TA wants to hear from a student. Here’s someone young and bright and enthusiastic about the topic, a model student in every possible way. But all I can focus on is how Avery’s earnest excitement lights up their whole face. What kind of repressed creep have I become to latch onto the first queer person I met outside my little town, despite the fact that they’re my student?

“Th-that’s great,” I say. “But you don’t owe an outline or anything for a while.”

“I know,” Avery says. “I just like reading about this stuff. I saw the syllabus online before the semester started and I couldn’t help it. A couple ideas came to mind right away.”

“Well.”

That's all I manage to say. Well. Barely the start of a thought. More a noise than a word. But the longer Avery looks at me like this, the more terrified I become that anything I say will be the wrong thing. My occasional trips to the gay bar a few towns over never prepared me for something like this, an encounter with a person unlike anyone I've ever met, someone I shouldn't want, can't want, but who draws me to them like the tides obeying the moon.

Avery leans away, their voice returning to its normal volume, which is still on the softer side.

"Anyway, I have another class," they say. "Good to see you again. Glad everything worked out. I guess I'll see you again soon, huh? And if you ever need a cup of tea, you know where to find me."

A cup of tea. No, what I need is several stiff drinks and a slap to the face to knock me back to my senses. My first week in Montridge and I'm apparently determined to become this city's – or town's – biggest pariah.

Maybe breaking out of my comfortable small town shell and connecting with my community in the real world wasn't such a great idea after all. Some things are meant to remain purely theoretical.

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Chapter Five

Avery

THE BOYFRIEND CAFÉ is in full swing. I'm with a pair of nursing students who are nervous about doing rotations in hospitals this year. Cameron has a quiet, stressed out math major who hunches over his tea, while Julian chats and laughs with a girl I think I recognize from one of my gender and sexuality classes. Even our newbie server, Henry, is nodding along as his customer dumps their worries onto him.

The whole place is running like clockwork, but that doesn't keep me from worrying about it. I'm sure Mia did a great job with the scheduling, but part of my brain is chewing over the next round of customers and the transition between the groups and every tiny thing that could go wrong as the Boyfriend Café starts off the year.

This is a different Boyfriend Café than any that came before it. I'm literally the only holdover from the original crew. Everyone else is gone. I live in Albert's house now, and I go to Montridge Munchies to pick up the discounted baked goods we resell to our customers, but those are thin connections at best. In reality, I'm like a swimmer left out in the middle of the ocean without so much as a life vest, treading water and trying to stay afloat as a vast expanse of unknowable danger sweeps out in all directions around me.

I sip from my tea. Chill out, Avery. You know how to do this. Cameron and Julian started last year. They have more than a semester under their belts. And Mia is totally on top of her role as manager.

The part of my brain trying to calm me down is right. Everything is fine. The fairy lights are casting a soft glow through the sedate basement café. The tea has left the air smelling sweet and light. The customers are enjoying their conversations and snacks. There is nothing to worry about, yet I can't keep myself from stressing over every detail.

"But did you hear about that one student last year?" one of my nursing students, Rebecca, is saying to the other when I check back in to the conversation.

"Who?" the other, Martin, says.

"That one girl. The one who supposedly hooked up with one of the doctors."

"What?" Martin's eyes go wide, and he raises his tea to his lips to try to hide his smile .

"Yeah, it was a huge deal," Rebecca says. "Like, technically that's her boss or mentor or whatever. So everyone was freaking out. I think the doctor got fired."

"Yikes. Well, you'd have to fire him for messing around with a student," Martin concurs.

"Sorry," Rebecca says to me. "You probably don't care about any of this. It's just a rumor that went around all the nursing students last year."

I wave away her apology. "This is your time. Use it however you like. Besides, who doesn't enjoy a little tea with their tea?"

The nursing students laugh and move right along to their next bit of gossip. I have no qualms with that. Listening to gossip is fun, and it means all I really need to do is nod along and throw in a snarky comment here or there. It's my favorite way for these

conversations to go. City University of Montridge is a massive school, so there's always plenty of juicy tidbits to gobble up.

The nursing students' story about a student hooking up with a doctor never quite fades from my mind as they move on to other topics, however. Against all my better instincts, the tale calls up images of Diego going wide-eyed the moment I walked into that classroom yesterday. I was just as surprised as he was by our reunion, but he seemed downright terrified on top of shocked. Some piece of me wants to think that's because I didn't merely imagine the spark that sizzled to life between us that night we met, but that's probably stress and wishful thinking talking. In reality, he's probably nervous that crashing overnight at a student's home, even if absolutely nothing happened, is inappropriate regardless of circumstances. But I'm not about to reveal his secret. It was one night. One extremely tame and uneventful night.

Nah. It can't be that. I probably imagined Diego being flustered at seeing me again. I could have sworn there was a faint blush in those tan brown cheeks flecked with dark stubble, but it's just as likely that I'm so stressed out and desperate that I simply saw what I wanted to see.

Besides, if that doctor got in trouble, imagine how much worse it would be for a TA. I could probably get Diego kicked out of the university by mentioning that he spent the night here once. If there was anything but surprise in his face yesterday, it was likely fear.

Which is a damn shame, really. The man is easy to look at. And I'm guessing there aren't too many straight guys going for a graduate degree in gender and sexuality, so my odds are better than usual.

If he wasn't my teacher, of course.

Can we carve out an exception for TAs? They're half-student, half-teacher. So does

that make them half-available?

I mentally shake myself. Bad, Avery. Very bad. Worse still, I'm forgetting all about my customers while indulging my wishful thinking .

Thankfully, they don't really notice. I slip gracefully back into the conversation and finish out my hour with them without a hitch. The other servers and I get a short break to use the bathroom upstairs or grab a snack before our next customers arrive, and the night winds on. Even with the massive changeover in staff over the past year, the café is basically on autopilot. My worst fears do not, in fact, come to fruition, and all four servers make it through three rounds of customers, then loosen our ties and unbutton our vests so we can clean up the cups and plates and crumbs on the carpet.

I make a point of being the last one out of the basement and locking it up behind me. Then I walk everyone around to the front of the house. All three of them are headed back to the university, and after what happened to a past server, Mal, I encourage them to make the trip together. Only Cameron grumbles about it, but Henry and Julian are chatting happily before I even finish waving goodbye.

I retreat to the quiet and solitude of Albert's home. It feels huge and empty with just me inside it, but I can't really complain. I'm a junior in college who has an entire freaking house. I'm tempted to see if any of the servers want to use the spare bedroom next year, though. It would be nice to have a roommate. I would get a pet, but I'm still a student, so in a year I might have to move, and that doesn't sound very fair to the poor creature .

For now, the best I can do is call up my brother, Gabriel, who reliably answers every time I feel like chatting for no reason.

"Hey," he says when I flop into bed with the phone. "How was opening night?"

“Everything went perfectly,” I say.

“Of course it did. I never had any doubts.”

Easy for him to say. He was never in charge when he worked at the Boyfriend Café. He was always just a server, and often he didn’t even do that alone. Him and his eventual boyfriend Trent had such a powerful dynamic even before they started dating that customers frequently requested them as a duo — and paid extra for it.

“I’m just glad nothing disastrous happened,” I say.

“Nothing disastrous is ever going to happen. You’ve got this,” Gabriel says.

He’s been saying it for a while. I’ve always been close with my oldest sibling, especially since we’re both queer, so he’s had to listen to all my complaining as the nerves got the better of me. He’s been a huge source of support, but he’s also not here anymore, so that support has been entirely over the phone.

“Anyway,” Gabriel says, “what about the rest of your life?”

“What rest of my life?” I say.

“Come on, Avery. You’re young. You’re in college. You have to do things other than work. I didn’t set you up with this job so it could consume your whole life.”

“I know,” I say, “but eventually there was no one left but me. I kind of had to take it all on.”

Gabriel sighs. “Sometimes I regret dragging you into that café. I never meant for it to be a burden.”

“It’s not a burden. I love it. And Albert gave me his entire house so I could run the café. It’s not exactly a hardship.”

“That’s true,” Gabriel says, “but I haven’t heard you talk about anything else going on in your life except the café in ages. How are your classes? Are you going to parties? Have you met anyone? Tell me everything.”

I shrug, even though he can’t see it. “There’s not much to tell.”

“That’s sort of what I was afraid of.”

“My classes are getting tough,” I say in my defense. “I have this Queer and Trans History class and it’s going to be super intense. There’s a research project at the end of the semester and—”

“God, you are such a nerd,” Gabriel cuts in.

This, at least, is just brotherly banter. I’ve always been a huge history nerd, gobbling up textbooks that weren’t strictly required and regurgitating facts no one really wanted to hear.

“Yeah, well, it could be worse,” I say, hoping to deflect. “Did you ever hear any rumors about students hooking up with mentors and stuff when you were here? ”

Gabriel gasps. “Avery. You didn’t!”

“Not me . Geez. It’s something a customer said tonight. Something about a nursing student who hooked up with some doctor while doing her rotations. I’m not that dumb.” I hope.

“Good,” Gabriel says. “It better not be you. You’ll get mega-expelled for that.”

“I don’t think mega-expelling is a thing.”

“It is if someone hooks up with a professor. Or a doctor, I guess. But to answer your question: No, I never heard anything like that. It would be beyond stupid for everyone involved.”

Beyond stupid. Yeah, he’s right about that. It would be mega beyond stupid for me to hook up with a guy I have to see twice a week for the rest of the semester, a guy who’s terrified of simply having stayed in my spare bedroom once. That isn’t stopping me from thinking about it, but I can at least acknowledge that it would be a huge mistake.

Maybe Gabriel’s right. Maybe I do need to get out more. Maybe I’m latching onto Diego not because he’s gorgeous and intelligent and deeply interested in the same things I’m deeply interested in, but simply because he’s there and going to class is pretty much the only thing I do besides working at the café.

“Anyway, just promise me you’ll try to go out and have some fun this year,” Gabriel says. “And not with any professors or doctors or whatever. ”

I roll my eyes. “I will do my very best. Mia is already threatening to make me go have fun.”

“Mia?”

“The manager helping me at the café. She said basically the same things you have, so I’m sure she’ll drag me out one of these days.”

“Good, I’m glad someone there is a positive influence. I would come up there and drag you out myself, but you’re still twenty and Mom would kill me if you got caught with a fake ID or something.”

“No fake IDs, I promise,” I say. “And no freaking out Mom. I’m going to be fine, Gabriel. And I’ll have fun. Eventually.”

Gabriel sighs, but he lets me get off the phone without further protest about my depressingly dull lifestyle. Is it really my fault if I genuinely want to spend my time at school studying? Isn’t that what I’m here for?

I can think of one person who would agree with me, and he’s the exact person I shouldn’t be thinking about. Not now. Not ever.

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Chapter Six

Diego

I HAVE SURVIVED a whole week. I've seen Avery twice, but the second time I was prepared for them to stroll into the classroom. They didn't have anything to say after class, and I think I got through it without seeming like a nervous wreck or a creep.

Either way, this has been the most ridiculous week or so of my life. I moved out of my comfortable Midwest small town, broke down in a city that's actually a town, and experienced a whole mess of confusing emotions when the person who helped me out of the situation turned out to be a student. I would laugh at myself for the absurdity of it all, but the self-loathing cuts too deep for mirth. The first queer person I meet outside of my isolated neck of the woods, and I'm fixated on them like some kind of kid with their first crush.

I shake my head at myself in an attempt to dislodge that disastrous thought. How can I sit here thinking about Avery as a "crush" as though that's not wildly inappropriate? They're just ... interesting. There is so much about them that is new to me, and I don't just mean the non-binary thing. I understand that there are people out there who feel less settled in their gender than me, but it's always been sort of theoretical, something that's part of my area of study rather than my real life. But it goes so far beyond that. Avery has an energy and intensity I didn't encounter too much where I grew up. It's like they're living life at twice the speed I am — and for some reason I want to try to catch up.

I physically pinch myself, trying to get out of my head. A stack of essays sits before

me on my desk in the liberal arts department. They gave me my own office here so I could keep some office hours and do things like grade papers and prepare lessons. It's a lot nicer than trying to do this in my tiny new apartment, and I've ended up spending a lot of time here in the past week. It's also a good place for me to get my own classwork done, because yeah, I still have to focus on my own studies on top of all of this.

It adds up to a massive heap of work. I don't have time to worry about Avery and whatever I'm feeling or not feeling about them. It's probably just a consequence of stress and meeting them before I met anyone else here, anyway .

Determined, I set my mind to the essays before me. I asked the Queer and Trans History students to write a short, simple essay. It's not supposed to be extensive, just something to give me a benchmark of where they're at. This is a skill they'll need to hone over the semester, so it helps both me and them to see what they can do before we get into the weeds.

Everyone's essays are fine, if clumsy, I find as I work my way through them. The students submitted the assignment electronically, but I printed them out so I could leave comments along the margins, pointers to guide them next time. It's all what I expect — wordiness, unnecessarily long quotes, all the hallmarks of undergrads trying to hit a word count.

Then I get to an essay that freezes me in my tracks. My pen hangs over the paper, but I don't actually make any notes. I get all the way to the end of the short assignment without a single comment. It's not because the essay is perfect. It's because it's so far beyond every other one in this stack. There's a depth of thought and research here, a care that no one else bothered with for a short introductory assignment, a passion that pours off the page.

The name at the top of the essay is, of course, Avery Aaron.

My heart is beating faster than any essay warrants. Avery's work is brilliant, even in a brief test assignment. I can already imagine what they'll do with the research project at the end of the semester, and I'd be lying if I claimed it wasn't thrilling to me. This is my field. This is what I uprooted my whole life for. And Avery not only gets it — they love it. Perhaps as much as I do. Yes, their face is beautiful. But this. This is real beauty. This is a hook digging into my chest and pulling me toward them more forcefully than any physical feature ever could.

I'm a mad fool, but I make only one comment on Avery's essay: See me after class.

STUDENTS FILE OUT of the classroom. Except for Avery.

They approach the lectern from which I delivered the day's lesson, their essay clutched in their hands. Excitement and nerves flicker on their face.

"Um, you wanted to see me?" they say.

I brought this on myself, but it doesn't make the knot in my stomach any less nauseating. More than once, I've wondered what the hell I was thinking, but this is genuinely part of my job. Avery is a brilliant student. If I can help them direct and hone that brilliance, the whole field will be better off for it.

"Yes, it's about your first assignment," I say.

"Was it bad? There's no other notes on it. "

Now that they're closer, the dark shadows under their light eyes are more obvious. They're way too tired looking for someone who has barely cracked into their twenties.

"No, it was great," I say, quickly reassuring them. "I didn't have any other comments.

That's why I wanted to talk to you about it. There was really nothing much I could correct or point out. You nailed this assignment."

Their thin, manicured eyebrows rise, surprise easing the tension in their face for a moment.

"Really?" they say. "I just assumed I got, like, half of it wrong."

I shake my head. "Not at all. You were far less verbose than a lot of your classmates, and your citations were perfect. You didn't need to go to that kind of depth for such a short assignment. I was only trying to get a feel for everyone's writing style, the things they might need to work on, but you stood out, Avery. This essay is really good."

They light up, and it's worth every anxious thought I've had since meeting them. They actually smile, and I can tell in that moment that it's the expression they are always meant to wear. It softens their whole face, banishing the shadows under their eyes and tension around their lips. I can't stop my stomach from fluttering, but I'm more grateful than ever that the lectern stands between us, that I have some sort of physical barrier to cling to. It was one thing to meet Avery and see them as the first queer person I've encountered outside of my secluded corner of the world; it's another to experience their smile, their mind, their infectious energy when they're passionate about something. And they're clearly deeply passionate about this.

But they're also a student. I grip the lectern harder, like I can also get a grip on my emotions that way. This person deserves a mentor who can actually guide them. They deserve a mentor who can give them the guidance and resources they need to reach their potential. I feel inadequate to the task, but I'm the person they have. I'm the one in their field. In the future, they could be doing exactly what I'm doing right now, which makes me their best point of contact. As unfortunate as that is.

I have to be professional. I have to be what they need. They deserve that. The whole field of gender studies deserves that.

“I’m so happy you think so,” Avery says, a bit breathlessly. “This is what I’ve been thinking about for my research project. It’s been a passion of mine for so long. There’s so little out there about this, but people have been playing with gender forever. It’s not some new phenomenon like people think it is. I want to bring that to light so badly.”

“And I think you will,” I say. “This is a great start. You could definitely use this as a jumping off point and build on your research here. You’ve already laid the groundwork for it. ”

“I guess I’m just stuck on where to go next,” Avery says. “I feel like I’ve found every book there is about it, at least every book in Montridge about it. This place isn’t that big.”

“To you,” I say before I can catch myself.

Laughter lights their eyes. “Oh. Yeah. You called Montridge a city. I guess it’s different from where you grew up?”

“Quite a bit,” I say mildly.

“It’s not that scary when you get used to it. There’s even some queer bars and stuff in the area.”

This is edging way too close to personal territory, way too close to a conversation I don’t want to have with my eager young student. I desperately try to steer it back on track.

“Well, sometimes in a field like this, modern day expressions of community can be helpful,” I say. “But you could also try looking in the back of any of the books you’ve already dug through. See what they’re citing. See where those resources lead you.”

“Oh, that’s a great idea,” Avery says. “Of course. Duh. Why didn’t I think of that?”

“Because you’re still learning how to do this and I’ve been through it already.”

“True. I guess that makes you my mentor or something.”

They laugh, but I freeze up. It’s what I’ve been thinking in my head, but the way they say it makes it sound so much more dangerous than my idle thoughts entertained alone in my office.

“I don’t know if I’m your best option for a mentor,” I say, despite spending the past week thinking the exact opposite.

“Why not?” Avery says. “You’re smart. You’re in the same field. And you’re closer to my age than a professor or something.”

“I’m almost thirty. You’re barely twenty.”

They roll their eyes and wave their hand like that’s the most ridiculous thing I could have said. “But you’re not thirty, you’re not even close, and I am twenty. That’s a lot closer than me and some professor who’s had tenure for a decade. Do you think... Do you think we could talk more about this? I have to get to my next class, but I’d love to discuss this more. I know it’s early to think about that research project, but I want to dig in as soon as I can. And when you mentioned community it gave me a few ideas too. There might be places around Montridge that are worth visiting if I can find the time to do it.”

They're off to the races, their ideas spilling out almost as quickly as they can voice them. I can tell they're hatching these wild plans on the fly, but their enthusiasm is so infectious it's like being hit with a blast of laughing gas. I feel light and wild, swept along by Avery's intelligence, their passion .

Maybe that's why I open my dumb mouth and say the stupidest thing I possibly can:
"Yes, we could arrange that."

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Chapter Seven

Avery

I SWEAR I'M not here because I think my TA is hot. Okay, I'm not here just because I think my TA is hot. Diego was clearly as excited as me about my research project. He's the first person I've ever met who actually wants to listen to me ramble about historical documents on gender presentation. He might be the only person who wants to listen to me ramble about that. And he has suggestions and resources and thoughts of his own on top of that. I could spend the rest of the semester reading books about this and tossing ideas back and forth with him, but he seems terrified of doing that. I'm lucky he agreed to this meeting at all, and I swear to myself before I knock on the door of his office that I'll be on my best behavior.

Probably .

"Come in," Diego calls.

I enter his office like I expect to find a dragon inside. The nerves bubbling up inside me only intensify when I spot him sitting behind his desk with a stack of papers before him. I can't tell if it's his own coursework or something for our class, but either way he looks as tired as I feel. He plucks off his glasses to rub at his eyes before setting them back on his nose. His dark hair falls artfully across his forehead, but I'm sure that's accidental, which only makes it more charming than if he was all meticulously put together.

I sit across from him. The desk feels like a wall between us, something forcing us

apart, something keeping us safe. Even with that in place, I know Diego feels some of what I feel. It's in the way his eyes never quite settle on me and his hands fiddle nervously with the papers before him.

"So, um," he says, then clears his throat. "So we were going to talk a bit about your research."

It's been a couple days since he pulled me aside after class, and I've been thinking about this meeting non-stop. We're in the liberal arts building, but his office is far more private than a classroom, and that lends every breath, every word a dangerous edge.

We are conspicuously alone, and I know he feels that as keenly as I do.

"I'm interested in getting started on collecting some citations, if I can," I say. "I think it's going to be hard finding material."

"It could," he agrees. "Gender expression is another one of those things that people had to talk about almost in code for a long time. References can be tenuous."

We dive into a discussion about gender performance and social and cultural restrictions. He asks me if I'm going to focus on a specific part of the world or time period, and I'm forced to narrow down my ideas. I've always known I wanted to study this, but I've never had to face such particular questions about it.

It's kind of thrilling.

I love this. I love talking about it, thinking about it, working through it with someone who's as passionate about it as I am. Before I know it, the nerves are gone. I forget whatever weird, unresolved attraction might linger between Diego and I and think only about the work itself, the thing we're both here for.

“Here,” Diego says, “this is a really good example of a bibliography that would be worth digging into. I’m sure there’s more there that you could look up.”

Diego is pointing at a paragraph in my paper, but I can’t actually see the words from where I’m sitting. I lean closer, but the desk is between us.

Fuck it. I want to see what he’s talking about. I’m really excited about this whole project. So I hop up from my chair and head around his desk so I can stand next to him and lean down to get a look at exactly what he’s pointing at. He’s printed out another copy of my essay and written a ton of comments all over it. Here he’s circled a whole paragraph and written out a rambling comment that spills over onto the back of the page. Diego has suggested a list of sources, but also written out tips for when I crawl through the bibliography of this particular source myself.

It’s everything I’m looking for. I want to tear the paper out of his hands and sprint to the library right now. I resist, but mostly because after the wave of excitement recedes, I notice how deathly still Diego is next to me.

He hasn’t moved a muscle since I swept around his desk to crouch next to him. With him sitting and me leaning over, I’m taller than him, almost hunched over him to get a closer look at the essay he holds. He’s like a statue beside me, except his hands, which are clutching the essay way more tightly than necessary. I get the impression that that piece of paper is more vital to him than air.

Do I really freak him out this much?

I know we were a little flirty that night when he broke down in front of my house, but it’s not like we’ve done anything since then. He’s my TA. My hot TA, but it’s not like I’ve said that out loud, not even to my brother or Mia. There’s only one reason he’d still be reacting like this to me, and it’s because he hasn’t totally banished whatever he thought of me on the night we met .

I should back away. I should give him the space he clearly wants. But part of me yearns to push. Both Gabriel and Mia have told me I should be getting out and having fun while I'm in college. This isn't exactly what they meant, but I'm pretty confident Diego would be fun. A lot of fun.

I just have to convince him of that.

His office is strangely quiet. He's not making any attempt to fill the silence. He's locked up tighter than a bank vault, as though if he simply holds still I might disappear.

Instead, I plant my hands on his desk and hunch over even more so I can see his face and speak to him instead of addressing my essay.

"So, I was thinking," I say, "since my research is all about gender performance and how different social settings can inform that, I might want to include a section about drag."

"Oh," Diego says. He's staring down at his desk, refusing to look at me. "Well, drag has certainly been around in various forms for a long time. I'm sure there are plenty of good books about it you could find at the university library."

Unlike before, he isn't eager to rattle off lists of exactly which books I should be looking for. Me moving closer has taken the wind out of his sails, which is kind of a bummer. It was cute seeing him all excited and in his element. At the same time, I'm not eager to move away. This is the closest I've been allowed to get, and it is only improving my impression of his handsome face with its dark hair and rugged stubble.

"I wanted to do something more hands on," I say, deliberately letting my voice dip lower.

Diego flinches, a gesture I only notice because of my proximity. He definitely heard that change in my voice.

“I want to interview actual performers,” I say. “I want to get some personal stories from real people.”

“That ... that sounds like a lot of work,” Diego says. His voice is also quieter, but he’s speaking at his desk instead of at me. “You shouldn’t have to travel all the way to New York City for this assignment. Everything you need should be accessible online or on campus.”

“I don’t need to go to New York to see drag,” I say. “There’s plenty of places around here that host drag performances.”

“Oh,” Diego says. “I ... didn’t know that.”

We’re talking about the paper, but not really. The words are appropriate enough, but my tone, his shyness, my proximity — they make a farce of this sterile, appropriate teacher-student conference. I dare to lean in a little closer. Diego doesn’t move away. His eyes finally shift toward me instead of continuing to bore holes through his desk.

“That’s right,” I say. “You’re from some small town, huh? I think you mentioned that that night when you stayed at my place. ”

The reminder rattles him. His jaw tightens, some little muscle jerking as he apparently clenches his teeth hard. His throat bobs. Diego stares at me with a mixture of desperation and pleading. Some piece of me wants to believe that’s a plea for me to close the distance between us and finally put an end to the charade we’re struggling to maintain, but that might be too bold to hope for. I wish he’d give me some sort of signal, but Diego just sits there and watches me like I’m a snake that might decide to bite him.

“What was it like back home?” I say. “Did you know any other queer people?”

Diego flinches, but it’s a reasonable question. It’s not like straight guys are out here teaching Queer and Trans History. But it’s also the first time I’ve openly acknowledged that he’s queer to his face.

“It was small,” he says. “But yes. I met ... a few people.”

There’s something more there, and I’d love to dig it out of him, but he genuinely looks like he might bolt.

Then again, what I say instead isn’t all that much better.

“So you’re not completely inexperienced,” I say. His eyebrows shoot up, and I add, “With the community.”

“I suppose not,” he says carefully.

“That’s good, but I somehow get the impression you should get out more.”

“That’s not really... I mean, I have to worry about my classes and things, so I don’t really...”

I barely resist smiling to myself. His professional veneer is rapidly breaking down, and all I’ve done is stand close and ask a couple questions that aren’t strictly about my research.

“Well, I’m going to find some drag performances to go to as part of my research,” I say, “and I think you should come with me to one.”

His eyebrows shoot up and stay up this time. I rush on before he can freak out too

much.

“It’s your field of study as much as mine,” I say. “And you’ve never seen it for yourself. Isn’t half the reason for leaving a small town to get out and see more of the world? I think this is good for both of us.”

“I’m not sure,” Diego dithers.

“It’s just for research,” I say, lower, silkier, infusing every word with added meaning.

“Research,” he repeats quietly.

“Research. Exactly.”

I reach past him for a cup of pens sitting on his desk. I didn’t plan any of this. It’s all just happening. I’m almost watching myself be this bold and brazen from afar. The pen cup is a nice touch, however. It forces me to lean over and past him, to get so close I can smell his aftershave, but in a motion that’s completely innocuous on the surface.

Pen in hand, I find a spare piece of paper on his desk (it might be another essay or his own homework) and scribble out my phone number .

“How about this?” I say, staying closer than necessary. “I’m going to find some performances to check out. If you ever decide you want to see one, text me.”

Diego stares down at the scrawled phone number. He brushes his fingers against it like the ink might burn him.

“For research,” he says. A suggestion, a hope, a question.

“For research,” I confirm.

There’s nothing inappropriate about a little research.

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Chapter Eight

Diego

I CANCEL MY next office hours. No one but Avery has made use of them anyway. I retreat to my apartment, giving myself a day to focus on my own classes. I have plenty to do outside of my duties as a TA. I am here for a degree, after all.

I hunker down in the living room, where my roommate and I have placed a couch that we got off a curbside. I have a bed, but no desk. The expense simply isn't worth it when I have an office on campus. Plus, I haven't had much time for anything but going to my classes and teaching.

It doesn't make for the most ergonomic setup. An hour into hunching over my laptop, which sits on a pillow on my thighs, my back is aching. I sit back and stretch my arms overhead. My back issues an alarming series of cracks. My eyes water after staring at a document for so long. I lace my fingers together to stretch out the cramps induced by all that typing.

I allow myself a short break for tea. It's just store-brand black tea, cheap stuff that comes in boxes of fifty. As I wait for it to steep, I can't help comparing it to the tea Avery made for me on the night I met them. It was definitely nicer than this, but I bet Avery could make even this utilitarian black tea decadent. They would brew it perfectly, then add something like honey or milk that smoothed out the bitterness.

I want to slap myself. I sequestered myself away today and avoided my office hours so I wouldn't think about Avery, and here I am doing it anyway. Their phone number

sits tucked away in my wallet. I didn't have the courage to throw it away like I should have, but I also haven't used it. What would I do at a drag show anyway? I'd be so out of place, and everyone there would know it.

Tea in hand, I drag myself back to my coursework. It's early in the semester, but the papers and assignments are already piling up, which provides yet another handy excuse for why I absolutely should not go to any shows with Avery. When would I have time for such a thing? All I do is work and go to class and I'm still buried under unfinished tasks.

Focusing on my paper narrows my awareness to nothing but the words on the page in front of me. It's a nice break after spending my entire first weeks in Montridge flitting from one disaster to the next. I don't mind the tedious work. It helps clear my head and remind me of the real reason I came all this way and left my cozy hometown behind.

I barely notice my roommate Leo slouch into the apartment, too engrossed in my paper. I found Leo through the university. He's a grad student as well, so it was a good match. It's nice living with someone who's here for the same reasons I am, enduring the same sort of life I am. He's studying math, which is so far outside of my realm that I can't even fathom it, but he seems to love it as much as I love my studies, and that has formed an easy amicability between us.

And he wasn't weirded out by my chosen field. I can think of plenty of people back in my hometown who would be, but despite being straight Leo didn't bat an eyelash. He doesn't seem to care. The whole thing is insubstantial to him. I have to admit, it's been strange to encounter such casual indifference when back home views are typically more ... polarized.

"Hey," Leo says as he tosses his keys on the counter in the kitchen. "Working here instead of at your office?"

“Yeah, thought I could use a break from being on campus.”

“I feel that.” Leo sighs and scrubs his hand through his brown hair. “This shit is intense . How do you feel about getting a pizza tonight? I’m assuming from the bloodshot eyes and pile of books that you haven’t bothered eating.”

My stomach grumbles as though leaping to respond. I touch it gingerly. I got up for tea without ever once thinking about the fact that I haven’t eaten much today. My body does not need to be put under any extra stress thanks to my tendency to get lost in my work, so I nod at Leo.

“Yeah, that sounds good. Whatever toppings you like are fine with me,” I say.

Leo treated me to my first “real” pizza shortly after I moved in. He seemed aghast at my Midwest sensibilities. I have to confess — I don’t really get what all the fuss is about. This East Coast pizza is thin and floppy and delicious, but pizza is pizza, right?

I will never utter that sentiment out loud. Leo seemed very insistent that this pizza is unique and special and the best in the world.

He plops onto the couch beside me and orders the pizza. I leave him to it, returning to my essay while I can. If I work until the pizza arrives, that’ll make for a nice break. Plus, I’ll need to clear my textbooks off the coffee table. It’s the only table we’ve got in this sparse apartment of ours.

Leo tucks into some assignment of his own, and the sound of typing and flipping pages fills the apartment with a soft susurrus for the forty minutes between Leo ordering and a delivery guy knocking at our door. Leo leaps up from the couch to answer and recover our dinner, and I hastily clear off the table to make space for a massive, greasy pizza box. This is way too much for the two of us, but as I tuck into my first slice, I rapidly discover I could probably take down half of this pizza on my

own.

“Thank you for ordering,” I say around a mouthful of cheese and dough. “I’ll get you back.”

Leo waves away the offer. “Buy the next one.”

I shrug. Seems fair enough to me. We split the rent and utilities here, but otherwise we haven’t fussed too much about groceries and pizza and things like that. We’re both broke and both working a ton.

“So, what were you working on?” Leo says after we’ve each scarfed down a slice.

“Just some paper. Trying to get ahead of some things before I have a million papers to read for my class.”

“It’s insane trying to teach on top of everything else, isn’t it?”

Leo doesn’t know the half of it. If only I was merely concerned about the teaching and lecturing and grading itself, and not also panicking over the phone number tucked into my wallet.

He starts talking about his class, but it sounds like it’s all going pretty well for him. He’s a smart guy, and I’m starting to suspect that he’s handling this way better than I am, a fact that does not help me contend with the shame spreading thorny roots through my chest .

“Your class must be cool though,” Leo says. “Any of them writing about your field?”

“Actually ... yes,” I admit. “One is working on something pretty close to my own studies.”

I don't want to talk about Avery. I don't want to think about Avery. I was doing so well, but the only truthful answer to Leo's question is that Avery is researching exactly the sort of things I'm here for. I might not be trans, but gender presentation and how people express themselves along that spectrum has always been a special interest of mine. It doesn't just mean people like Avery. It's also the blue collar guys I grew up around, the queer men at the one gay bar a few towns over, the teenagers growing up in that small community but with ample access to the internet. Every time they get dressed in the morning, whether it's for work or school or a date, they're making conscious choices about how to present themselves to the world.

"Hey, that's awesome," Leo says. "You could mentor them. That's gotta be exciting."

Maybe a little too exciting.

"Yeah," I say mildly. "It's interesting. They have some fascinating ideas they're planning to chase down."

"Like?"

"Well..." I feel the words piling up, feel my ability to hold them back breaking down. "They want to do all this research on gender presentation in society, but there's only so many historical documents on that kind of thing. The language for it has changed a lot over time, and there's certainly been periods where certain types of expression were outlawed, explicitly or implicitly."

"Right, right, makes sense."

"So they were thinking of going to a drag show," I say. "Maybe even interviewing performers."

"Whoa, okay, that's awesome. And so far above and beyond. You must love this

student. They're as nerdy about this stuff as you are."

Leo laughs, but every muscle in my body tenses. Avery is indeed every bit as passionate about this topic as I am, perhaps moreso since it's got a personal component for them. And that's kind of the problem. If they were just an attractive person I met, it'd be one thing, but their mind is even more enticing than anything else about them, and that's the part that's truly dangerous. I could talk to Avery for hours. I could go to that drag show with them and experience things that have resided purely in the realm of theory for me. My entire queer universe has been books, the internet and one lonely gay bar up until now, but I know that if I follow them, I'll experience so much more.

I want that far more than I should let myself want that.

I love my hometown, but it was certainly a sheltered experience. Scared as I am, I do want to experience more of my community. I do want to take advantage of all the queer bars and shows and events and community out here. But letting Avery be my guide through that would be ... dangerous.

"They want me to accompany them to the drag show," I say.

I don't know why I'm telling Leo this. Maybe it's been stuck in my head so long that I need to say it out loud and let someone else tell me I'm crazy.

But Leo doesn't say that. He says, "Oh, that sounds cool."

"Does it?" I glance over at him. "They're a student. Isn't that a little inappropriate?"

Leo shrugs. "It's just a drag show."

"I thought those shows were kind of raunchy."

Leo laughs and pats me on the shoulder. “Man, I keep forgetting how small that town you grew up in is. I mean, yeah, they can get raunchy, but even I’ve gone to a drag show, and I’m straight. It’s not porn, dude, relax. It’s like lip syncing and stuff. It’s fun.”

“I just worry about how it would look if someone from the university saw me at a thing like that with a student.”

“Why? You’re just going to a show. It’s not a big deal. I promise. And you really should get out more. This seems like a perfect excuse.”

It does. It really does. And Leo’s reassurance makes me want to say yes so badly that later, after the leftover pizza is tucked into the fridge in tin foil and I’m in bed staring at the dark and unable to sleep, I fumble around on the floor for my pants, then dig out my wallet and that phone number secreted away inside it.

Even as I tell myself I’m an idiot and a fool and worse, I put in the number and type out a simple message: I would like to go to a show some time. Just tell me when and where.

My hands are shaky when I muster the courage to hit send. I toss my phone on the floor without waiting for a response and turn onto my side, throwing the covers over my head like that will hide me from what I just did.

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Chapter Nine

Avery

THE PERSON AT the door stamped my hand with a red X when I showed my ID, but at least I'm allowed inside. I sit nervously near the back of a crowded room that's clearly usually a dance floor. Folding chairs line up in rows with a lane down the center, all pointed at a makeshift stage with a curtain hanging before it.

I bounce my leg, but it's not the drag show I'm nervous about. I check my phone, but there's no update since I sent Diego the time and location for this and he responded with a simple "thanks." I haven't texted since then, too afraid that any excess communication will scare him off. It's a miracle he accepted the invitation at all, as terrified as he is of our every interaction. No matter how innocuous, he always looks like he wants to run .

I catch movement out of the corner of my eye, but it's a couple on a date and not Diego. Someone tries to sit next to me and I bashfully explain I'm holding the seat for a friend. They don't seem to mind, but the tiny interaction sets my heart racing. I sure hope I'm holding the seat for a friend. Otherwise, I'll look like a fool sitting here by myself next to an empty seat. I check my phone yet again. Still nothing. And there's only a few minutes until the show is supposed to start.

"Come on, Diego. Please," I mutter under my breath.

Restless, I go to the bar, show my red X, and ask for a soda. Optimistically, I ask for two sodas. The bartender doesn't bother charging me for them.

I'm carrying them back to my seat when I see him.

Diego stands at the back of the room where the performance will take place. His head swivels, and he shifts from foot to foot, his nerves apparent.

I can't stop a smile from breaking across my face. I hurry toward him before he can flee or disappear or turn out to be some kind of overly hopeful hallucination on my part.

"Hey," I say.

He startles when he spots me beside him. I hold up a plastic cup full of soda.

"Want a drink?"

"You shouldn't be drinking," he says.

I roll my eyes. "It's soda." I hold up my hand, displaying the big red X the bouncer placed there to mark me as under twenty-one.

Diego finally accepts a cup, and I lead him to the seats I snagged, moving my jacket aside so we can sit. It turns out we're just in time. We barely settle on the chairs before the lights go down and an excited murmur ripples through the crowd.

The emcee all but leaps onto the stage. She's literally sparkling in her sequin bathing suit. Thigh high boots climb up her legs. Her wig is teased up so tall it nearly hits the stage lights as she jumps around hyping us up for the show. Then the queen tells us to get ready for the first performance, and I almost splash soda on myself from squeezing my plastic cup so hard.

Music blares. The lights flash and swirl as a drag queen struts across the stage lip

syncing to “Baby One More Time.” At one point, the queen drops into a split, her tiny school girl skirt riding up around her hips, and the whole crowd goes nuts and throws bills at the stage. I crumple up a dollar of my own and toss it at the stage for the queen to collect at the end of her performance.

In the brief breath of quiet between performances, I chance a look at Diego. He’s fixated on the stage, his fear receding behind a wave of pure awe and delight. I have to bite my lip to keep from smiling too much at that, but fortunately the lights soon shift as the next queen bursts onto the stage .

We get all the hits over the next hour or so. “Bitch Better Have My Money,” “Dancing Queen,” Cher, Madonna, you name it. There’s even a performance of “Save a Horse (Ride a Cowboy)” by a drag king who’s devastatingly handsome in full cowboy getup, complete with a ten-gallon hat. He struts down the center row, like many of the queens did, then locks onto me and Diego and sprawls over our laps for a dramatic moment. I shove dollar bills at him and he struts off, but Diego is wide-eyed next to me, and it’s all I can do not to laugh. Despite his field of study, it’s painfully obvious how far out of his comfort zone he is, yet he’s soaking it all up, taking it in with joyful earnestness.

The show wraps up after a couple more performances. Everyone throws whatever cash they have at the stage. Diego digs awkwardly through his wallet, but all he has is a twenty.

“Don’t worry about it,” I say. “Just remember to get some ones for next time.”

The mention of a next time puts the tension right back into his shoulders and face, and I almost regret suggesting it. But he clearly had fun, and nothing weird happened. We sat and watched a show. What’s so awful about that?

We have to vacate our seats and head to the other side of the bar so the crew can clear

out the area for the dance floor. The night is just getting started, and as long as I play it cool I can probably hang around and dance .

The other half of the bar is just a literal bar. It's crowded with most of the show's attendees hanging around, but I don't mind. I lead Diego to a corner where we can toss our empty sodas and escape the worst of the crush vying for the bartender's attention.

"So, how'd you like it?" I say. I have to yell above the din, but Diego and I stand so close that I know he can hear me. I also know he's nervous about our proximity, like when I stepped around his desk the other day. I, however, am not. I like being so close I have to look up at him, so close we can't help accidentally bumping into each other. It gives me an opportunity to appreciate all the warm shades of brown in his eyes, from amber to chestnut to umber.

"It was interesting," Diego says.

"Just interesting? Come on. I know you've never seen something like that."

"Not in person, certainly."

"It's so much better than a textbook," I say. "The music. The looks. The makeup."

His head must be spinning. Diego just saw all of his studying in action in a way he's never witnessed before. From what he's admitted about his hometown, it definitely didn't have anything close to the performance he saw tonight.

"How are you not freaking out right now?" I say. "That was so good."

"How do you know I'm not freaking out?" he mutters .

Even with the noise of the bar around us, I catch it and laugh. “Okay, fine. But you’re freaking out so quietly. Come on, tell me what you really thought.”

He looks down at me, and his gaze turns genuinely thoughtful, like when we were talking about my paper. I’m beginning to understand that this is the way past his high walls, not perfect hair or flawless skin or an idealized body, but a mind that’s a match for his own.

“I thought,” he starts slowly, “I thought it was fascinating. I want to know why they chose what they chose. The makeup. The shoes. It must take practice just to walk in those things, and they were doing far more than walking. Why go to such effort? What drives it?”

“Euphoria,” I answer immediately, and his gaze sharpens. I have his interest now, beaming down on me like the full light of the sun in the middle of the day, and I’m basking in it. “Some people get a rush from playing with the gray areas, from bending the rules. Even if some of those queens take off the makeup and wigs and are cis men underneath, there’s a kind of high from blurring the lines, even temporarily. And for some people, it’s not so temporary.”

“For you?”

It’s a brash question, but I don’t shrink away from it. Few people are bold enough to actually ask me something like that.

My hair is sitting in its usual high ponytail. I take a lot of pride in its length, in flaunting its sheen every day. I also put on a little eyeliner for this. I’m wearing two long, dangling silver earrings and a slinky sweater that drapes over my slight frame and the tight jeans beneath it. It’s not as far as I sometimes go, but it’s what I felt like wearing tonight, it’s the presentation that felt good today, and that’s most of how I make these sorts of decisions.

“Yeah,” I say after a sizable pause. “It’s not temporary for me. But it’s also not one stable thing. It can change from one day to the next. But I decided a while ago that I’m going to go with what feels authentic to me instead of what feels normal for everyone else. And people can think whatever they want about that.”

He looks at me for a long time, like he’s weighing out each and every word I said on some scale inside his head. I’m desperate to know what he’s thinking, what he makes of all this, of me, but his placid face betrays nothing.

A beat starts up in the other half of the bar. They must have finished clearing out the chairs and stage for the show. The crowding eases as people filter back over to that side of the venue.

“I studied this for so long,” Diego says eventually, almost to himself, “and somehow never really experienced it. I thought being gay in my small town was enough. I didn’t realize how much I was missing.”

“That’s why you came here, though, right?” I say.

He nods. “Yes. But still. Thank you for inviting me out to this. I wouldn’t have done this on my own.”

I can’t stop grinning. “Thank you for showing up. I was afraid you wouldn’t. I just wanted you to see what I’m so excited about in my research.”

“Your research,” Diego says.

Suddenly, I flash back to that conversation in his office and my bold suggestion that he join me at this event ... for research. The phrase meant a lot more than gathering quotes for a required essay, and the way Diego repeats the words now suggests he remembers that. Vividly.

Heat trembles low in my gut. Diego is staring at me like he's waiting for something, but I have no idea what to do about this. If he wasn't my TA it would be so obvious, so easy. Normally, someone eyeing me up like this would be a blinking green "go" signal, but I have to be more careful here.

Or do I?

We aren't at the university. We're anonymous patrons at a bar. No one here knows us, and we don't know them. The lights are low. The music is loud. We're just two strangers in a bar, two strangers with an obvious and voracious attraction.

For the first time in a long time, all the stress of juggling the café and my degree lifts off my shoulders. Perhaps that's what makes me bold enough to grab Diego by the hand .

"Dance with me," I say.

He freezes for a second, but doesn't jerk free of my grasp. Then he nods, just once.

It's all the confirmation I need.

Chapter Ten

Diego

I LET AVERY tug me toward the dance floor.

Who am I kidding? I don't "let" them tug me anywhere. I want them to. The moment they take my hand, I'm theirs, wholly and completely.

But it isn't just that. The longer we stood there talking, the more I was waiting for them to do this, hoping they would do this. Their eyes seemed to get brighter and brighter the more I engaged and the less I held myself back, and I'm too weak to resist. So when they took my hand at last, I was already prepared to follow them; I was already eager to follow them.

I'll pay dearly for this, I'm sure, but the bar is dark and the music pounds over my thoughts, silencing my own objections .

Avery pulls me into the throng of bodies on the dance floor. Only narrow lanes exist between grinding, gyrating bodies. Avery weaves expertly through the crowd, stopping at some mysterious cue. Perhaps it's just the first somewhat open space they've found, but it doesn't feel very open when they turn toward me and the bodies around us force us close together.

Oh God. I'm supposed to dance. I don't dance. The gay bar back home has a single pool table with peeling felt and a row of stools at the bar. If they're playing music, it's only because there isn't a sports game to put on. I've never been to a place like

this, much less danced.

But clearly what Avery expects and wants is dancing, and they display none of the self-consciousness cementing my feet to the floor. They release my hand and immediately fall into the beat, raising their arms over their head, closing their eyes, swaying to the throbbing rhythm of the music. They're like a leaf caught in a breeze, dancing whichever way the wind pushes them, graceful and free and unburdened by any shame whatsoever.

All I can do is stand there and watch.

It feels strange, almost voyeuristic, but I also can't stop myself. There's an effortlessness to Avery's every movement, like they're always meant to be in motion. If I found them attractive before, I'm devastated now, hopelessly enthralled by the sway of their hips, the grace of their limbs, the bliss on their face. Their raised arms pull up their light, baggy sweater, exposing their narrow waist. My eyes dart down to a patch of pale skin, and my throat instantly clogs. I want to run away to the bar and beg for water, but I know it won't actually help. What's lodged in my throat can't be cleared away that easily.

They open their eyes and catch me watching. Instead of being horrified, they laugh. I can see it but not hear it, but I already know the shape of their laughter when it eases all the stress in their face.

We can't talk anymore. The music is too loud. So instead of asking, they take my hands and simply start moving me. It feels awkward, almost childish. But when Avery laces their fingers between mine, I forget all about that.

That point of connection ignites something inside me. They're pulling me along with them, dragging me into the music whether I'm ready to go or not. I move with them, feeling the motion of their body and going along with it as best I can. Before I know

it, I'm mirroring the sway of their hips, and they're grinning at me like they've won some major victory.

Before I can feel self-conscious, they let go, but I don't stop moving. It's like I'm a metronome they set in motion. I can keep going under my own momentum for now, but I know I'll lose my nerve eventually.

Avery doesn't let me, of course. They turn around, and for a panicked instant I think they're going to leave me here, lost amid a sea of bodies on this dark dance floor. Then somehow they're closer, much closer, so close I instinctively reach out to brace my hands on their hips.

They roll into the touch. I can feel the music through their body, like every pulsing beat is coming up through the floor and traveling through their slim hips before it reaches my hands.

I move with renewed vigor, following them. It feels like holding onto the edge of a cliff or riding a mechanical bull. All I can do is cling tightly until I inevitably fall off.

And when the fall comes, will it be Avery I land on?

It should be terrifying, but this weird, noisy, dark corner of the universe separates me from the real world and all the things I should be concerned about. When the beat shifts, so do Avery's hips, and there's nothing in my mind except following along, moving with them, riding every note of the club music as Avery's body transforms it into something beautiful.

They push even farther back against me. My hands slip minutely around them, just slightly forward on their hips, but it feels like holding them. Their dark ponytail is in my face. They flip it over their shoulder, and then their neck is right there, inches from my lips, exposed and vulnerable. My lips ache to taste them, to press against

warm skin. Every breath brings me the scent of whatever they wash their hair with, something light and floral but not overpowering. It also brings me the scent of them, their sweat from the dancing, their body so perilously close to mine.

Weak and helpless, I lean down. I close my eyes as I rest my head against Avery's shoulder. I can feel their reaction, some little noise that vibrates in their throat. I feel like all I'm doing is swaying back and forth, but they don't seem to mind. They let me hide my face against them, on the bare skin exposed by their slinky sweater. My lips brush their skin almost accidentally, and it's just as sweet as I imagined, flushed with warmth, salty with sweat, so smooth and soft when I dare to kiss their shoulder a second time and a third.

"Diego," they say.

I'm close enough to hear them, to feel my name as it takes shape in their throat, and that leaves me gasping for breath. A breath that tastes all of them, of the heat rising off their body from dancing, of the desire held at bay inside them.

They turn in my arms, smoothly draping their arms over my shoulders as they do. Thanks to how my head rested, I'm leaning forward, placing me almost nose-to-nose with Avery. Their eyes are so unbearably blue from this distance. My hands linger on their hips, and I tremble at the thought of tilting forward to press even more of our bodies against each other.

"I like when you touch me," they say.

I can barely breathe. Every inhale is too warm. My lungs never seem to get all the air they need. I don't even know if we're dancing anymore or simply standing here holding each other. Holding each other. I'm holding them, clinging to them, my hands on their body, my face an inch from theirs.

And I'm not pulling away.

From this distance, the pull is undeniable. Now that I've touched them, tasted them, felt them, I can't seem to get enough. Reason wages a hopeless battle against raw desire, against the magnetic pull of this person who isn't simply beautiful in body, but also in mind. I want to drag them off this dance floor and touch them, yes, but my fantasies leap almost immediately from that to lying in bed just talking to them, picking their brain in the dark, listening to every thought they're willing to share.

"Kiss me," Avery says.

"I can't do that." Whatever part of me is still functioning forces the words out.

"You're already touching me."

"I know."

"Then why not kiss me?" Avery says. "Just like you kissed my shoulder."

Their shoulder. Oh, what a fool I was to allow myself even that. Because now that I've had a sip, I want more so badly that my whole body seems to clench around the need.

"Please, Avery," I say. "I can't do this. "

They move their hands so they're cupping my face, thumbs stroking. "Nothing bad is going to happen. We're both students, you know."

"I'm more than just a student."

They don't even bother arguing with me more. They don't push. They don't try any

further convincing. They just stand there cradling my face in their warm, soft hands, staring at me, waiting, calm and unconcerned.

It's like they know before I do that I'm going to give in.

I hold back a few seconds more, but my defenses crumble before my eyes. When I lean forward, Avery doesn't lunge up at me or yank me to their lips, they simply wait, guiding me but not forcing me. So it's entirely my decision when I land at last against their mouth.

Their lips are every bit as soft as I imagined. I close my eyes and the rest of the world vanishes. The bodies around us are a distant beacon of warmth, the music a dull throb in the back of my mind. None of it can pierce the Avery-ness of this moment, the feel of them all around me. Their hands are still on my face, mine on their hips. They stand amid the pulsating dance floor, kissing me and kissing me for as long as I let them.

When we need air, we don't go far. We gasp against each other, but Avery seizes my bottom lip in their teeth and tugs. Heat flushes through my body, and I return to their mouth ravenous. This time, it isn't some sedate, exploratory moment of soft lips. Our mouths open so our tongues can prod at each other. Avery lets me into their mouth, sucking on my tongue for a dizzying moment before they let me go.

My hands have a mind of their own. They tug at Avery's hips, pulling them flush against me. I tremble from the sensation of their body against mine, their whole body from the hips almost to the chest. Their arms slide around my neck, finally yanking me against them with force, and any pretext about dancing is fully banished.

We're making out in the middle of this dance floor. There's no other word for how we grab each other, throwing our bodies together, mouths seeking more and more contact.

I slip away as an idea strikes me. I go to Avery's neck, kissing along the side, sucking on their skin. They gasp, one hand tangling in my hair as their whole body arches against me. We don't have long before this gets too raunchy even for a dark dance floor, but I don't stop sucking and licking at their neck and savoring their boisterous reactions until I must come back up for air.

That's when I spot the person watching us from across the room.

I don't recognize him, but then again, it's hard to tell. He doesn't stand out. He could be anyone, but he's definitely watching us.

My heart races. Is the look in his eyes interest? Hate? Fear? Recognition ? The possibilities rapidly cool my heated blood, leaving me terrified to my core. What if he's someone from the university? What if he's a student, a fellow TA, a member of the faculty? He looks too young but I can't be sure.

I jerk away from Avery. Hurt and confusion passes over their face and stabs into my heart.

"What's wrong?" they say.

"Nothing. I ... I have to go."

The hurt deepens, and so does the ache in my chest, but I can't shake that look from across the room. I can't shake the bone-deep terror it punched into me.

"Diego?" Avery says.

But I shake my head. "I'm sorry. I..."

I should say more. Apologize, perhaps. But I can't. I'm too mixed up. There's too

much happening in my head. Fear and lust and regret and longing. I don't know what to do with all of it except run.

So that's what I do.

Chapter Eleven

Avery

THAT NIGHT LINGERS about me like a persistent cologne I can't wash off my skin or out of my clothes. Not that I want to wash it off. I indulge it every chance I get — in the shower, in bed, even once in the kitchen while making my morning tea. The feel of Diego's hands on my body and tongue delving into my mouth sticks to my skin like syrup coating every place where he touched me. I return to it over and over again, even as he does everything in his power to completely ignore me in the days following the drag show.

It's made it hard to concentrate, even when I'm at the Boyfriend Café and my entire job is concentrating on the distressed computer science major drinking tea with me.

He's been complaining about his classes while sipping the calming chamomile with lemon that I brewed for him. I made jasmine for myself. It's my favorite flavor, but it's also the tea I made for Diego the night he broke down in front of my house, and I shamelessly use it to stir up those memories.

"Maybe going to college just isn't for me," the computer science student, Steven, groans. "Maybe I'm too stupid for it."

"Hey, don't say that," I cut in. "You got in. So they believe you're smart enough for it."

"But everyone else is struggling way less than me. Why am I the only one who

doesn't get it?"

"You assume everyone else is struggling less than you. I'd be willing to bet the truth is that a lot of your classmates feel exactly the same way you do. Have you tried making a study group or something? You might be surprised by what your classmates reveal in private."

It's advice I've given at least a dozen times during my semesters as a server here. It's amazing how many people think they aren't good enough compared to their peers, when those peers are just as anxious as they are.

"That's ... that's a really good idea," Steven says. "Thanks."

I let a genuine smile break free. "That's what I'm here for."

The rest of my hour with Steven switches to lighter topics. He seems a bit more at ease by the time our session winds down and I stand to shake his hand and escort him toward the door.

One customer down. Two rounds to go. I resolve to be less distracted next time. It would be humiliating for a customer to catch me distracted when they're all college students paying good money for this experience.

I reheat my tea in the microwave that we hide from customers (at least a few of them would be scandalized by this tea faux pas) and then pace the basement before the next round starts. Cameron raises his eyebrow at me, but his nearly permanent scowl doesn't change in any meaningful way. Julian jumps up to join me, calling it a fun game, and that deepens Cameron's scowl to a look of actual disgust. But before they can start bickering again, it's time for us to line up and greet our next round of customers.

“Welcome to the Boyfriend Café. We look forward to serving you.”

My next table is a girl looking to go into early childhood education after she graduates. Anna loves working with kids; it's the adults who are getting her down.

“Kids are just so honest, you know?” she says. “It's adults who are always speaking with some double meaning. Like the other day, we had this class of kids we were working with, and one walked right up to someone in my class and asked them what non-binary means. All the adults in the room were so awkward, but the kid was just asking a question. He didn't think anything of it.”

A familiar bolt of dread shoots through me. I don't make any secret of my gender here at school, but it rarely comes up as a topic of conversation, especially in a setting like this. My customers don't have any reason to talk about it, except I suspect Anna brought this up deliberately. She's fishing for my opinion on the matter, or perhaps for my approval. It wouldn't be the first time someone wanted me to pat them on the head for not being a bigot, but how is that my damn job?

“What did your classmate say?” I ask mildly. I'd prefer for her to talk about this instead of me.

Anna jerks her shoulders in a shrug. “They said some people aren't boys or girls. They didn't want to talk too much about it.”

I understand the feeling. I don't really want to talk about it either, but I'm at work with a customer, and she isn't doing anything wrong by bringing up the subject.

“What would you say?” she prompts.

Ugh. What would I say? I don't know. The same things I've had to say over and over since coming out, probably. The same things I'll be repeating to everyone I meet for

my entire life. It gets easier, but it never really becomes fun trying to explain your existence to another person.

“It sounds like your classmate had a good answer,” I say.

“Yeah, I guess. I mean, the kid didn’t ask any more after that. He seemed to accept it.”

Kids often do, I’ve found. The feeling of being nebulous, neither, different, isn’t as strange to them. They’re often less poisoned by expectations, so hearing that someone isn’t really a boy or a girl doesn’t rock their world. If only everyone could take it in stride and go back to playing with their LEGOs.

Anna has apparently gotten the approval she was seeking from me. She moves on to complaining about having too much homework, and I relax and encourage her along. Once she leaves, I take my last table of the night, a pair of friends both going for photography degrees. They’re the best table of the night since they’re mostly there to gossip rather than complain or throw awkward questions at me, and I lose track of time chatting with them.

I’m still grateful when their time is up and I get to escort them out. It’s been a draining night, especially with Diego consuming a good fifty percent of my brain power. Even when I’m not thinking about it, I’m kind of always thinking about it. Any time I have a free second, the memory of our dancing floods back in, bringing with it every sense and sensation from that night.

He never asked me about my gender. I corrected him one time and that’s been the whole discussion on the matter. If a guy who has spent his life mostly in the middle of nowhere, a guy who’s encountering this stuff for the first time, can take it in stride that easily, what is everyone else’s damn excuse?

Granted, Diego is studying gender and sexuality. So he might not have met someone like me before now, but his entire academic career prepared him for that meeting. Still, I don't think people need a freaking degree to just chill the hell out. Is it really that hard?

I'm so distracted by these thoughts that I go through the motions of cleaning up the café on auto-pilot. I'm surprised when I realize we're done and I should lock up the basement and head outside with the rest of the staff.

I walk them all around the house and bid them goodnight. They leave in a cluster, Cameron and Julian already well on their way to arguing. Poor Henry. He has to walk home every café night with that. It's a wonder the guy stays so relentlessly cheerful, but he's never complained in the slightest.

When I head inside, our manager, Mia, is lounging on the couch in the living room, as I knew she would be. I flop down beside her and start unbuttoning my vest and loosening the laces on my shoes. I dress like all the others for café nights. It's very masculine, but it's become the café's uniform, in a way, and I don't really mind it. If I wanted to show up in a dress or skirt one night, no one would care.

"How was it?" Mia says as I sprawl beside her. She lifts her feet to make space for me, then plops them in my lap.

"Fine," I say.

"You look exhausted. Even compared to usual." She shuts the laptop perched on her thighs and sets it on the coffee table. "I finished the scheduling for the next month and updated the waitlist. I also made sure we have some social media posts ready for special events. Oh, and I paid Montridge Munchies, so we're good for another month with them."

I nod, too worn out to care. Mia has been on top of everything I could ask her for and more.

“Hey, seriously, are you okay? You look like you’re going to pass out sitting up,” she says.

“I feel like I’m going to pass out sitting up,” I reply.

“What happened? Did you have a bad customer?”

What didn’t happen in the past few days? Bad customers, awkward gender questions, plus whatever the hell is going on with Diego. He went from sticking his tongue down my throat to pretending I’m not sitting right in front of him in his class. I want him to give me another chance. I want him to stop running away. But I don’t know how to convince him to do that when he won’t even look at me.

“Avery?”

“A little of everything,” I say.

“Do you want to talk about it?”

I shake my head because if I try to say it out loud, she’ll hear the lie. I do want to talk about it. I want all of these mixed up feelings about Diego to come gushing out of me so I don’t have to hold them all myself. Yet I know if Diego ever learned I’d breathed a word about us to anyone he would somehow grow even more distant than he already is.

Mia drops her legs off my lap and scoots over on the couch to hug me. I sink into her embrace, and for a while she simply holds me, accepting my refusal to talk but seeing my need for comfort regardless. I got so much more than a manager for the café when

I hired her.

“I think,” I say slowly, “I think you and my brother are right. I think I am missing out on part of my college experience.”

“You’re just so busy, baby,” Mia says. “When was the last time you really had fun?”

When my TA was groping me on a dark dance floor.

“I don’t know,” I say in place of the truth.

“I really want to go out with you some time,” Mia says. “There are a couple places that I know we could get into. We just have to play it cool and stay away from the bar. My friend can get us into this one place near the city.”

“I’ll think about it.”

“You better. Otherwise I’ll have to kidnap you and drag you out there by force. You need some fun in your life, Avery.”

I agree entirely, but the most brilliant, fun, enticing person I’ve ever met insists on pushing me away.

I am exhausted from talking tonight. Talking about me, talking in my head about Diego, talking with customers about gender. I’m exhausted with all of it. I curl up on the couch, my head in Mia’s lap while she obligingly combs her fingers through my long hair.

Fun. How the hell am I supposed to make time for fun ?

Chapter Twelve

Diego

I'VE AVOIDED THE university often since that night at the drag show. Someone is going to notice all the time I don't spend on campus sooner or later, so I've forced myself into the library today, but I'm as jumpy as a skittish cat backed into a corner. I choose the table that sits farthest from everything, a nook in a back corner, then settle in with a stack of textbooks from the paltry bit of the history section that actually focuses on queer history.

The work is calming. I do a bit of prep for that Queer and Trans History class (trying very hard not to think about Avery the entire time) then move on to work for my own studies. I don't have a ton to work with based on what's available in the university library, however. And that's not a dig at C U of M itself. Their selection is actually pretty decent, but this is a vastly under-studied field. There isn't enough research on it, or enough people doing the research. That's why the field is so important. That's why people like Avery need to be mentored and guided.

But not by me.

Definitely not by me.

I'm no fit mentor for anyone. After what happened at the drag show, I should probably resign my position, pack my things and drive home. I don't deserve to be here after letting myself do that with a student. What was I even thinking?

My body answers before my mind can stop it, heat stirring in my gut, the same heat that sparked on that dark dance floor. When Avery took my hands and danced, I lost myself. I lost control. I let the music and the dark and Avery's touch lull me into believing we were far enough away from our real lives that I could violate every bit of ethics I know. If we were strangers on that dance floor, fine. But we weren't. We knew. We knew the entire time what we were doing. And we did it anyway.

I swallow hard. A book sits open before me, but I haven't read a single word in minutes. A cursor blinks condescendingly at me from a blank word document on my laptop. Even here in the library, I can do nothing but think about them. It doesn't matter whether I'm on campus or off, my mind inevitably loops back to those moments in the dark .

I force myself to focus, and even manage to take some notes and begin an outline of yet another paper I should be writing. The assignments never end, and the stress certainly isn't helping with my ... other predicament.

I'm still begging myself to focus when someone joins me at my table. They sit right next to me, in fact. The library must have filled up while I was busy thinking about things I shouldn't be thinking about. I ignore the other person, who's likely a student intent on ignoring me too, and finally turn to the textbooks and that outline taking shape on my dying laptop.

"I don't have cooties, you know."

I freeze when Avery speaks beside me. I was trying so hard not to look at the person next to me that it never crossed my mind that it could be them. Now, I turn my head just enough to sneak a glance at them. They're relaxed beside me, cheek perched against a fist as they smirk at me.

"What are you doing?" I say under my breath.

“Studying,” they say. “Like you, I assume. We both have classes at this university, if you haven’t noticed.”

“Why are you studying here ?” I say.

Maybe that’s rude, but I don’t care. My heart is beating way too fast. My shoulders are hunched like I can disappear into them like a turtle retreating into his shell. I’m barely looking at them, and even that is enough to coat my hands in sweat.

It’s only partially fear. I wish it was more than partially fear .

The patter in my chest is undeniable, as tangible as the heat pooling in my belly. My brain might be screaming red alert, but my body has a very different opinion of being this close to Avery again.

“I’m studying here,” Avery says coolly, “because you have half the books I need.”

I blink at the books scattered across the table. A lot of them are relevant to my graduate studies ... which means they’re probably relevant to Avery’s undergraduate studies. I was just bemoaning how small that section of this library is, so it shouldn’t be a surprise that Avery is looking for a lot of the same things I am. That doesn’t make me like it any better, though.

“You could use other books,” I say. “Or the internet or something.”

“I could, but I want those books,” Avery says.

They infuse extra meaning into every word, speaking in that silky, lilting way of theirs, that way that suggests so much more than whatever their words mean on the surface. I can’t not hear it, not with the way they smile at me as they speak.

“Avery, please,” I say.

“Relax,” they say. “I’m here to work. Same as you. It’s not like I knew you’d be here. How would I?”

“Then switch to another table and use other books.”

“I can’t. I really do need some of these.”

“Avery, come on. There must be other books. ”

“I’m not sure if you noticed, but the ‘incredibly gay history’ section isn’t exactly overflowing.”

I have noticed, but that doesn’t stop me from dislodging my glasses to pinch the bridge of my nose as I huff out a sigh. My body wars between assailing me with a headache and flushing head to toe. Closing my eyes barely holds off either reaction, but it’s like sandbags trying to hold back a hurricane. The defenses will crumble eventually.

I’m desperate to prevent that from happening. I can’t keep giving into this. It doesn’t matter if things would be different in different circumstances. These are our circumstances. I’m their TA; they’re my student. We don’t have the luxury of any other circumstances.

“We could work together,” Avery says.

“I’m working on my graduate degree. You’re still an undergrad.”

“That’s true. And yet...”

They don't have to finish the thought. Some piece of me knows they're right. In a field this small, there's ample overlap.

They sigh, exhausted with my reasonable refusals, and reach past me for one of the textbooks. They skim it swiftly, flipping back and forth between a few pages.

"I was using that," I protest.

"I saved your page. Relax."

They find a section near the back and stick a sticky tab on the page, then flip back to where I was reading .

"There," Avery says. "See? Right back to your spot. But when you're done, I need that later section."

I concede, and Avery seems satisfied at last. We both go back to our own tasks, and within a few minutes some of the tension melts out of my shoulders. I fall back into my work without realizing it, and my outline swells into something usable. I have a separate document full of quotes and citations. All I have to do now is weave it all together by writing the paper itself. I close the textbook, then remember that tab Avery placed in it.

"Oh. Right."

I slide the book over to Avery. Is it an accident that their hand brushes mine when they accept it, or did they orchestrate that flutter of fingers? They're so clever, so intelligent, so determined. If they wanted to touch me, even in the middle of the library, they would find a way.

They take the book without anything more than that light, potentially accidental

touch, opening up to their tab without comment. I'm giving them too much credit. I'm trying to blame this on them when I'm the one entirely at fault here. They're a student; they're not the one responsible for shutting this down.

For some reason, I don't leap up from my seat after that. I stay there beside Avery and start working on my paper for as long as my battery will last. I have my charger with me, but I don't plug it in just in case I need an excuse to flee .

Within minutes, I forget about the charger. I forget about fleeing. The silence that falls over our corner of the library is as comfortable as a blanket laid over our laps. We're both typing between flipping through one of the books in front of us, and soon it almost feels like we're working on the same paper rather than separate assignments.

They reach for one of the books and start flipping through it. My eyes are watery from staring at words on a bright screen for so long. I close my laptop when I notice the textbook Avery grabbed.

"You can find a better source than that," I say.

They raise an eyebrow at me. "Oh? What's wrong with this?"

"Nothing, but there are better sources if you're looking for first-hand accounts."

"Like what?"

There's no artifice this time. I don't know how I know, but I'm certain of it. So I lean a bit closer, edging into their space, and point at the page they were looking at.

"A lot of these kinds of reports ended up online. It was the early '90s, but some of the accounts survived. I know I'm supposed to tell you to use better sources, but you can find reliable sources if you dig around a little. Is your laptop connected to the library

Wi-Fi?”

Avery turns their laptop toward me. We start searching around. I even reach over and type in a couple things when I’m not sure how to explain it. I love these old accounts. A lot of them come from the queer bar and club scene from the ‘80s and ‘90s. A lot happened there away from the prying eyes of the rest of society.

“Wow,” Avery says. Their eyes are flickering around the screen like they can’t possibly read all of it quickly enough. “This is amazing. I need to read all of this.”

“I doubt you need all of it for your paper.”

“Not for my paper. Just for myself.”

My chest does some kind of alarming lurching thing at the thought of Avery sitting around reading these documents just for personal interest. Because it’s exactly the kind of thing I used to do.

Suddenly, they turn their wide eyes and huge grin on me, and it’s like getting hit with a stage light. I swallow, finally realizing how close I got so I could type on their computer. I’m leaning so far toward them that I can see every crease of their lips, and that conjures up a vivid memory of how soft those lips felt against mine.

I reel back, almost knocking myself out of my chair in my haste to retreat. Some of the light in Avery’s face fades.

“Sorry,” I say. “I forgot. I need to...”

The excuse withers. I know they don’t believe me. I don’t believe me. Those words are the flimsiest of barriers between us, and I scramble to run before the bulwark can break.

“Diego, wait,” Avery says. “It’s okay. ”

It’s not. It’s not okay. Every time I’m around them, I either cross the line or almost cross the line. I’ll take this “almost” as a victory, but it’s only going to stay an “almost” if I leave right now.

I sweep my laptop and the couple books that are mine into my bag, then jerk up out of my chair.

“You can use the rest,” I say.

It’s all I offer to Avery as a goodbye.

Chapter Thirteen

Avery

I WATCH DIEGO go. It's like watching a sand castle crumble. His frantic escape shatters something fragile within me, my weeks of hard work dissolving between my fingers into a pile of formless sand. He all but runs from the little table we shared, all but runs from the library itself, and I watch him until he disappears beyond the front doors.

For a while, I sit there staring at the websites Diego helped me find. Talking about research seemed to put him at ease. What changed at the end there? What scared him away? One moment he was relaxed and helpful; the next he looked like I had a knife to his throat. I know he's worried about this looking inappropriate to outside observers, but surely a TA can advise his student in the freaking library of all places ?

I close my laptop with a sigh. I was so happy to see him when I walked in here. I truly didn't plan it, but the moment I spotted him, I made a beeline for his table. Not only was I sure I wanted some of the books scattered around him, but I also wanted to see him. He's avoided me for days, and I just wanted a chance to show him that this is okay. The world didn't end because we danced together and shared a kiss. Okay, shared a few kisses. A few extremely hot kisses. But still! Nothing else happened, and the world is still spinning.

If only I could make him see that.

Maybe if we were strangers it would be fine. Maybe if I graduated, he would go for

it. Our current circumstances are temporary, and I'd bet anything that if we weren't stuck in this unfortunate situation Diego wouldn't be so reticent.

He certainly wasn't on that dance floor.

I inhale sharply, trying to flick aside the memory that has hounded my every thought since that night. It's not working, and I give up, packing up my things and gathering the books Diego left behind. I deposit them all in the returns bucket. If I need any of them again, they won't be hard to find since they all sit on the same shelf, but I suspect I'm going to spend a lot more time with those websites Diego showed me. I want to crawl through every word with Diego. Six years isn't that much time, but it might be just enough for him to have knowledge I lack. And besides that, he has experiences I certainly don't, growing up in that small town. I can't imagine what his little gay bar must be like, any more than he can probably imagine my high school LGBT club. It's all too easy to imagine us talking all night about this stuff, staying up late swapping anecdotes.

Right. Yeah. As though Diego would ever let that happen. These fantasies of mine will probably remain mere fantasies forever.

I hustle out of the library and head back toward home. I wanted to get some work done without distractions, but Diego proved a powerful distraction even after his hasty exit. Walking through the brisk fall air helps settle my mind, however. Leaves crunch under my feet as I wind my way through campus, avoiding the most practical and straightforward paths for a meandering course that lets me enjoy the changing colors before I exit the university and turn onto my street.

The house is quiet and empty when I return, but it won't stay this way. I have a few hours before I need to open the café for the night, which gives me a narrow window of time to get more work done. I settle at my kitchen table this time, a place where there's definitely no Diego to distract me, and attempt to focus.

Then my phone pings.

“Shit,” I hiss. “Shit, shit, shit.”

I went to the library because it’s close to the liberal arts building ... where I was supposed to meet up with a study group for another class. I completely forgot in my rush to wallow over Diego, and now I’m a solid fifteen minutes late and far enough from campus that there’s no point trekking back.

The text is the third one asking where I am. I type out a hasty apology, but I can’t claim I’m sick. If word spread to a customer, they might cancel their timeslot at the café. I don’t offer any excuse. My study group can think whatever they will. Whatever they come up with won’t be as bad as the truth.

“Ugh.” I set my phone aside and even close my laptop. Mia and Gabriel’s admonitions about how I’m spreading myself too thin and not having any fun pop into my mind. I’ve never been forgetful like this. I’ve never fumbled my way through life as much as I am now.

I give myself a few minutes to feel sorry for myself, but that’s all I can afford before I have to start thinking about the café. I should eat. I should wash the dishes. I should iron the slacks and vest I usually wear. I rush through a shower, then fly around my room getting things ready. How did I plan to do this after being at a study group? I suppose I would have simply shown up rumpled. It wouldn’t be the first time this semester.

I pull my hair into its usual long, black ponytail, throw on a dash of eyeliner, and call it good. Wait, did I eat? I can’t remember, so I grab a quick snack of leftover bakery goods before I rush outside to unlock the basement .

Within minutes, the others start showing up. Henry was good enough to go pick up

the baked goods from Montridge Munchies tonight. He sets them in the back behind the screens that separate the tables where customers sit from the area where we brew tea.

“Thanks, Henry,” I say.

Henry is the youngest part of this new crew. Someday, he could be in the position I’m in now, trying to keep this going without the help of anyone with history here. That doesn’t seem to worry him at all as he smiles brightly at me.

“No problem at all!” he says, ever the ray of sunshine.

I’m happy to have his infectious optimism around, especially as the other two members of this slapdash crew show up.

Cameron and Julian seem to be mid-argument when they make their way into the basement. Julian is smirking, but Cameron looks like he could throw a punch any second. I turn away, keeping my sigh to myself. As much as they might hate each other, whatever they have going on is working. I’ve contemplated asking them to work as a duo some night, the way Trent and Gabriel used to. Their dynamic seems to interest some of our customers. But part of me fears Cameron will explode if I even suggest it.

We start brewing tea for ourselves, making sure our own cups are ready and don’t take away time from our customers. Everyone sets up at their usual tables. Then it’s time. The first round of customers appears at the top of the stairs, and we welcome them in with our usual flourish.

There’s something comforting about the work. It’s familiar, and putting on my “café face” is comforting in a strange way. Café Avery isn’t pining hopelessly over their TA, forgetting study groups and meals in the process. Café Avery is lively and

interested. They're the old me, the me Gabriel and the others entrusted this place to before they graduated. I like this me better, but it's almost like I'm watching them from a distance during nights like this.

I get through the night without incident, and lately that counts as a victory. We clean up, and I let the guys go. We don't need to stay around for a meeting. Mia has been so on top of all of that kind of stuff that usually she can simply email out the schedule for the week and that's all we need.

It's a relief. I don't want to be their unofficial leader tonight. I don't want to have to seem like I have my shit together when I so desperately do not.

Yet when I return to the house, I'm a little disappointed to find my couch empty. I could use a bit of Mia time, but it would be selfish to drag her over here for no reason. I'm sure she has other things to do with her life than deal with me. As she likes to remind me, we're young. We're in college. She's probably out having all the fun she constantly tells me I should have.

I lock up and trudge upstairs, shedding my nice clothing in favor of comfortable, cozy things. I crawl into bed early, run down from the day. Then I lie there scrolling through social media, zoning out as timelines flash by delivering news, images, hot takes, whatever people want to fling onto the internet tonight.

When I grow bored of it, I open my texts instead, rereading the terse message I got from Diego the night he met me at the drag show. I yearn to make use of this phone number. I've already saved it in my address book, but if I remind him that we once exchanged numbers he'll probably block me.

I toss the phone onto the mattress and roll over so I can shout into my pillow. No matter how busy I am, I can't stop thinking about him. There's an easy solution to this, if Diego would simply stop pretending he doesn't feel the same. I know he wants

me. That kiss wasn't an accident. We nearly caused a scene on that dance floor, and no matter how much he wants to pretend it didn't happen, I know the memory is hounding him just as much as it's hounding me. Why else would he work so hard to avoid me?

I sit up with a jerk. Screw that. He wants to avoid me, fine. I don't need him. There are plenty of other queer people around here who won't be so hung up on what other people think. I snatch up my phone before I can spend another second thinking about Diego. I'm not going to beg him to want me. Gabriel and Mia are right. I should be getting out there and doing what I want, having fun, hooking up, making mistakes.

Mistakes aside from Diego, that is.

I snatch up my phone and search for Mia's number. I type out a message swiftly, before I can think about it, before I can talk myself out of it by remembering how much other shit I should be doing.

Okay , I write. I'm ready. Let's go out. I don't care where. You said you knew a place?

She responds almost immediately.

Finally!!! Yes, I know a great place. We can't drink but we can get in and dance. It's going to be so great.

I don't know about "so great," but it'll be necessary, at least for me. I let Mia gush about how cool the place is, how awesome the music is, how great this night is going to be. I don't voice any of my fears, don't tell her this adventure is more to get someone out of my system than to go out and have fun. Maybe if I'm lucky I'll do both.

We set a date and time. I put a reminder on my phone so I can't lose track of it among the billion other things I'm supposed to be doing. I'm already stressing out about losing a night of studying for this, but if I don't get Diego off my mind, no amount of studying will save me.

Chapter Fourteen

Diego

AFTER THE INCIDENT in the library, I start avoiding campus again. So when Leo bursts through the door to our apartment, he finds me hunched on the floor with books all around me and my laptop sitting on the coffee table.

“This is the absolute saddest thing I’ve ever witnessed,” he says.

“A grad student studying?”

“A grad student studying on Saturday night , which is what he does every Saturday night .”

Leo throws his keys at our kitchen counter and strides in, plopping onto the couch and sprawling in the way only a straight man can.

“Come on,” he says. “Time to shut the books for the night. I’m taking you out. ”

I shoot him a skeptical look. “I’m not sure you and I are interested in the same establishments.”

“That’s why we’re going to this queer bar I know of over in Newark.”

“What? Newark? Queer bar?”

“Those are the words I said, yes,” Leo says. He stands and slaps me on the shoulder. “Finish what you’re doing. I’m claiming first shower, but when I’m done I better find you out here pre-gaming.”

“Leo, I can’t. I have too much to do.”

“I’m going to stop you right there,” he cuts in. “You’ve been here an entire month and I’ve never once seen you have fun. This is non-negotiable.”

I do shut up then, because he doesn’t know about the drag show, he doesn’t know just how much “fun” I had that night, and I’m not eager to tell him.

Against my better judgment, I let Leo boss me around. Within an hour, we’ve both showered and changed. I even down a couple drinks of cheap whiskey. Leo abstains so he can drive, and it only hits me to regret this when I’m in his car and we’re leaving Montridge behind. The lights feel even more voluminous with my head faintly swimming. We’re heading toward New York City, toward a place that seems more like something out of a story than a real location to me. So many millions of people in one spot. It’s unfathomable. It’s terrifying.

It’s exciting.

The thought arrives in Avery’s voice, bright and enthusiastic, and I shake it away.

“You doing okay there?” Leo says. “Don’t get sick in my car.”

“It was a couple drinks,” I say. “I’m not sick.”

“Hey, I don’t know how you do it in those small towns. Maybe that was a lot for you.”

“If you think we don’t drink far, far harder than that in small towns then you know nothing about small towns.”

Leo laughs and drops the subject. We leave the highway, but the roads we turn onto seem just as busy and chaotic. We’re in some sort of city, or would Leo call this a “town” too? It seems too large and sprawling for that. When Leo parks, we exit onto a sidewalk crammed between buildings along a four-lane road.

“The bar is this way,” Leo says, taking the lead.

The dark is liquid around us, a writhing, inky thing, like a snake slipping between my hands. It’s vast and terrifying and full of possibilities.

Leo steers us toward one of those possibilities. Club music thumps out of a black door set into a building painted entirely black. I would have missed it if it weren’t for the bouncer standing in front of it checking IDs.

Thank God. If there’s someone checking IDs, that means the only people here will be at least twenty-one. Avery’s twenty. There’s no possible way they’ll be here tonight. Even if they were twenty-one, it would be some kind of statistical marvel for us both to end up at this club tonight.

I catch myself relaxing at that thought. Nothing weird will happen tonight. Heck, maybe I’ll even meet someone who isn’t my student. I’m not against it. It can’t be that different from my gay bar back home, can it?

Yes. Yes, it can.

The moment the bouncer waves Leo and I inside, I realize just how different this bar can be from what I’m familiar with.

The inside sports nearly as much black paint as the exterior. Multi-colored lights flash through a big main room that's mostly dance floor. A bar sits to one side, but there's also a hallway leading to, I assume, more rooms and more bars and more dancing.

And the people. I'm not sure I've ever seen so many people in one room all at the same time. The place is absolutely packed, bodies from wall to wall, all of them cloaked in concealing darkness until the lights flash over them to paint them in neon hues. They're like something out of a cartoon or a dream, all these unfathomable people either pitched into darkness or flaring as bright as Christmas lights.

Leo is the straight guy here, yet I'm the one feeling out of place as we shoulder our way toward the bar. A lot of people are wearing leather or studded belts or harnesses over bare skin. The amount of dyed hair could keep every salon in the state in business, and perhaps does. A lot of them have shaved off part of their hair, but only part.

"What do you want to drink?" Leo shouts when we reach the bar.

I shrug, too overwhelmed to think. Leo flags down the bartender and orders something, I have no idea what, and I go back to observing the place. It's just so ... so much. So much everything.

Leo nudges me and hands me a glass of what looks like whiskey. He clinks his glass against mine.

"Don't worry," he says. "I'm only having one. We'll dance it off before driving anywhere."

I nod. I'm not worried about Leo's sobriety tonight. What's really here for him besides a drink and some dancing? I didn't actually realize straight guys did this, but Leo seems completely at ease, even when some guy sidles up to the bar and offers to

buy him another drink. He's not freaked out or angry or offended or any of the things I've learned to expect from a straight guy. He simply declines and goes back to bopping to the music while we drink.

"Hey, let's check out the other rooms," he says.

Other rooms?

I nearly choke on my drink. Is this not enough? But before I know it, Leo is leading me down that hallway running beside the bar and we find, as promised, more rooms .

The first one is soaked in red light and playing deeper, slower music. The people here are getting so shamelessly handsy that I urge Leo to move on quickly.

Stairs lead us into a basement where three more rooms await. One has trippy, psychedelic lights whirling on the ceiling. One is far too well lit and bright. The last one has contraptions hanging from the ceiling and an awful lot of people in an awful lot of leather.

We opt for the psychedelic room, and head in with whatever remains of our drinks. Once we start moving around a bit, the lights washing over us, I have to admit that I catch myself getting into it. Something about the constantly shifting colors pairs well with the alcohol I've had tonight. I sink into the flow of the whole thing, dancing with Leo and the strangers filling the room.

"Hey, look at you," Leo says. "I knew you remembered how to have fun, but I'll confess you were scaring me for a minute."

"It's not that I don't want to have fun," I say. "It's just..."

Leo cocks his head to the side. "Something wrong?"

“No. Not really. I just... I did go out one night. You remember that drag show I mentioned?”

Leo’s eyebrows creep up, but he just nods. This is not the right place to talk about this. I probably shouldn’t talk to anybody ever about this. But the whiskey and the lights and the dancing and the darkness have loosened me up, tricking me into lowering my defenses. A piece of me is desperate to expel this secret and let Leo judge me for it, see how appalled and disgusted he is when he knows what I’m really like.

“Okay, well, I went to the drag show,” I say. “And ... my student was there.”

“Okay. Yeah. You said it was their idea.”

“It was. And it was great. The show, I mean. It was really fun. I do think it’s ... valuable or whatever.”

If I was sober I might be able to soften the blow of what I’m about to admit, but I’m not and I can’t. It just comes out.

“We danced afterward,” I say. “They asked me to dance. And we ... it might have gone a little past dancing.”

Leo’s eyes widen. I cringe, waiting for the hammer to fall.

“They asked you to dance,” Leo says. “And you said yes?”

I cringe even as I nod.

“Was it fun?”

“Yeah,” I admit. “It was. But it’s totally inappropriate. I’m probably going to get fired or worse.”

Leo shocks me by laughing. He claps me on the shoulder, then leads me out of the psychedelic room and into the hallway where it’s a little quieter. He never lets go of my shoulder.

“Listen, man,” he says, “I’m not saying it’s a smart plan, but the world didn’t end, did it? It seems like it’s okay.”

“It’s not okay. What I did is not okay.”

“If you weren’t a TA and you were only here to study, would it be okay?”

“Sure,” I say, “but I’m not only here to study.”

“Not disagreeing. I’m just saying. Maybe you should wait a semester or something. Let the ... conflict of interest work itself out. Then see where things stand. It’s not like this is a kid. They’re almost your age.”

“Six years.”

“You make that sound like six decades.”

“It might as well be as long as I’m their TA,” I groan.

Leo squeezes my shoulder, but he looks sympathetic and not reproachful, which is something of a surprise. Part of me wants to try what he suggested. If we wait a semester will there still be something there? Will Avery still be interested? I’d need to be cautious regardless. If I’m working as a TA at all then hooking up with a student is an ethics violation at best, but at least I wouldn’t have that specific

student's grades in my hands.

"Let's go upstairs," Leo says. "You need to dance with a stranger tonight."

I'm not feeling as enthusiastic about that as I was a few moments ago, but I follow Leo anyway. Our drinks are empty, and we leave them on a table along the hall with other empties. Then we head back up the stairs.

We have to pass through that strange red room before we reach the front of the establishment. But we hardly make it two steps into the main room before I stop dead and grab Leo by his sleeve. He stops short, confusion knotting his brows when he looks back at me.

"What—"

"It's them," I say.

He looks where I'm looking, looks in the direction of the person who has my feet cemented to the floor and my blood running cold. They've stopped as well, and a girl who looks as confounded as Leo is cocking her head at them.

I swallow. Avery smiles at me from across the bar. Before I can recover, they're marching toward me.

"That's them?" Leo says. "That's your student who you—"

"Yes," I cut in before he can say it out loud. "That's them. Shit."

I'm frozen with terror. Avery's eyes are deadset on me. They're cutting through the crowd on their way to me, and I don't know what to do.

Before I can decide, Leo shoves me forward.

Chapter Fifteen

Avery

I ONLY MAKE it a step or two into the club when I pull up short.

Mia nearly leaves me behind until I grasp her arm. She squeaks in surprise, then furrows her brows at me.

“Come on, Avery,” she says. “We shouldn’t linger by the door. My friend got us in but we’re supposed to be low-key so we don’t get her in trouble.”

I can’t respond. I can barely hear Mia over the static in my head.

Across the bar, staring at me wide-eyed, is Diego. He looks as shocked as I feel, but his surprise is tinged with terror .

“It’s him,” I say.

“Him? What?”

Mia follows my gaze, but the sight of Diego gaping at me from across the club doesn’t mean much to her. I haven’t said a word to anyone, not even her or Gabriel, so she justifiably has no idea why I’m freaking out.

“Avery?” she says.

“It’s...” I shake myself and force myself to face her. “Mia, there’s something I haven’t told you. I ... I’ve been seeing someone. Well, no, not seeing him. Trying to see him.”

“I am so confused,” she says.

“Sorry. It’s complicated. There’s this guy and we made out this one time and I know he wants me but he won’t admit it and somehow he’s here right now and I don’t know what to do.”

Mia’s eyebrows rise. She looks between me and Diego on the other side of the room. Something shifts in her expression.

“It’s that guy who’s watching you like there’s no one else in the entire club?” she says.

I nod. I like the way she described that. I like the thought that Diego is focused only on me out of everyone in this busy club.

“So what’s the problem?” Mia says. “Go get your man.”

What’s not the problem? I’m scared if I attempt a single step, Diego will bolt like a frightened deer. And there’s the whole matter of him being my TA, but I’m not going to reveal that to Mia. I’ll keep Diego’s confidence, even if he never knows.

Mia gets frustrated with my dithering and pushes me toward Diego. “I’ll catch up with you later,” she says. “Or not.”

She sounds more hopeful than me, a lot more hopeful, but her push works. My feet start moving on their own, propelling me inexorably toward Diego, who hasn’t moved or looked away. Mia vanishes into the crowd, becoming part of the blur of

bodies and colors at the edges of my vision. The music is a tidal pull; with every thump, it pushes me forward like waves nudging me toward the shore. I don't even realize there's someone with Diego until a guy pats Diego on the shoulder and then melts away into the crowd.

I stop before Diego. He swallows so hard I can see his throat working.

"Friend?" I say, nodding in the direction the guy went.

"Roommate," Diego says, so thin and insubstantial it's hard to hear over the clamor of the club. "How are you here?"

"Nice to see you too," I say. "Mia has been trying to get me to go out all semester. I finally took her up on it."

"Why this place? How is this happening?" Diego speaks like he's talking to some dream apparition and not a real person.

"Luck, I suppose," I say .

"Of every club..."

"Okay, well, first of all, of every queer club. And second, Mia's friend works at this one. Also it's pretty old and pretty famous. If two people were going to randomly pick a queer club in the area, this would probably be at the top of both lists. So it's not that unlikely if you think about it."

Diego shakes his head, but I'm not sure if he's shaking it at me or himself. I can tell he's panicking, despite his cool exterior. The fear is written all over his face. It dances in his dark eyes and tightens the line of his tempting lips. Knowing how those lips taste is making it hard to focus on anything else. Already, my shock is gone,

replaced with the heat that simmers inside me every time I get anywhere near this guy. I can tell he feels it too, and tonight I'm not letting him run away.

"Come dance with me," I say.

"Avery," he says, a warning, a reprimand.

"Our friends already saw us. There's no one else here who knows us."

"If we could both end up here from Montridge, anybody could. You said it yourself. Top of the list."

Okay, screwed myself a little with that one.

"Then let's go somewhere else," I say.

"I can't dance with you," Diego says.

"Why not?"

"Because—" He stops himself, biting down on his words, then continues in a voice so quiet and low it's almost a growl. "Because of what happened last time."

So he has been thinking about what happened at the drag show. I knew it. There was no other explanation for how weird he acted afterward.

"All the more reason to dance with me," I say, stepping minutely closer.

Diego has to look down at me from this distance, and I don't hate that. I don't hate it at all.

“If we waited a semester, or a year...” Diego says.

I sense his defenses crumbling and trail a finger up his shirt from ribs to chest. He shivers from that single finger gliding up his body.

“I can’t wait until the end of the semester,” I say, “and I don’t think you can either.”

“Avery...”

I trail that finger across his chest and down one arm. Where the shirt ends, I meet the skin of his bicep, more toned than I might have expected. I make my way down his forearm, then take his hand in mine. Diego grips my hand in return after a beat, and I know I have him.

I start to make for the dance floor, but Diego tugs on my hand.

“Downstairs. The more private rooms,” he says.

That sends a thrill and a burst of heat through me. Private rooms? I’ve heard about this place, but this is my first time here, so I have no idea where we’re going when Diego leads the way down a hall beside the bar. We head down a set of stairs and find another hallway. Diego tugs me into the first room along the hall, a far smaller space than anything upstairs. Trippy lights whirl around the room, making the entire space feel like the inside of a kaleidoscope. The music here is slow and sexy and deep, some pulsing psychedelic beat. There are only a handful of people in here. Three sit on the floor in a corner, talking with their heads close together. One woman stands in the middle of the room swaying and lifting her arms, eyes closed and head tilted back. The final occupants are a couple dancing close together. The dark and the lights almost make them look like a single being.

It’s the perfect place to go unnoticed.

No one looks up when we enter. I sense Diego relaxing a little as we find a bit of space for ourselves. He turns toward me, still holding my hand, and some of the fear is gone, replaced with a simmering heat I know all too well.

I don't waste any time. After waiting so long to touch him again, my body is burning. Getting any kind of permission to be close to him sends me rushing toward him. I throw my arms around his neck and let my body fall against his. Diego catches me, hands going to my hips, and I'm so glad I chose a cute skirt and leggings for this. It feels incredible having Diego feel along the waistband of that skirt, hands threatening to roam lower. I can tell without another word passing between us that he's into the look, and that only swells my confidence when I pull him down to me.

He doesn't resist the kiss. Once again, as soon as I've managed to drag him away from the threat of the university, he opens himself to me. His mouth is hot and greedy against mine, proclaiming loudly that he's been waiting and hoping for this just as desperately as I have. I bite at his bottom lip and pull, so insatiable I can't contain it in mild mannered kissing any longer, and Diego makes a low, rumbling sound that vibrates through me.

Our attempt at "dancing" truly didn't last long. We're barely moving as we stand in the strange little room and make out under the whirling lights. When we separate for breath, our foreheads end up together, and Diego's hands turn brave. They slide around my hips, but I can feel the hesitation and stand up on my tip toes to force his touch lower.

I slam my mouth into his in time to catch a gasp. As I delve into his mouth, his hands grasp me more firmly, feeling for my ass through the skirt. Being on my tip toes has forced me to rely on him for balance, not that I mind. I'm all but falling against him, my tongue in his mouth, his hands on my ass.

How can he deny this? The second we were alone we started grabbing for each other

ravenously. I'm panting into his mouth, breathless no matter how many times I interrupt the kissing to gasp in air, and my cock feels like it's making a tent of my poor skirt. He must be able to feel it with our bodies like this, and he's not exactly reeling away in horror.

I fall back to flat feet, and Diego's hands ride up, taking some of my skirt with them. I curl a hand in his hair, clinging to him as white hot desire burns through me.

"Please get out of here with me," I say, nearly begging. I have no shame about it. I need to have this man tonight.

A flinch flickers over Diego's face.

"I might lose my mind if you say no," I say. "I know you want me. I can feel it. Literally. And you can feel me. Please, Diego. Please say yes."

Diego draws a shaky breath. He slides his hand from my waist to my neck, cupping my face to draw me into a long, slow, deep kiss. It's unlike all the kisses that have come before it. It still has that heat, that overflowing passion, but there's something more thoughtful behind this kiss, like Diego is kissing me in search of an answer he can't put in words.

I don't know what he finds, if he finds anything at all, but eventually he eases away, still cupping my face. His eyes bore into mine, then he nods, very slowly, almost tentatively.

"Okay," he says.

My heart leaps like it's making a bid for freedom. I can't quite believe I heard that right, but Diego lets go of me to take my hand and lead me out of the club. I have barely enough wherewithal to reach for my phone, tucked into the small bag slug

across my chest, and type out a fumbling message to Mia letting her know I'm leaving.

She responds with a wink, a peach and an eggplant.

Real helpful, Mia.

I barely get the message off before Diego and I are suddenly outside on the club. Smokers mill on the sidewalk. None of them bother to notice us, but Diego pulls us around the corner anyway before he calls for a rideshare.

That's the moment I finally believe him. A car is on the way. A car that's going to take us to my house.

After all this running, I've finally caught him.

Chapter Sixteen

Diego

I DON'T KNOW what I'm thinking. I don't know what I'm doing. But when the rideshare pulls up I get into it and let Avery give the driver their address.

The lurch of the car pulling away from the club is a sobering slap. The whiskey I drank tonight is long out of my system, leaving me horribly clear-headed as Avery and I sit in the backseat not speaking. After a few awkward seconds, Avery takes my hand.

It's weird how comforting that is.

It's just us in this car. And the driver, but he hasn't said a word and seems content to ignore us for the duration of the drive. We exist in this temporary liminal space between the club and our real lives, and in that bubble of peace I find myself ... calm .

And also curious.

I can't help looking at Avery beside me. The lights flashing by on the highway offer me a better view of them than the lights in the club ever did. Their hair is sleek in its long ponytail. Their slim legs are encased in leggings, their skirt covering their lap. They're so vibrantly unlike anyone from my gay bar back home, all those men in jeans and cowboy boots and plaid. Back home, wearing a hoodie instead of a denim jacket made me downright flamboyant compared to those men.

A jolt of doubt streaks through me. What if Avery does things differently than those guys back home? What if everything I think I know about sex is wrong? Is it different because they're non-binary?

Avery squeezes my hand. "What's wrong?"

They can always tell so quickly when my mind slides toward panicky anxiety.

"Nothing, I just..." I shoot a look toward the driver, still happily ignoring us. "You'll tell me if anything ... isn't working?"

Avery quirks one eyebrow, smiling with only half of their mouth. "I'll tell you all about what's working, but I wouldn't worry about it."

Their eyes rake up and down me, and the heat of that gaze burns away some of my doubt. They certainly seem to have no concerns about my past experiences.

I swear the drive back to Montridge takes forever. At least it affords me an opportunity to text Leo and let him know I left with someone. He texts back a thumbs up. I guess I'll find out later if he's mad at me for bouncing. It's increasingly difficult to care about my new roommate as the car puttters down Avery's street and pulls up to the same curb I broke down beside a month ago.

Avery thanks the driver and tugs me out of the car almost before it stops moving. They drag me toward their house, quickly unlocking the front door and letting me inside.

"Should I take my shoes o—"

I don't finish before Avery kisses me so hard I slam against their door. They steal my breath before breaking away.

“I don’t care about the fucking shoes,” they say.

They don’t wait another moment, taking me by the wrist and pulling me up the stairs to the second story. I slept up here that night when I broke down, but we pass the little guest room where I stayed that time, opting instead for the large bedroom at the end of the hall.

Avery’s bedroom.

I don’t know why this shocks me. Maybe because it’s real. I actually said yes. I’m here. This is going to happen.

I should feel way more guilty than I do.

Instead, I’m watching the way Avery’s hips move, reveling in their strong grip on my wrist as they pull me insistently toward the large bed in the center of the room .

We fall onto it, and Avery wastes no time crawling on top of me. I’ve touched them before, but I’ve never felt their whole body this way. They lay atop me kissing me, and I can’t help letting my hands wander to their hips, to that skirt they looked so damn good in tonight. They groan when I muss it trying to tug it aside, boldly pushing their ass into my hands. I raise one knee, trying to relieve the pressure building in my jeans, but that only places Avery between my legs, their body pressed along mine.

They tug on my lip as they end the kiss, finally releasing me with a pop.

“I’d say it’s all working so far,” they say.

A trickle of pride sneaks into my chest at how breathy their voice is. It’s softer, too, straddling the line of ambiguity, and that does more to me than I thought it would. I

can feel Avery's excitement against me, but that doesn't make them one thing or the other to me, not really. In the moment when that distinction should feel the most blunt, the most unavoidable, I can't help feeling instead like I'm experiencing their truest self, a person who defies easy binaries.

"You're thinking," Avery says. "You shouldn't be thinking. You should be getting undressed."

I reach up, ruining the playfulness of the moment by stroking my thumb along their cheek. "I'm thinking that you're extraordinary."

Out of all that's happened tonight, this is the thing that manages to surprise Avery, as though they don't realize how uncommon and brilliant they are. They smile shyly, casting their gaze down for a moment so their lashes fan over their cheeks. Then they recover, fixing me with a look that screams their determination.

They sit back and peel off their shirt, and I'm almost speechless when I get a glimpse of their smooth, narrow chest. It's just a body, I tell myself, a body like a lot of other bodies, but for some reason I can't stop drinking in every creamy plane of this one. I can't stop my mouth from watering at the sight of all that skin on display for me.

Then they start unzipping their skirt, and I scramble to sit up so I can get my own coat and shirt off, eager to keep up. I set my glasses aside, vision going slightly blurry. I don't know what I could possibly have to offer in comparison to them, yet the moment my chest is bare, they size me up and shamelessly chew on their bottom lip.

They move in a frenzy. Before I get to appreciate them, their skirt and leggings are coming off, their shoes thumping to the floor. They shove me backward so I fall onto the mattress, then claw at my jeans and shoes and every other bit of cloth that stands in their way. I might be older, but it's clear I'm not in charge as Avery strips me

down.

“Wow, you are so...”

They don't finish, as though overcome by the sight of my body, but that's such a ridiculous notion I almost laugh. They're ... they're surreal . They're gorgeous. They're a fantasy. Avery climbs over me and settles on my thighs and even though I can feel their solid weight on my legs, they're like something from a dream. They let down their hair, and it spills past their shoulders like ink staining marble. I want to reach up and grab it, but Avery is snatching something off a nightstand, and I realize I can't simply lie here stunned by them; I should probably participate in this.

Avery squirts lube into their hands. They hunch over me, propping one hand on the bed, but using the other to grab themselves — and me. I suck in a sharp breath when my cock is suddenly squeezed against theirs. Avery pants above me, and I'm not doing much better myself. My whole body reels from the contact, as though I've never been touched this way before. But things with those guys at the bar back home were never quite like this.

“Diego.”

Avery breathes my name out like a sigh, and it makes me want to grab all that inky hair and pull them to me even harder. Before I can, they start moving their hand, and I forget about anything else.

Their slick touch squeezes us more tightly together, making a ludicrously lewd noise along the way. Avery rocks into the feeling, unabashedly using their hand and my cock for their pleasure. I rest my hands on their thighs, feeling the motion of their body, riding it until I find my hips shifting with theirs, their long hair falling around us like a satin curtain as they rock more forcefully.

They were hunching over me, but as the pressure mounts, they sit back, arching and shifting like they're riding my cock and not stroking it in their hand. My grip goes to their narrow waist, moving them up and down, feeling the shock of momentum that rolls through their whole body and down into mine.

As their moans ring out, I lose whatever fragile grasp I had on shame or reluctance. I'm chasing them with my body, scrambling to keep up as they bounce on my thighs and groan and pump their hand along our cocks. Pre-cum has started to mix with the lube, making a slick mess of us that will surely only get worse.

And soon.

The edge is so close I can taste it, but I don't want this to end. I don't want to stop watching them move like that on top of me. Caught up in the moment, my cock can't really tell the difference between this and if they were actually riding me. The heat, the pressure, the beautiful view — they're similar enough for my overheating brain to conflate.

I grip them harder as tension barrels into me, threatening to push me past the point of control. I arch up at them, and they moan sweetly, strangling some version of my name as they do. I'm no longer sure if I'm moving them up and down or simply following them, caught in their wild exuberance as they fuck into their hand, cock grinding against mine. Blinding friction forces me to squeeze my eyes shut, and I squirm as it all becomes so big I'm like a rubber band about to snap.

"Avery," I groan.

I meant it as a warning, but Avery seems to take it as encouragement. They moan in response, and their hand somehow moves faster, stroking so hard it teeters on the edge of painful. I'm so overcome with sensation that I'm not truly sure I'd notice if it crossed that line. All I know is the fire consuming me and the precipitous drop

looming ever closer.

Avery shouts, actually shouts . I've never heard someone yell during sex, but their voice rings out loud and brash and I assume they're coming, but I can't see it, can't stop to wonder about it, can't do anything but groan and grind my teeth together as that rubber band snaps and my body shatters.

Avery's hand guides us through it, every thunderous drop and spurting exclamation. I don't open my eyes throughout any of it, gasping for breath through every shuddering beat of an orgasm I barely have words for.

Finally, my body relaxes, bone weary after that performance. I sink onto the bed, and though my eyes creak open, I don't make any other attempt to move.

Thankfully, Avery is a lot less useless than me. They leave the bed, and for a brief, terrifying moment, I almost call out for them to return. They leave the room, but it's only to head into an attached bathroom. When they come back to the bed, they have a damp washcloth, and they start using it to clean my chest and abs.

"I can do it," I say. I don't mean to make them baby me like this.

They shoot me glare. "Let me do it."

It's not a request, and I don't dare argue. Avery patiently cleans me up, quite obviously taking their time and keeping me in their bed. Yet as they work I realize I never truly intended to leave it tonight.

I take them by the wrist as they go on wiping a spot that was already clean. They stop, looking up at me, worry pinching their expression.

"Could I stay here tonight?" I say.

Their face changes, shifting back into that open, radiant expression I've gotten to glimpse tonight. They smile — a real smile with both sides of their mouth — and nod as though they can't find the words. Avery tosses the dirty washcloth onto the floor and throws back the covers, ushering us both into their bed. As they settle against my side, their head on my chest, I'm surprised to find myself calm and peaceful. I've given into something I will probably come to regret, but the truth is that Avery is extraordinary, and they wanted me, and I wanted them, and it was ... it was incredible. My body is too blissed out on feel-good brain chemicals to figure out how to regret that .

Avery is petting their fingers through the dark hair on my chest. "You okay?" they say.

"Yes," I reply shortly. I don't know where to begin expressing everything this night came with.

"I'm glad that we did this," they say quietly.

I swallow. When I don't respond, Avery pushes themselves up onto their arms to peer down at me. Their long hair falls past their shoulders, and at last I can reach it. It's just as soft as I imagined when I wind a strand between my fingers.

"Are you glad we did this?" Avery says. "Or are you going to run away from me again?"

The hurt in their voice plunges me into cold water. I dig for the right words to salvage this moment.

"I'm glad we did this," I say. "I am. But I'm also trying to get my graduate degree. This was my dream school, my longshot. I didn't expect to get in, and the first thing I did when I got here was ... was fall for you. I could lose it all. I could lose

everything.”

“I know,” Avery says. “I understand. I really do.”

“I don’t want to run from you. You’re...” I release that strand of hair to cup Avery’s face. They lean into the touch, eyes fluttering shut. “You’re incredible. But this is dangerous.”

Avery turns their head to kiss my palm. “I know it is. But we can be careful. There’s no one in this house but us. We aren’t on campus. We’re alone. It’s okay. ”

I hope that’s true. I really hope it is. But the fear is trickling back in as we discuss this, a slow drip of poison.

“And you’re here,” Avery continues. “So some part of you is willing to risk it. Some part of you ... likes me.”

It’s easy to smile at this bit, at least. I pull them down to me, kissing them yet again. I don’t think I could ever get sick of this mouth.

“All of me likes you, Avery,” I say.

And all of me is terrified of you.

Chapter Seventeen

Avery

WHEN I WAKE UP, he's still here.

I know before I even open my eyes. Diego's arm lies over me, a heavy, tangible weight that tells me he's here, holding me as we cuddle in my bed. We fell asleep this way shortly after that conversation about Diego's fears. Despite his trepidation, he didn't run. He stayed here with me, and the truth of that is ringing through me like the final perfect note of a favorite song.

I tense when he stirs, but he simply yawns and kisses my shoulder, face buried against my back. It's Sunday morning. Neither of us have anywhere we need to be. Which leaves me powerfully tempted to turn around in his arms and start kissing him again. I didn't quite get enough of that last night .

But I don't want to push it, not when Diego actually seems relaxed. As much as I led the charge when we got here, I'm going to have to allow him to drive this morning. The more I cling, the more it'll ignite all those fears he confessed last night.

"Morning," I say.

"Morning." His gravelly morning voice vibrates against me and stirs up a flurry of pleasure in my gut, like a flock of birds taking flight.

I wait, and he simply lies there holding me. I don't mind; really, I could do this all

day if he wanted to, but eventually he lets go with a grumble and forces himself to sit up.

He's beautifully rumped when I drag myself up and get a look at him. His hair juts out in crazy angles. His eyes are bleary, his glasses resting on a nightstand. The warmth of deep, peaceful sleep glows in his tan cheeks. Best of all, he's still naked, so even with the sheets covering part of him, I get another look at his firm chest and the dark hair scrawled across it. It's all I can do not to coast my fingers through that hair, and I catch myself biting my lip to aid my efforts at self-control.

"Could I use your bathroom?" he says.

"Of course. Right over there. Albert left some new toothbrushes in the cabinet under the sink if you want to brush your teeth. There should be some other toiletries as well. Take whatever you need. Albert liked to stock up for guests. "

"Albert?" He rubs at his eyes before getting his glasses on.

"Guy who owns the house. What? You don't think I bought a house, do you?"

"I thought maybe you were renting it or something. The night I broke down you said you were taking care of it."

I burst into laughter and catch him watching me do it. A smile tugs at my mouth no matter how hard I try to tamp it down.

"Are you in the mood for a shower?" I say. "Plenty of towels and stuff."

"I don't have anything to change into," Diego says. "It's okay. I don't want to inconvenience you."

“Dummy,” I say. “I’m asking if you’re in the mood for a shower with me .”

I’ve never had to be this blunt with a guy before, but Diego’s eyebrows flicker up and down with surprise. He’s watching me closely, his eyes skating over my lips, then across my bare chest.

“Oh my God, come on,” I say, before he can torture us both by debating it any longer.

I slip out of bed, heedless of the fact I’m completely naked. It’s not like he didn’t see it all last night. I hurry around the bed and take Diego’s hand, tugging him from under the sheets. He joins me on my trek to the bathroom, and I flick on the shower. We scrub our teeth side-by-side while the water heats up, then I fetch some towels and set them on the heated bar beside the shower (Albert really tricked this place out while he lived here), and Diego sets aside the glasses he just put back on.

The shower is large, but it feels far smaller when we both squeeze inside. The glass doors fog over from the steam, but there’s nothing to obscure my view once I get Diego under the spray. The water soaks his hair, turning it pitch black and sticking it to his forehead and cheeks. He tilts his head back and sweeps hair and water out of his face, and good God, it’s like something out of a shampoo commercial. He’s tan and gorgeous and soaking wet, and I get to look at all of him from mere inches away. I have to work very hard not to let my eyes go right to his dick, but fortunately there’s plenty else to drink in — like his pecs or his abs or the slight flex of his arms when he brushes his hair back.

With his hair out of the way, he opens his eyes and finds me watching him. I snap my mouth shut, but the damage is done. He caught me red-handed. The slightest of smiles pulls valiantly at his mouth, but he stuffs it away so quickly I question if it was ever there at all.

“Do you need the hot water?” he says.

I have to repeat the sentence in my head a couple times to figure out what it means. I'm not exactly functioning at maximum capacity while naked, wet Diego stands within touching distance .

"No. I mean, yes. Probably. Yeah. I should do that," I say.

He laughs, one short little noise that doesn't even pry his mouth open, and swaps spots with me. The swapping forces us to touch. Diego steadies me with his hands on my arms, and I almost give up the charade and throw him against the wall of the shower. The only thing that holds me back is my determination to prove to him that we can do this, that I'm not going to jump him at every opportunity. We can be normal. Well, as normal as two people sharing a shower can be. I don't want to push the sex thing, though. I have a strong suspicion that if I do it'll lend credence to all his worst fears.

The water soaks my hair to my neck and back. It reaches nearly to my waist when it's loose and wet. I stand there wondering what I should do next, and Diego reaches for me, slipping a lock of wet hair through his hands.

"Turn around," he says. "I'll wash it."

"Oh," I say stupidly.

I turn around, facing the faucet, and Diego gets closer. There's only three bottles in here: Shampoo, conditioner and body wash. He chooses the correct one, I presume, and then his hands are in my hair, working in the shampoo. His fingers are strong as they massage my scalp, and I tilt toward the feeling, not realizing for several seconds that he's working in the shampoo far more than strictly necessary. He trails his fingers down, combing the shampoo through my hair, then comes back up, gently scratching my scalp.

I could let him do this all day, but eventually he drags his hands free, and I quickly wash out the shampoo so he can do the same with the conditioner. But by then the game is up. I turn toward him as soon as he stops working his fingers through my hair. Instead of rinsing out the conditioner, I pull him toward me, kissing him under the hot spray of the water.

I swear I wasn't going to do anything but take a shower with him, but when he reaches for the body wash, my mind floods with all kinds of unhelpful ideas. And it seems Diego agrees. We start rubbing the body wash all over each other. Technically we're getting cleaner, I suppose, but I'm not sure how much cleaner his chest is going to get from me squeezing it.

We're slick and soaked. Diego's hands wander down to my waist, pulling me toward him. He kisses me again, his lips lingering this time, and I can't suppress or hide my reaction with both of us standing so close in the shower.

"Energetic this morning," he murmurs.

"Yeah, I, uh, sorry about that."

"Why?" Diego says. "You shouldn't be. I like it."

He reaches down to touch me, and my cock springs to full hardness. I cling to his shoulders as he starts stroking. When I tip my head back in pleasure, Diego's mouth seeks my throat. He kisses and sucks as his hand works, and this officially becomes the best morning of my entire damn life.

It's early. I'm worked up from last night. His hand feels fucking incredible. And in no time my voice is filling up the shower stall even more than the steam as I shove my hips at Diego's firm hand. It's so hard not to crumble against him, not to give him everything. He touches me with fascination, with devotion, like he wants nothing

more than to lavish every inch of my body with attention and care. That feeling that he loves my body, loves what I look like, but still sees me for myself, is almost more enticing than the strong, insistent motion of his hand.

“Those sounds you make are going to drive me crazy,” Diego rasps against my neck.

That’s all I need. His encouragement urges me on. I dig my nails into his slick skin and let go of all that hesitation and caution I woke up with. Then I undo all that aimless scrubbing, making a mess of both of us all over again.

I slouch against the wall afterward, but even that feels like too much. In the end, I drop to my knees, not caring how close his cock is to my face when I start stroking him in response. Diego braces his hands on the shower wall above me, his body blocking the spray, and groans until he explodes, nearly hitting my face when he does.

He sinks to the basin with me, and we kiss while the water tries to drown us. It takes several minutes before we can drag ourselves back to our feet and wash properly, but I’m pretty sure of neither of us truly cares about getting squeaky clean in here. We spend some time simply touching each other again, touching with no aim other than enjoying the feel of each others’ bodies. A day ago, I would have called this moment impossible. Even right now it feels like a dream. But the pruning of my fingers reminds me that my body will have needs today other than sex.

Mia and Gabriel will be so proud of me. All this time, I’ve been telling them I have no time for fun, but maybe it wasn’t a question of time. Maybe it was a question of making time for the right kind of fun. And the right person.

I shut off the water reluctantly. We use the warmed up towels to dry off, then head back into the bedroom.

“I might have something you can borrow,” I say as I dig through the closet.

Most of my jeans and fitted things will be too small for him, but I might have a T-shirt that’s baggy enough to get the job done. I throw on some sweatpants and a crop top for myself, incapable of resisting being a little cute, but Diego hasn’t answered even when I’m fully dressed and leaving the closet. Instead, he sits on the edge of the bed wringing his hands.

“Diego?” I say.

“Avery, this was really fun, but...”

My stomach plummets into my feet. Just like that, he’s a completely different person than the one who slept in my bed, the one who washed my hair and touched me in the shower. This is the old Diego, the Diego from before last night, the Diego who couldn’t stop running from me.

What could I have suddenly done wrong?

Chapter Eighteen

Diego

EVERYTHING WAS GOING so well. I let myself go last night, let myself have things I've been terrified of. The world did not crumble beneath me. Then Avery and I shared that shower and I couldn't keep my hands off them.

But reality crashed back in to ruin things when I started getting dressed in my clothes from last night and the high wore off. I'm in a student's bedroom. I shouldn't be here, no matter how much I like Avery, no matter how much I'm drawn to every single piece of them. We got away with last night, but the longer I linger, the more danger I create for both of us. I need to keep a level head about this, no matter what my heart thinks of the matter.

"Diego?" Avery says.

"Avery, this was really fun, but..."

Their face falls. My chest clenches. The last thing I want to do is hurt them in any way, but we have to be reasonable about this.

I force myself up from the bed so I can clasp their hands in mine. I rub my thumbs over their knuckles, but it does little to soothe the tension in their face. Their hair is wet and loose, water droplets kissing the side of their neck and face. I could lean in and lick those little droplets up, kiss my way to Avery's ear, pull them in and listen to them sigh against me.

Which is exactly what I shouldn't do right now.

"I think I should go home," I say.

"You don't want breakfast?" Avery says. "I could make us some tea."

I smile a little. "That sounds really nice. It does. But I think it's smarter for me to go home."

Avery isn't confused. They don't argue. They clasp my hands tighter for a beat.

"If that's what you feel like you need to do, then that's okay," Avery says.

"It's not because of you," I say before realizing how stupid that sounds.

Avery just chuckles. "I think I've heard that one before."

"I mean it, Avery. I'd stay if I could, but I'm your TA. This is ... ethically dubious."

"We aren't breaking any laws, Diego. No one is going to kick down my door."

"We aren't breaking the law, that's true, but that doesn't mean my department wouldn't have to take some sort of action if they knew about this."

Avery scowls, and I slip my hand from theirs to tip their beautiful face up.

"I'm sorry," I say. "I really am. I'd stay here with you all day. I'd drink tea and watch movies and lay on the couch until we rushed back up here at some point tonight when we just had to—"

I cut myself off before my words can run too far ahead of me. It's a beautiful vision, a

tempting future, and Avery's eyes shine with the same longing that burns in my chest. It is the future, however, and not the present. In the present, I'm their TA, and the last thing I should be doing is spending the entire day in their house touching them in every way I can think of.

Heat dances across Avery's cheeks. If my skin was as pale as theirs, I'm sure I'd be glowing too. I have to swallow before I continue.

"I want to spend more time with you," I say. "But I also should be cautious about this. Just for now."

"I know," Avery says. "I understand."

It's difficult to let go of their hands, difficult to step away and put a breath of space between us. Not merely because of their stunning body. I've never been with a non-binary person, but that hasn't mattered to me at all. I'm drawn to every aspect of Avery, their body, the way they dress, their long, silky hair, but perhaps most of all their mind, the way we can talk about our field for the entire day and never run out of topics, the passion that shines through as we discuss heavy concepts, the brilliance burgeoning in their mind. I could spend the whole day working on essays for my classes beside them and it would seem like the greatest day of my life.

But I can't do those things today. I've given in, conceded to my attraction, but that doesn't mean I'm going to act like a fool. There's still a risk — a significant risk. I would much rather wait and do this right than risk too much in the heat of the moment and lose it all.

I check my pockets to make sure I have my phone and keys. Then Avery walks me downstairs. They poke their head out of the door, but the neighborhood is quiet. Even if university students live on this block, they likely went out partying last night. There isn't so much as a person walking a dog waiting for me outside.

I linger at the door, kissing Avery a few more times before I force myself to let them go.

“Can we do this again?” Avery asks. The hope in their voice digs claws into my gut.

“Yes,” I say.

“When?”

“I don’t know. Soon, I think. When it’s safe.”

“How will we know it’s safe?” Avery asks .

“We just have to wait, make sure no one noticed us. If someone suspects something, I’m sure my department will bring it up. They wouldn’t wait around on a thing like that. So if they don’t say anything in the next few days or so...”

“Then I get to see you again?”

I nod, and Avery rises up on their tip toes to kiss me again.

“God, I hope we know soon,” they say.

My stomach lurches in sympathy. My whole body seems to rebel against leaving this house, but every second I waste makes it more likely for the wrong person to notice we walking home. I only allow myself one more peck before I finally drag myself out of the door.

I walk quickly, before temptation can drag me back. It isn’t super early, but October encases the morning in quiet and coolness. If my blood wasn’t running so hot today, I might be cold, but instead I walk swiftly down the sidewalk, mostly heedless of the

temperature as I replay the past night and morning.

In spite of the danger, I can't help smiling to myself. I took a bigger leap than when I drove hundreds of miles away from home to attend grad school out here, but I'm not as scared as I probably should be. Letting go last night broke down some barrier inside me. Maybe I'll come to regret it. Maybe someone saw us leaving the club. Maybe someone is noticing me walking home and coming to the obvious conclusion. But I'm still flying too high to stress about it.

That is so weird.

This entire time, I've been freaking out over this, but the moment I gave in it all lifted off of me like throwing off a heavy jacket. I'm sensible enough to be cautious, but I'm not checking over my shoulder anymore.

I float home, so unburdened that I almost miss the package waiting at the door of my apartment. I nearly trip over it, then scoop it up to bring it inside with me.

Leo isn't home. Maybe he had a good night as well. Maybe he simply came home, slept peacefully and headed to the library on a day when it'll be mostly deserted.

I toss my keys on the counter and check out the package. My heart thuds when I see my parents' address on the box. I tear into it, prying it open frantically, already guessing what might be inside.

A package of fudge awaits me. Not just any fudge, either. This is the good stuff from the farm down the road. Mr. Hart guards his homemade fudge recipe as jealously as a dragon guarding its gold, but no one back home is all that eager to bother him for the specifics. The stuff is so good that the town nearly breaks out into a brawl when a new batch comes out. You can't go to a birthday or funeral or graduation or wedding without encountering this fudge. Mom and Dad had to get there fast to snag some to

send me.

Tears sting the backs of my eyes. I hug the fudge to my chest, way too overcome by this fatty treat. It's just fudge, I tell myself, but my heart knows better. It's home. It's comfort. It's everything I know and miss and want to go back to. Maybe it's everything I never should have left. Am I really cut out for being here if I immediately fell for a student?

"Oh God, what am I doing?" I groan out loud, sinking to the cool linoleum of the floor with the fudge clutched to my chest.

A piece of me wants to call my parents right now and confess the whole thing to them; a larger piece of me is terrified of hearing judgment in their voices. I'm their baby boy, the first one to take my education to such a high level, the one they brag about at parties. And I'm letting them down so I can have something I want.

I call them anyway, and thankfully my mother answers on the first ring.

"Hey, Mama," I say. "I got the fudge."

"Oh good! I was so worried it might not make it so far."

"It's not that far," I say, but I'm probably reassuring myself more than her.

"How are things, baby? Tell me everything. We haven't talked since you left."

I cringe, then wonder how much guilt one body can hold before it explodes. I have neglected to call her this whole past month, too caught up in my own unfolding personal drama. So I tell her everything I can, going on at length about my classes, both the one I teach and the ones I'm taking. I focus more on the ones I'm taking, tell her all about my studies and my degree and my roommate and my apartment.

She sounds fascinated by all of it, and coming from her, I know it's not an act. She grew up in our small town, lured my father there when they got married. It was the place where she knew she wanted to spend her life, the place where she wanted to raise her family. Does it scare her that I've flown away? It scares me. I'm a baby bird that hopped out of the nest before I knew how to fly, and I'm scared I won't figure it out before something out here devours me.

"What about your friends?" my mother says. "You must be meeting such interesting people."

I'm not sure how to respond to that one. Avery is definitely interesting. They're like someone from a completely different universe. They couldn't be more different from me and my family and everyone I know and care about back home. Even at the gay bar, there's no one quite like them.

I'm suddenly struck by the image of bringing Avery home and showing them around town. Even the fantasy rings false, however. Why would they ever leave all this to see my boring little hometown? My world could not be more different from theirs, perhaps so different that it's impossibly incongruous .

As compatible as we are physically, what if we're irreconcilably incompatible in this? What if our worlds simply don't mix?

The thought stabs a dagger directly into my chest, and it's then I realize just how deep I am. All this time, I've tried to hold myself back; all this time, I've been falling for Avery anyway. Now, I can't stomach the thought that my home, my life, would be hopelessly boring to them, that they would hate everything I love, that we're too different to work.

Maybe it's good I couldn't stay too long today.

It would only give me false hope.

Chapter Nineteen

Avery

EVERY TIME SOMEONE enters the library, my head pops up from my laptop. It's never him, but it always could be, and I can't stop myself from checking.

I have a free afternoon, and I dragged myself out of the house and to the library in the hopes of making some progress on my research project for Diego's class. I wanted to do this at home, but it quickly became clear that the only thing I would do at home is chase my thoughts in circles, just as I have been since Sunday. I was hoping being at the library would force me to focus, but so far it hasn't been much better. I can't stop myself from looking for him every time someone enters the building. I know he comes here sometimes, but I also know we're supposed to be playing it cool. It's been a couple days and nothing has happened, but when I texted Diego he said he'd feel better waiting a little longer.

It doesn't help my cause that working on this research project reminds me of him. He helped me find so many good sources. With the materials he guided me toward, the drag show, and the resources I found on my own, this is shaping up to be a huge paper. I'm worried I'll have too much material, which is kind of wild in a field where primary sources can be tricky to come by.

Even so, there's a couple difficult sections that I'm not sure how to iron out. Like those first-hand accounts from the '80s and '90s that Diego steered me toward. I'm not sure I'm using those the best way I can. They're not exactly scientific, and sometimes the source is dubious, but I'm determined to weave them into the paper

regardless.

There's someone who'd have good advice for me about how to use those documents, someone who would be able to mentor me from experience. But I'm currently supposed to be acting like I barely know him.

I sigh at my laptop. I've managed a few paragraphs, but it's been like walking through waist-high sand, every bit of progress a struggle.

More people enter the library. I tell myself not to look up, not to bother checking when it definitely won't be him. Am I really that desperate and pathetic, chasing some guy after only two days of separation?

I give in and look up, bracing for disappointment.

But this time it's him.

He meets my eyes and holds them for a moment. But then he turns away, heading off into the library. I can't tell if there was more to that look than simple recognition, but I start packing up my things anyway. Two days is long enough. Nothing has happened. No one has said a word about seeing us or suspecting anything. As Diego himself said, if the department thought there was some ethical violation going on here, they wouldn't wait to bring it up.

I nearly drop books in my haste to bundle them up and get them into my bag. I keep looking up to see where Diego went. At one point, I lose track of him amid the stacks in the library. Then I spot him on the second floor, moving toward the study rooms in the far corner. He doesn't look back at me, but a little piece of me wants to interpret that as an invitation. The study rooms are private. Why go there after meeting my eyes across the room unless you wanted me to follow?

I get my things in my bag and throw it over my shoulder. I scoop up my laptop as well, the cord for the charger dangling as I hurry to gather everything. My bag is hanging open as I take off across the library, my disheveled state garnering more than a couple curious looks from students attempting to study. If my goal was to be stealthy and low-key, I am failing spectacularly.

On the second floor, I take a breath and pause. The study rooms are behind the stacks, a couple glass-walled cubbies that contain a table and a couple chairs. They're meant to be even more private than the rest of the library, a place to hunker down and work in total silence. Today, they're mostly empty, except for the one where Diego sits with books and a laptop around him.

He notices me coming toward him and straightens up in his chair. I get the impression he isn't thrilled to see me headed his direction, but I let myself into his study room anyway, out of breath from the short walk through the library.

"Hey," I say.

"Hey."

His guarded tone withers some of my excitement at seeing him. It's only been two days, but I was hoping to get more from him after the way we left things on Sunday. He opened up so much to me. What could have happened since he walked out my door to make him shut down again?

"Studying?" I say.

"Yeah." He waves at the books and laptop around him.

"Me too. I mean, I've been here for a while, but I was studying. I was working on the research project for your class, actually."

“You don’t need to be working on that already. It’s only October.”

“I know, but I want to. Whenever I have free time I do a little bit on it. That way I won’t have to stress out at the end of the semester. It’s not all that often I have free time between classes and the café.”

“And you just happen to have free time right now,” Diego says.

“Hey, I was here first,” I point out. “You’re the one who showed up to my study session.”

“I didn’t sit at your table,” Diego says, but a hint of a smile tugs at his mouth.

I roll my eyes. “No, but you could have. You don’t have to run away like you don’t even know me.”

“Don’t I?”

The question hangs between us. I take the seat across from him. The door is closed, but I lower my voice anyway.

“It’s been two days, Diego. No one has said anything. We’re fine.”

“Two days isn’t that long.”

“I think it’s long enough to know if the whole department is having a meltdown over an illicit...”

I almost said relationship, but bit it back just in time. This isn’t a relationship, obviously. It’s one hookup and a lot of making out and longing. Not that it couldn’t be a relationship. I could have spent all of Sunday working on essays while Diego sat

there reading in my living room. I could have done all those normal, couple-y things without a bit of hesitation. But he had to go. He had to play it safe. And I understand, but I'm about at my breaking point when it comes to "safe. "

Diego sighs. Before he can tell me why we shouldn't even sit in a library together, I cut in.

"I understand why you need to be careful," I say. "I do. But do you really think it's fair to treat me like a stranger?"

Diego's warm brown eyes watch me. Something moves in his jaw as he chews over his response.

"No," he says. "But it's still dangerous for me to spend too much time around you on campus. I like you too much. It's going to be obvious."

All of my frustration deflates in a rush. Diego really needs to stop doing this. Ever since Saturday night, he's been casually lobbing out these declarations like they're nothing. He's so blunt that he could be describing the weather, but hearing him say, again, that he really does like me almost rocks me out of my chair. How can he simultaneously be so forthright and so withdrawn?

"And," Diego goes on. It takes me a second to pull myself back into the conversation. "And I'm ... I'm not sure how much I belong here. I don't know if I'm cut out for a place like this. I want to get my degree, but I miss home. I miss my small town. I miss the crappy gay bar and the fudge shop and my parents' house. I don't want to promise you things I'm not actually sure I can give you."

Just like that, any surge of joy I might have felt drops away as my stomach plummets into my shoes.

“You’re leaving?” I say.

“No. Not right now. I have to at least give it a semester, right? But after that ... I’m not sure.”

“You’re not sure? Don’t you want your grad degree? What’s the point of all this if you don’t even finish?”

Diego is looking down at the table, refusing to meet my gaze. The air in the study room suddenly seems thinner, and I can’t get enough of it into my lungs.

“You can’t just give up,” I say. “You worked so hard for this. You said yourself that there aren’t enough people in your field. How can you throw this away so easily?”

“I’m not throwing anything away,” Diego says. “I just ... don’t belong here. This place is so different. Maybe it’s best if I do my work back home, where I belong.”

He finally meets my eyes. His are wavering, searching, like I might have an answer.

I dare to reach across the table and take his hand, not caring who might be roaming the library on the other side of those glass walls. He doesn’t pull away, but his gaze darts to the glass for a moment.

“You’re trying to run again,” I say. “I get it. You’re scared. You’re overwhelmed. And when you’re scared and overwhelmed you usually run. But please don’t. Give yourself a chance, Diego. You deserve this. And you do belong. Do you not feel like you belong on campus? What about the drag show and the club? What makes you think you aren’t like everyone else? Let me show you. Please.”

I get that parts of the queer community have been academic concepts to him for a lot of his life, that his gay bar back home feels like a different universe than things like

drag shows and psychedelic pop rooms in queer clubs, but he does belong here just as much as me or anyone else.

“No one but you is chasing you out of here,” I say. “Study with me. Just one time.”

“Avery,” he says in warning.

“It’s just a study session. Come here with me one day. We’ll use one of these private rooms. All we’ll do is work. I swear. Give yourself a chance to belong here. Give me a chance. Challenge yourself to not run away this time, just to see what happens.”

“I can’t seem like I’m giving you any favorable treatment.”

“You won’t be. You’ll be acting as my TA, as my peer, my mentor. Those sources you sent me are fantastic, but I’m having trouble working them into my paper as seamlessly as I want to. Don’t laugh. I’m not lying. I really could use your help.”

The slightest of smiles graces his lips. I release his hand, forcing myself to sit back. If he’s going to stay, he has to make the choice himself.

“No one else even requests my office hours,” he grumbles.

“Slackers.”

He snorts a laugh. “Or maybe you’re an over-achiever.”

“Does that mean you’ll do it? We can have a study ... meeting.” I wanted to say date, but I’ve finally made some headway in this conversation. I’m not going to ruin it.

Diego sighs. “How do you keep doing this?” he mumbles. “Yes,” he says louder, “we can meet to study. I’ll help you with your sources.”

I spring to my feet and gather up my stuff before he can change his mind. I could stay here longer, but this feels like a win and I want to bask in it. I want to show him that I can walk away and be normal and life will move on.

“Yes! Fantastic,” I say. “I’ll text you a time. I have to get to the café. But no disappearing between now and then, understand? No running.”

He rolls his eyes and waves me off. I go, but even though I smile, my heart is heavy. It’s been barely over a month and Diego has one foot out of the door. He’s trying to flee Montridge before I’ve even gotten a real shot with him. And I don’t know if there’s anything I can do to stop him.

Chapter Twenty

Diego

WE MEET ON Friday. No one has fired me or confronted me with accusations. It has been an entirely ordinary week.

That doesn't mean I'm not nervous.

My stomach is fluttering when I wind through the nearly deserted library and head up to the study rooms on the second floor. Students aren't eager to spend their Friday evenings here — except for Avery. They're already in one of the little glass-walled rooms with books all around them when I tap on the door to announce myself. Their head pops up, eyes bleary from reading, and they break out into an enormous grin, waving for me to come inside.

That fluttery feeling in my stomach intensifies to a circus clown making balloon animals out of my guts .

I enter the study room, despite all my trepidation. It isn't only about the school catching us. Ever since the call with my mom I've been thinking more and more about how long I'll actually be here, how long I want to be here. I'm eating that fudge she sent as slowly as possible so I can cling to that piece of home indefinitely. But eventually it will be gone, and I'll be here aching for anything familiar.

“Friday afternoon,” I say as I take a seat beside Avery. “Not a time when I assume students are sitting around studying.”

“Which makes it perfect, doesn’t it?” Avery says. “Barely anyone around. Even if we didn’t have this private room, there’s almost no one else here. So there’s absolutely nothing to worry about.”

Is that why they chose this time? I figured it was simply when they were available, but it doesn’t surprise me that they were trying to find a time when I’d be the most comfortable.

“That’s a reasonable point,” I say.

Avery is smiling over at me, clearly pleased with themselves for this. A piece of me revels in the way they look at me, as though my praise is worth that much to them, as though I’m any kind of actual expert. In reality, I’m only a few scant years ahead of them. I can easily imagine Avery being in my position in a couple years, if that’s what they plan to do with their degree. They haven’t expressed any explicit desire to go to grad school, but it would be a horrible waste if they didn’t. Someone as bright and curious as Avery should absolutely be enmeshed in this field conducting the kind of research that is going to change society’s ideas about gender and sexuality.

Avery lets me settle in. They silently return to whatever they were working on before I arrived, and I dig my laptop and some books out of my bag. Once I’m all set up, Avery slides a paper cup from the dining hall toward me.

“I snuck some jasmine tea out of the dining hall,” Avery says. They have an identical cup in front of them. “Hopefully it’s still hot. I had to sneak it in, but I doubt anyone is going to come all the way up here to tell us not to drink it.”

“The dining hall has jasmine tea?”

“No, definitely not. I brought the tea bags from home and used the dining hall for hot water so I could brew it fresh.”

I pop the plastic lid off. Steam curls off the pale golden liquid, fragrant with jasmine blossoms. I breathe deeply, inhaling the memory of that first night when I met Avery. Oh, how naive I was, thinking they were just a nice, attractive stranger I'd never see again.

"This is what you made me after my car broke down," I say.

Avery's smile widens, and my heart dances at the joy in their face. "You remember that tea?"

"Of course. It was great. And it was really kind of you to make it for a complete stranger."

"Maybe I already had a good feeling about you."

I hide my smile by sipping on the tea. It's definitely cooled a bit, but it's worlds better than any of the tea you'd get in the dining hall itself. I drink slowly, inhaling every time I take a sip in order to appreciate the distinctive aroma that flavors the drink.

"That's really good tea," I say.

"It's my favorite," Avery says. "I always make it when I'm working at the café."

"Your café sounds like a strange place. I can't believe that's a real thing."

"It is strange, but it's also special. We fought hard to keep it going. The school even wanted to shut us down at one point," Avery says. "I wish you could come see it." They rush on before I can mention what a dangerous idea that would be. "I know. You can't. I get it. I'm just saying that I wish you could. We dress up and decorate. It's a whole atmosphere, not just a cup of tea. That's why people keep coming back."

“It sounds lovely. Maybe...” I catch myself, but Avery’s face shines with hope, and I can’t stop myself from wanting to nurture that light. “Maybe we could get tea someday. Not in paper cups.”

“I’d really like that,” Avery says. “someday.”

The “when” goes unspoken. It’s a future so fragile that neither of us want to say it out loud and potentially shatter it. When I’m not Avery’s TA. When there’s no risk. When we can be more open about this. When I know if I’m staying in Montridge or fleeing back home. When, when, when. All of these whens that are even less substantial than the steam curling off my tea. At least I can smell and taste that. These whens are completely ethereal, a hope lingering on a held breath.

“What are you working on?” Avery says, nodding at my books and laptop.

“Just papers for classes,” I say.

“What kinds of papers?”

“I’m sure it would be dull.”

“I’m sure it wouldn’t. Aren’t you the one who’s always saying how we’re in the same field?”

I concede, and start explaining a paper for a class about sexuality and global language conventions. Different cultures and languages come with different traditions and norms around these things, and that’s certainly carried into the modern day.

Avery seems fascinated by all of it. I feel like I’m giving a lecture for their class rather than describing what’s happening in mine as I go on and on about how different languages deal with things like pronouns.

“I always wondered how I’d talk about myself in other languages,” Avery says.

“It’s complicated. There’s no one answer. Different communities in different places have their own conventions, their own ‘rules,’ so to speak. A lot of times, they have to make it up themselves.”

“Just like us,” Avery says. “We’re all just figuring it out as we go, aren’t we? There’s no one simple answer, but that’s kind of the beauty of it. Our languages and cultures are changing as we assert our right to be here and to be part of society.”

“I didn’t think about it that way,” I admit. “It sounds like it would be very difficult. I can’t imagine what I’d do if English didn’t have a ‘he.’”

“It is difficult,” Avery says, “but it’s also rewarding and beautiful. These kinds of communities are like their own little micro cultures. It’s amazing, don’t you think?”

Micro cultures. Like the micro culture around Montridge, this town full of university students that has drag bars and gay bars and Boyfriend Cafés. It’s strange, sometimes overwhelming, different from everything I know. But Avery is right. It’s also kind of amazing.

I nod. “What about your paper? You had questions about sources.”

“Oh, I mean, if you have time, I’d love your help with this part.”

I scoot my chair closer, and we dive into their research paper. It’s far more extensive than what’s required for an undergraduate course, but I’m not surprised by that in the least. This is Avery. They’re always going to go far above and beyond when they care about something. Watching them indulge their passion is like getting sucked into a whirlpool, an inescapable tug into deeper waters. Soon, we’re digging through books and articles, reshaping whole sections of the essay, discussing topics that

stretch well beyond the requirements for the paper — or the course as a whole.

I'm captivated.

This has always been the aspect of Avery that hooks me most strongly. The second I got a glimpse into their mind, there was no running from this. That morning when we woke up together, I could have gotten as much pleasure out of lying in bed talking to them as from what we did in the shower.

I come back to my senses when we start veering into case studies that aren't even complete yet, research that's still underway.

"This is all way more than you can put into that paper," I say. "You're going to blow past the word count at this rate."

"That's okay," Avery says easily. "I like this stuff. If it doesn't all get into the paper, I'll still enjoy learning about it."

"You're way too busy to do more than what's required, and we both know it."

Avery scowls. "That's true, I guess. Things have gotten better at the café but it's..." They huff out a sigh. "It's a lot. You're right. I'll trim this back before it gets out of control. "

"You know, you could save the sources in a separate document. Who knows when you might need them in the future?"

Avery's laugh surprises me more than any other reaction they could have had.

"Yeah, sure," they say.

“What? You sound skeptical.”

They shrug. “I don’t have too many other classes left that focus so intensely on the topic of gender. I doubt I’ll need to crack open these books again after your class.”

“I wasn’t thinking of only your undergrad, Avery. You could keep studying. You only have a year and a half left on your degree.”

They go quiet at this, neither agreeing nor denying it. Their silence sits heavily between us, but I’m too much of a coward to prod. Do they really not intend to go further with this degree? They have the mind and the temperament for higher levels of education. That much is obvious. What would hold them back?

“Anyway,” they say before I can ask, “I didn’t mean to take up all your time with my stuff. I’m sure you have work to do as well.”

“It’s okay,” I say, but silence falls between us again, and we turn back to our own work.

I can’t entirely manage to focus after that. I keep thinking about how quiet they got when I prodded them about their education. Are we both planning to abandon this? Me doing it is one thing. I’m a small-town boy longing for home. But Avery belongs here. This is their kind of environment. They thrive here. They should want to keep going.

“Hey.” Avery cuts into my thoughts, and I realize I haven’t typed a single word in far too long.

“Sorry, spaced out.”

“I noticed. Seems like we’re getting kind of worn out.” They lean in closer, lowering

their voice even though we're alone. "I'm going to head out now. Alone. For safety or whatever. But there's no café customers tonight. I'll be home watching movies. You should come by."

"Avery, I..."

What? Can't? Won't? Neither of those feel true, so I never finish the thought.

Avery seems to sense the gap in my resolve.

"You can do whatever you want," they say. "I'm not twisting your arm. I'm simply saying that I'll be home and if you come by, that would be cool. Maybe it would be really cool."

They eye me up and down, but the look is so quick that I almost doubt it happened when they rise smoothly to their feet and leave me in the study room staring dumbly after them as they casually walk away.

Chapter Twenty-One

Avery

I HOPE HE shows. I really hope he shows.

I tried to act cool back at the library, but my heart was pounding like a hammer smashing through my chest. Diego froze the moment I invited him over. I could almost hear the gears grinding in his head, churning through all the reasons not to, even while his body offered him a strong counter-offer.

God, he's frustrating.

I know he wants me. He knows he wants me. He said it last time he was here. Yet he insists on fighting this, on running scared no matter how many times we don't get caught. He doesn't seem to realize that everyone around him has their own shit to worry about. They really don't care what we're doing as long as it doesn't affect them .

I pace the house, more anxious with each passing hour. I wash the dishes, clean up my room, vacuum. The chores keep me busy, but I catch myself peeking out of the windows trying to spot his car along the block. Wait. Would he drive? Would he think that's too conspicuous and walk the mile instead? I don't actually know.

Finally, I do what I claimed I would and flop on the couch to watch a movie. I can't manage to pay attention to the bland action sequences, though. I'm too busy worrying about whether a comfortable maxi dress under a cozy, baggy sweater is too dressed

up or too dressed down. I can't make it look like a date or like I was sitting around waiting for him all evening (even though I was). That would make Diego think I'm treating this like a relationship, a thing it definitely can't be, at least not right now. But I have to let myself put some effort into impressing the man. I want him to look at me the way he did in that club, like I'm the most gorgeous person in the room, the only person in the room, someone he can't keep his hands off of.

I turn off the dumb movie and start heading upstairs to second-guess my wardrobe choices when someone knocks on the door. My heart nearly slams itself out of my body, but I don't have time to calm down. If it's Diego, he won't want to stand out there exposed for long.

I throw the door open, and sure enough, it's Diego who hurries inside like someone might be chasing him. Fine by me. At least it got him in here with me instead of standing outside questioning whether he should go home instead.

He eyes me up and down, and a nervous trill flutters through my chest. He wears exactly what he had on this afternoon, but his hair looks freshly washed, his stubble recently shaved down to a dark shadow against his cheeks. The spice of his aftershave warms my whole body like the steam wafting off of perfectly brewed tea.

"You look nice," he says.

"It's comfortable," I say. It's a bad instinct. I've always had to explain away my unconventional fashion choices and long hair, as though I can't simply have those things because I want them. Diego certainly doesn't care about what I'm supposed to dress like, how long my hair is supposed to be, whether I'm supposed to wear eyeliner and lip gloss. He doesn't need an excuse.

"It looks comfortable," Diego says.

He shifts from foot to foot. He has nothing with him but his jacket, and he stuffs his hands into the pockets.

I can't stand the awkwardness for another second. We both know what we're here for, and I, for one, have waited damn long enough.

I grab his wrist, pulling his hand free of his pocket as I drag him toward the stairs.

"I still have shoes on," he says.

"Don't care. "

I am on a mission, and God damn shoes are not going to get in my way.

At first, I feel like I'm dragging him with me toward the bedroom, but we aren't halfway up the stairs before Diego starts contributing as much to our propulsion as I am. The second we're in my bedroom, I spin him around and do the thing I've wanted to do since I saw him in the library on Tuesday — kiss him as hard as I can.

His aftershave is even more potent from this distance, and it leaves my head light as I drink in his lips. I throw my arms around his neck, and he grabs me by the waist to pull me against him. The moment our bodies are flush, the kiss deepens, both of us tilting our heads and employing our tongues to explore each other's mouths.

I've been a wreck while waiting all week for this. My body screams with relief the moment I have him, the moment his warm mouth is against mine. His fingers tighten, tugging at me like I can't possibly get close enough. I groan into his mouth, hoping it conveys a fragment of the pent-up longing I've bottled all week long.

Apparently, it does. I can feel him stirring against me. My maxi dress is thin, even if his jeans aren't. When we break for breath, he's panting every bit as hard as I am, and

the beautiful brown of his skin is a shade darker around the cheeks.

“I’ve wanted to do that all week,” I say.

“Me too. ”

The admission is quiet but heated, something torn from deep within him, something he’s probably not even dared to think. It’s only here that he lets himself go and shows me how he really feels, and while that’s frustrating as hell, it also makes these kinds of moments all the more precious. I get a glimpse of a Diego no one else sees, a Diego that’s just for me.

That doesn’t mean I forgive him for running away from me at every opportunity. In fact, I’ve been imagining ways to get my revenge all evening long. Fun ways. Ways I want to do to him right now.

I don’t notice us drifting deeper into the room until Diego suddenly falls, pulling me down with him out of reflex. We tumble jarringly to the bed, jolted apart, but it isn’t enough to stop either of us. I simply shove him farther back and crawl onto the bed after him, chasing him across the mattress until we’ve both shimmied onto it.

Perched between his knees, I sit back and peel off my sweatshirt. My dress is sleeveless beneath it, just a simple black jersey dress I wear for pure comfort, but Diego watches me like I’ve stripped down to nothing. His eyes dart up and down, unsure where to settle, and I milk the moment for all it’s worth, hiking my dress up to my knees but no higher. Not yet.

In his excitement, Diego sat up a little as I pulled off my sweater. I set a hand on his chest and shove him back down so he’s flat on his back. Then I sit on my heels, not touching him, not taking off the dress, leaving us both squirming for several long moments. It’s torture, even for me, but leaving him waiting, making him chase me for

once, is so sweet I can bear it.

Diego breaks, tries reaching for me. I bat his hand aside.

“No touching,” I say. “Lie there and be good while I take care of you.”

“Avery,” Diego gasps, and I wonder how many ways he can say my name. He pronounces it like a warning, like a question, like a hope. I never get sick of it, no matter how many shapes he makes of me.

I shimmy my dress up higher, exposing my knees, my thighs. Diego watches every new inch of skin. Then there’s nowhere left to hide; I have to pull the dress up and tug it off. As the fabric covers my head, I know he can see even more of me, chest and waist and hips and the lace-edged panties I decided to wear for this. Are they what he expected? Have any of the men he hooked up with back home ever worn something like this? I’m guessing no, and his sharp inhale strengthens my suspicions.

By the time I discard the dress, he’s propping himself up on his elbows again, avid eyes drinking me in. I shove him down, but this time I keep touching him, letting my hands wander to his waist to undo his jeans and pull them down. I have to wrestle his shoes off to peel his pants off. Normal boxers beneath, not that I expected anything different, but they’re special because they’re his, and I’m the one who gets to see them and touch them.

There’s certainly something worth touching inside them.

With his jeans gone, Diego’s excitement is blunt and obvious. That tent in his boxers calls out for my attention, but I hold myself back. I’m not giving him what he wants so easily. It’s my turn to be in control of the pace of this, and I’m going to savor every damn second.

I bend down to kiss along the insides of his thighs, the dark hairs on his legs tickling my face. He squirms, and I loop an arm under his leg to keep him from slipping away. I work my way higher, deliberately planting false hopes in every kiss as I near the bottom edge of his boxers. But when I reach his groin, I pull my mouth away. Instead of giving him what he wants, I nose along him through the fabric.

Diego tilts his head back and groans.

“Avery.”

This time it’s a plea, strained and stretched. Diego all but writhes under me, but I’m not giving in that easily, not after he put me through all this. I’m going to have this man exactly the way I want him tonight.

I lick over his boxers, still not moving the fabric out of my way, and Diego groans. I can all but hear him grinding his teeth. He yelps when I proceed to blow across the fabric. His cock twitches in his boxers, and the sheets rustle as Diego squirms his legs.

I push myself up and am rewarded by the absolutely devastated look on Diego’s face. His mouth hangs open as he pants. His eyes are bright with need behind his glasses. His cheeks have flushed; his chest heaves with every labored breath. And I haven’t even gotten him naked.

I crawl up to him and pluck off his glasses, taking my time setting them aside so I can tease him with the nearness of my nearly nude body. Diego reaches for me before I can retreat, petting a sweaty hand down my chest.

“God, Avery,” he pants, “I can’t take much more of this.”

I let my hips lower, let my thin, straining panties meet his tented boxers. He groans

pitifully from the contact. I roll my body forward as I kiss him, tasting his desperation in his sloppy response. His fingers dig into my skin. His hips jerk toward me. He's breaking from my every touch, and it's so sweet I almost don't want it to end.

But since I do actually like this guy — maybe too much — I relent after only another moment or two and start moving down his body. He scrambles to take his shirt off when I push it up, but he's a mess. He got absolutely nothing off on his own, so he has to shift and squirm out of his coat before he can fuss with the shirt.

I leave him to it and work my way lower. When I palm over his boxers, he lets out a cut off cry, like he wasn't expecting me to finally touch him. Oh, this is going to be so good.

I yank off his boxers before he gets a chance to recover and dive right for his cock. I don't know what kind of progress he made with his shirt; maybe it's still tangled up around him. Diego doesn't seem to care. As I plunge down his cock, he reaches for my hair. I put it in my usual ponytail, but that goes to hell the moment he starts grabbing for it to brace himself. His hand lingers there, riding the motion of my head as I work up and down him. I tighten my lips, hollow my cheeks, employ all the tricks I know.

Not that they matter.

The way I worked him up left him trembling like a dew drop on the point of a leaf. I taste salty pre-cum as soon as I lower down him. It only takes a few more plunges before he's groaning around my name, and this time there's no mystery — it's definitely a warning. A warning I will not be heeding, but a warning all the same.

I take him deep, savor his strangled cry, then brace as his hot cum hits the back of my throat in a burst. Diego tugs at my hair in a spasm of ecstasy as his relief pours down my throat. I swallow him, take every last drop, holding him in my mouth until he

collapses on the mattress.

I pull myself off him slowly, enjoying the feel of his cock in my mouth until the very last moment. When I sit up between his knees, Diego is even more wrecked than before. He did manage to get his shirt off, but it's still hanging on one arm, like he couldn't free himself from it entirely before he was too overcome to care. He hasn't managed to steady his breathing, and the way he looks up at me — I don't know how to describe it except as awe. Like he's looking at a painting he never expected to see in person, a natural wonder he only half-believed was real.

It's doing awful things for my ego.

"I'm going to be insufferable if you keep looking at me like that," I say.

Diego pushes himself up, propping himself up with one hand while cupping my face with the other. His thumb strokes along my cheek.

"It's exactly the way you should be looked at," he says. "It's the way everyone should look at you all the time."

Then he draws me into a soft, warm, exhausted kiss.

Chapter Twenty-Two

Diego

I'M BARELY HOLDING myself up. My arm trembles, but my desire to kiss Avery supersedes the post-orgasm exhaustion melting my bones into jelly.

What the hell did they just do to me?

The way they took things so slowly was absolute torture, but it made the high of release even higher. I'm reeling from it even as I kiss them. The world can't seem to hold steady anymore.

I suppose there's only one sensible thing to do.

I flip Avery around so abruptly they squeak with surprise. When I get them on their back, I shimmy between their legs. No point in trying to prop myself up when I'd much rather be here, like this, lying on my stomach .

Their panties stretch around their excitement. I've never seen a body like this in a garment like this, but it looks ... it looks really good. Then again, I suspect anything Avery decided to wear would look good on them. They're not bound by the boring rules the rest of us abide. They turn whatever they decide to wear into the perfect thing to wear.

Despite all that, I can't wait to get these damn things out of my way.

I pull them down as swiftly as I dare, then angle Avery toward my mouth. The taste and weight of them revitalizes all the exhausted parts of me, and soon I'm bobbing with as much enthusiasm as they did. At least, I hope I am. They certainly deserve it after what they did to me.

The moment they sigh, their body seems to go slack, and I know I have them. They move subtly with me, not jamming their hips at me, but encouraging me along nonetheless. I take them with all the devotion and joy I can muster, hoping it conveys even a sliver of what I feel. I'm wrung out, hollow, but I want them to feel as good as I do, so I put everything I have left into licking and sucking their sweet cock until they whine my name in a high-pitched, pleading moan.

Even after that, it doesn't seem like enough. Even after we recover and push our hastily discarded clothing off the bed, I'm greedy for more. I bundle them in my arms as we lie there drowsily talking about nothing. And before I know it, we fall asleep that way.

I GROAN WHEN I wake, but not from any physical distress. I feel incredible, in fact, like I just got the deepest sleep of my life. And when I breathe in and catch the scent of Avery's shampoo brushing against my nose, warmth and comfort suffuses my body.

No, the groan isn't a physical malady. It's because I'm awake. And being awake means I'm not going to stay here much longer.

Avery is tucked against my chest, my arm draped over them. We separated a little in sleep, but not much, so all I have to do is lean forward to kiss the soft, warm curve of their shoulder. They stir with a pleased sigh, a slightly less smooth breath than the ones that indicated they were dreaming.

"Morning," I say.

“Mmm. Morning.”

My voice is scratchy and rough from sleep, but theirs is as sweet as ever. We slept naked, and I lean my forehead against their bare back and allow my fingers to trail along their skin like I’m drawing patterns in sand. Goosebumps break out under my fingertips, and Avery shimmies closer. They roll over, their face rosy with sleep as they brace their hands on my chest.

“I like waking up this way,” they say.

“Me too.”

They comb their fingers through my hair, brushing it off my forehead and out of my eyes. “How are you so handsome first thing in the morning? It’s not fair. The rest of us have to try, you know.”

I scoff. I’m sure the hair they’re combing is a mess. I’m probably squinting without my glasses. My mouth is tacky, my skin sticky from the sweat and sex we didn’t bother washing off. And even if all of that wasn’t true, I’m lying here with Avery . Avery, whose black hair falls loose around them like silk, whose eyes are bright and so blue it’s like looking into a lake, whose every gesture and movement carries a grace a century of dance lessons couldn’t teach me. If anyone is far too handsome first thing in the morning, it’s them.

“Don’t disagree with me,” they say.

“I didn’t say anything.”

“But you thought it. I could tell from that little sound you made.”

I pull them closer to me, kissing along their neck then tracing their jaw with my lips.

“I’m allowed to think whatever I want.”

Avery’s voice is slightly unsteady. Their breaths are deepening. I hold myself back before I stir both of us up too much .

“Especially if what I think is that you’re the handsome one,” I say.

They laugh and accept the compliment this time, giving me a swift peck on the lips.

It would be so easy to keep doing this all morning. It would be so easy to spend my whole day this way. This is the second time I’ve woken up with Avery, and it’s no easier to leave now than it was the last time. I drag myself from the bed and use the toothbrush Avery let me borrow on that fateful Sunday morning. I suppose it’s mine now. They left it beside the sink, that confident that I’d return. And, well, I guess they were right about that because here I am.

We take a shower together. Unlike last time, we truly only shower this time. Mostly. We can’t quite resist rubbing our hands all over each other’s bodies, washing each other, touching everything we can touch, but it doesn’t move beyond that. Barely. It’s a struggle, I must admit. Having Avery’s body under my hands and doing nothing but touching takes superhuman restraint from me, but I’m determined to stick to what I promised myself. I’m not going to linger. I’m not going to put us in any unnecessary danger. These aren’t things we can have right now, but they’re waiting for us in that hypothetical “someday” that I so desperately want to reach with Avery.

Avery lets me wash their hair too, an activity I never realized I needed in my life. I love doing it, love having an excuse to dig my fingers into the silky strands, to scratch along their scalp, to run all that dark hair through my hands and feel the weight of it. And Avery seems to love letting me do it. They hum with satisfaction and pleasure, making noises that very nearly tempt me to break my promise to myself, but again I persevere.

Someday , I swear to myself. Someday. Someday. When it's safer.

I survive the shower, despite the enticement of Avery's naked, slick body. Truly, I deserve some sort of award for that. I can already tell the image of them in the shower is going to flood my mind the second I'm home and by myself. But at least it's safer that way.

"You really have to go?" Avery pouts when we stand dressed at their front door. They turn pouting into an art form. It shouldn't look so damn beautiful.

"I really have to go," I say, softening my words with a kiss. I cup their face in my hands, thumbs stroking when I ease off their lips.

"Fine," they say. "But we can do this again?"

I nod. "It seems like it's going to keep happening regardless. We might as well be smart and intentional about it. It's safer that way."

"Safer. Yeah." They don't sound like they care about safety.

"It's just for the rest of the semester," I say. "When I'm not your TA, well, it's still not exactly great, but it's a lot better than if someone found out now. "

"I know, I know," they say. "I don't want to get you in trouble. I just..." They bite their bottom lip, and God help me, I almost break.

I kiss them to keep myself from doing anything worse.

"It is not fair that you are both the most beautiful and most handsome person I've ever met," I say. "If I look at you for even one more second I'm not going to make it out of that door."

They laugh in delight, a sound I tuck away behind my heart for when I exit this house and go back to being their TA.

“In that case,” they say, “I think I have this spot on my face. I need you to look very closely for a very long time.”

They point at a random spot on their cheek. I kiss it playfully. I could so easily go on teasing and playing with them this way, but I slip from their hold before I can get carried away, summoning the final dregs of my self-control to put on my coat and set my hand on the doorknob.

“I’ll see you soon, Avery,” I say, more promise than farewell.

“Text me,” they say. “I like hearing from you.”

I promise to keep in touch, then finally get myself out the door. It isn’t easy. Again, I presume that award I’m in line for is coming in the mail any day now. Stronger men than me would crumble at the thought of leaving Avery there wanting them.

I’m less paranoid as I walk toward home this time. It’s only a mile away, and I’ve gotten to know the town a bit better, so I can appreciate the big old oaks and cute storefronts along Main Street. The changing leaves throw splotches of garish color onto every roadway and sidewalk, a burning quilt defying October’s gray skies. It even smells different from home, more wild, more full of stuff, more perfumed in a way. It’s probably that my nose isn’t as accustomed to the things that grow here compared to home, but I like that I can smell this place, that its newness has remained tangible in that way.

And that is when I realize I’m not as homesick as I ought to be. I’m barely homesick at all. I’m enjoying my walk through town, the strangeness, the differences. It’s not that I never want to go home. That bar of fudge sits on my counter, barely eaten, like

once it's gone I'll lose my tether. Yet ... this is nice too. Montridge, the university, the trees and leaves and drag shows and all of that.

I'm so caught up in contemplating my sudden comfort with this place that I don't notice the people waiting outside my apartment until I'm climbing the stairs to the second story. Then I stop dead in my tracks, blinking at both of my parents standing outside my apartment door.

"There you are," Mom says. "We thought you'd be home first thing in the morning."

I feel my eyes widen. "You're here," I say stupidly.

"We wanted to surprise you," Dad says. "Sorry, we didn't know you might be..."

He waves vaguely to encompass the obvious truth that their son did not sleep in his own bed last night and that none of us want to discuss that in more detail than a hand wave. I certainly am not about to tell them anything about what I did last night, or who I did it with.

Instead, I launch myself at them, every ounce of homesickness bursting out of me all at once as my parents catch me in a hug. I might be twenty-six, but this is the longest I've ever gone without seeing them and my heart is damn near ready to explode. We launch into Spanish without even noticing the switch.

"What are you doing here?" I say.

"We wanted to see your big fancy job in the big fancy city," Mom says. "And after I talked to you on the phone I couldn't wait any longer."

My job. Right. The one where I'm a TA fucking one of his students. That job.

My head reels. The world wavers around me. Joy and terror make for a potent mix, a mix that attempts to knock me off my feet. I keep nothing from my parents, but I absolutely, positively can't tell them about this. I'm their baby boy. I won't disappoint them that way.

"Come on," Dad says. "Show us everything."

Chapter Twenty-Three

Avery

I BARELY NEED my usual morning jasmine tea to get me going today. I'm buzzing from waking up with Diego cuddled behind me, my body light and humming. I float through my morning routine of making tea and scrolling through my phone before I have to get ready to head to campus to use the library. I'm not going to ditch my study group this time. In fact, I plan to go to the university early and camp out at the library so I can't possibly miss them. At least, that's the idea, but my my routine is stalling out as I scroll through social media feeds, my brain sliding right off the words and gifs and pictures and looping back to thoughts of Diego.

I can't seem to stop touching my hair. I dry it so it doesn't drip all over everything, straighten it, and throw it into its usual high ponytail, but then I keep running it through my hands. The ghost of Diego's touch lingers in each strand, and somehow that memory is replaying more powerfully than anything else we did while naked.

As much as I want to replay all of it, I do need to get out of the house today. I dress needlessly cute in leggings under a thigh-length skirt and my coziest sweater, then head for campus. But my mind never really joins my body in the campus library. Normally, I love being here, but today I can't summon an ounce of focus. All I'm thinking about is whether or not I should text Diego when I take a break to get some food at the cafeteria. I told him to text me, but he hasn't yet. I remind myself it's been a scant few hours since I saw him and I shouldn't be disappointed, but I'm needy, especially after the night we just had. I want to hear that he's thinking of me, that he can't focus either, that I'm as much of a distraction to him as he is to me.

I hold myself back. Even when I leave the library, I manage not to text him. I don't want to scare the guy off just when he's opening up to me. For him to say we can do this again as long as we aren't stupid about it is huge. It means this is real. It's going to keep happening. He isn't running from me. I don't want to do anything that could jeopardize that.

I'm on the big, wide main path that goes past the dining hall and student center and all that stuff when I spot him. My heart dances around my chest like a little kid given too much sugar.

No. Play it cool, Avery. You're on campus. You're in public.

Right. If I get too excited, it could scare Diego and make him think I can't keep our secret. At the same time, I refuse to pass him by without so much as a "hello." Surely "hello" is safe. People say "hello" to their TAs and professors all the time.

I force myself to walk (and not run). I force myself to smile but not too broadly. I think I'm doing a pretty good job of looking like any other student approaching any other TA. But when I step up to Diego's side and say, "Oh, hey," he nearly jumps out of his skin.

His eyes go huge behind his glasses. He actually physically flinches away.

"Avery, what are you doing here?"

"I'm ... on campus? I have a study group later and figured I'd show up early to get some work done. I do that sometimes, you know." Part of me can't help being disappointed that he reacted so dramatically to a simple greeting.

And then I see why I freaked him out.

A couple approaches us. They're older than most of the students here and even without a word of explanation, I know they're Diego's parents. His father has the same shifting amber-honey-chocolate brown eyes behind glasses. His mother has the same smile and pitch-black hair. They even walk like him. And when they speak, they have the barest hint of the Midwest drawl that pops up only in very specific words that Diego says like "know" and "go" and "Wisconsin."

"Oh, hello," his mother says. "I'm Diego's mother. Are you his friend?"

I blink. Even though I knew that was what she'd say, I definitely did not plan on meeting my secret TA hookup's parents today. Or maybe ever.

"I, um, I..." What the hell do I say? Is the right answer "friend" or "student" or "mentee" or something else entirely? What answer will make Diego feel safe?

"They're my student," Diego says.

His parents' eyes go wide, like Diego just introduced a rock star or something.

"A student," his mother says. "You take Diego's class."

That places me on steadier ground. This, I know how to talk about.

"I do," I say. "It's fantastic. Has he told you anything about it?"

And that's how I find myself talking to my crush's parents about the history of drag shows. I guess I should have some reservations about it, but it turns out that Diego's parents are really easy folks to talk to. They're curious and interested, asking genuine questions as I gush about a topic I care way too much about.

"We should go to a show while we're here," Diego's mom says .

I blink, shooting a glance at Diego. What happened the last time we went to a show passes between us in one terrified look.

“We can ... look into it,” Diego says.

“You aren’t going to shock us with this stuff,” his dad throws in. “We might be from a small town, but we’ve seen a bit of the world. It’s just a show.”

“I didn’t bring anything nice to wear,” his mother says.

I chuckle. “You don’t have to dress nice. Leave that to the performers.”

His mother seems pleased by that prospect, though Diego squirms with discomfort. I don’t want to push my luck. Successful introduction to parents achieved. I should take the win and get out of here. Except the moment I propose doing so, his mother’s face falls.

“You aren’t going to show us around?” she says.

“Me?” I all but squeak.

“Well, you’ve been a student here longer than Diego, right? You probably know this place even better than he does.”

“Honey, they probably have classes and stuff,” Diego’s father says. “We shouldn’t bother them.”

I should take the easy out. I’m sure it would make Diego feel a lot better if I left now. But his parents are so sweet, and when am I going to get another chance to learn about Diego right from the source? Plus, they picked up on Diego’s use of my pronouns instantly and without a single complaint or question, and that gives them,

like, a million points in my book.

“I have time,” I say. “My study group isn’t meeting until after lunch. I was just going to hang around on campus. I could give you a tour, get lunch, then meet up with my group.” I shoot a nervous look at Diego. “I mean, if Diego’s okay with that.”

Diego is very, very still. Dangerously still. I don’t know if he’s terrified or angry or what, but his parents answer before he can.

“Don’t be ridiculous,” his mother says. “Of course he’s okay with it.”

She loops her arm through mine without a beat of hesitation, and we’re off. I’m walking arm-in-arm with Diego’s mom, pointing out the student center and administrative buildings. I even take her inside the admin building to show her the historical photos of what the campus looked like before it was this huge, sprawling behemoth of a university. She seems fascinated by all of it, engrossed in every word, and I suddenly understand where Diego gets his insatiable curiosity. She’s a lot less timid about it than Diego is, however, diving in fearlessly where he might tiptoe delicately.

I lead Diego’s parents to the liberal arts buildings next. It’s where Diego does all his teaching, after all, and where his office is. We have to be a bit quiet. Even on a Saturday, there are a few people hanging around working, but once we reach Diego’s office, we’re free to talk how we please.

His mother sets her hands on her hips as she looks around the sparse office. “You haven’t even decorated,” she says.

“I’ve been busy working and studying, Mama,” Diego says. “I’m a student, too, you know.”

She waves her hand. “How are you supposed to work and study in such a drab place? It’s depressing.”

“It’s not like I have anything to decorate with,” Diego says.

“Then I’ll send some things. Your old room at home has plenty of junk in it.”

“Mama, please.”

I hide a laugh behind my hand. For all that Diego stresses that six-year gap between us, he sounds very much like a kid right now, a kid being scolded by his over-concerned mother.

“Avery, back me up,” his mother says, suddenly swinging on me. “This office is depressing, isn’t it? Do any of you students actually visit him here?”

I swallow hard to keep heat from flashing through my face. I only visited Diego here once, and while nothing technically happened, I definitely pushed that line as far back as I could.

“It... It could use a little love,” I say.

“Ha, there, you see? Avery agrees with me. I knew I liked them. ”

Diego’s mom slings her arm around my shoulder and hugs me against her, and her warmth soaks through me. This much, Diego did not inherit from her. He seems more like his father in this regard, a bit more withdrawn and withholding when it comes to such an overt show of affection. But screw it, I like it. I like being forward and blunt with my feelings, and I hug her right back.

“If I send him things, will you please make sure he decorates?” she says. “I don’t

know who else I can ask.”

“I’m on it,” I say. “This office will be like an interior decoration magazine shot the next time you see it.”

A commotion sounds out in the hall, doors opening, voices bouncing against the walls and ceiling, footsteps creating a low rumble of thunder. It must be a group leaving, someone who booked a room for a project or something. Either way, it reminds me that this has eaten up the afternoon and I’m in jeopardy of blowing off my study group for the second time.

“Oh shit,” I say. “I mean, oh shoot?”

Diego’s parents laugh, so I assume their ears are not too virginal.

“Sorry, people must be leaving. It reminded me of the time,” I explain. I check my phone. “I have to get going or I won’t have time to eat before my group meets. I wish I could continue the tour for you.”

Diego’s mother gasps. “We’ve taken up your whole Saturday. I’m so sorry. ”

“I told you we shouldn’t have pestered them,” Diego’s father throws in.

“You didn’t,” I assure them. “Really. This was amazing. Way more fun than sitting around alone. Thank you for letting me show you around.”

His parents smile warmly. I look cautiously to Diego, wondering if I’ll find anger there. Fear, perhaps. But he’s watching me with something else entirely, a warmth that sinks through me like hot cocoa on a snowy day.

“I’ll ... see you in class, Diego,” I say.

He very nearly smiles, and that hot cocoa feeling seeps all the way down to my toes.

“Yeah,” he says. “I’ll see you then.”

I make my escape, heart skipping as I slip into the traffic cluttering the halls.

Chapter Twenty-Four

Diego

I WANT TO see you tonight.

My hands trembled as I typed out that text. It's the first time I've been the one to reach out, the first time I've asked for this instead of being swept along by Avery. Seeing them with my family wiped out all my reasonable arguments against seeing them again. I woke up at their house today, and here I am going right back over late at night, after a café shift has ended and all the customers and servers have left.

Avery is on the couch in the living room when I arrive. They're wearing the slacks and vest and tie that they don for the café. Their hair is even more sleek and straight than usual, and a bit of makeup highlights their eyes and glimmers on their lips .

I see why they get so many customers at that café of theirs. I hear there are other servers working there, but I can't imagine why people would choose anyone but Avery.

"Hey," Avery says, turning on the couch and smiling at me. "I didn't have time to change. Wanna watch a movie? Sometimes I unwind from the café this way."

I toe off my shoes and join them on the couch, cozying up close under a blanket that Avery spreads over our laps. I wrap a hand around their waist, indulging in kissing the side of their head as I settle in.

“You don’t need to change,” I say. “You look great.”

Avery chuckles. “It’s a little formal for movie night on the couch.”

“I like it, but if you want to get comfortable, don’t let me stop you.”

Avery smiles, self-satisfied, basking in my compliment, and it makes me want to describe every single thing I like about them just to drink in that expression for longer. They take off their vest and tie, tossing them on the table, then resume the movie they had on. I leave my arm around them as a couple actors I vaguely know of steal paintings in an elaborate heist in the rainforest, but I have to admit I’m not paying much attention. I’m more focused on burying my nose in Avery’s hair and soaking up the echoes of every quiet chuckle that rings through them.

And if the night were to end here, I can’t say I’d mind. It’s a bit startling to realize that. A bit scary, too. This isn’t purely physical. That’s no shock; I’ve always been attracted to Avery’s intelligence. But this goes beyond that. We aren’t even talking. We’re simply existing in each other’s presence, silently watching a movie, holding each other on the couch. And it’s giving me the same sensation that seeped through me as I watched them charm my parents this afternoon, a feeling of warmth and security and home that I haven’t felt since I’ve come to Montridge.

Avery shifts closer as the movie nears its climax. Their hand has rested on my thigh through most of it, but now that hand is moving, trailing slowly up and down, getting dangerously close to my groin.

“Good movie,” Avery says.

“Mhm.”

Avery chuckles. “It wasn’t. It was terrible.” The blanket falls to the floor as they

shift, throwing a leg over my thighs to sit in my lap. “But you weren’t paying much attention, were you?”

A wicked smile curls their lips. I reply by kissing the expression, my hands going to their waist to pull them toward me. Avery tangles their fingers in my messy hair and kisses me back, rocking in my lap and groaning as our tongues tangle. I let my hands trail downward, along the slope of Avery’s back and over the hump of their ass. They push back into my palms, giving me a good feel of that firm ass and tugging on my hair. When I squeeze, they groan into my mouth, and there’s no more hope of my having a coherent thought for the rest of the night.

Avery pulls away, cradling my head in their hands, lips bright and blushing. “I’m so glad you asked to come over here tonight,” they say. “I was kind of surprised. But in a good way, of course.”

I swallow, trying not to wince. It’s hard staring at the results of my own flaws. My fear, my cowardice, has left Avery afraid to ask for what they want, afraid to reach out, afraid to want me. It’s like a dagger in my chest, the knowledge that I’ve dimmed their brilliance in this way. They’ve been nothing but themselves this entire time, and meanwhile I’ve hidden and cowered, always thinking first of protecting myself, always scared.

“I’m glad I asked too,” I say.

I slide my hands up their back and draw them in for a softer kiss, trying to reassure them. They sigh against my mouth, nearly melting against my lips, and God, I want to give them everything. Everything they want, everything they need, everything they’re hoping I can be for them. But I simply don’t know if I have those things to give, and if I’m wrong, won’t I hurt them more? What if I were to give them what they want only to decide I need to go home? The soft, yielding, trusting lips against mine deserve better than that.

They're squirming in my lap, unable to keep still. Occasionally, their wriggling brushes over my crotch, and that light touch stirs my blood. I can't help remembering what they did to me last night, all those barely-there touches that tormented me until I was all but begging them for relief.

They pull away, and I can see some deviousness glinting in their light eyes.

"Diego," they say, "I really want to ... want to feel you."

"You have me," I say, confused. What more of me could they possibly need to feel?

Avery shakes their head. "No, I mean..." They huff, frustrated with themselves, and climb off of me. They don't go far, standing before me so they can dig in their trouser pockets. Their hand re-emerges clutching a condom and a packet of lube. "I mean like this."

"Oh." I blink, then catch myself. My heart restarts like a clunky old car coughing and spluttering before it finds its rhythm again. "If that's what you want..."

Avery is biting on their lip. "It is. I didn't have time to change, but I grabbed this before I came down here in the hopes that ... that you might say yes."

What kind of utter fool would I have to be to say no? Yet I can barely form the word, my throat all clogged up as heat boils through me in a rush.

Avery tosses the packets onto the cushion beside me. They stand before me unbuttoning their shirt, and I get to watch as they slide it off their slender arms and let it fall to the floor. The undershirt goes next, then they move right on to the slacks, not a beat of hesitation pausing them before they're completely naked before me.

They lower to their knees, sliding their hands up my legs to spread them, then sliding

those hands even higher to palm over me while they lick their lips. Their eyes could be the eyes of a demon, sharp with mischief, luring me into oblivion.

Mama and her church group will have to say a few extra prayers for me this week.

Avery reaches my fly and undoes it, their eyes never leaving mine, even when they start dragging my pants and briefs all the way down and off. I race to take care of my shirt, but when I free myself from the fabric all the breath whooshes from my lungs.

Avery is kneeling on the floor languorously feeding their own fingers into their mouth with a deliberate, destructive pumping motion. They pluck their fingers free and smile at me as they reach behind themselves.

“Are you going to help, or should I do everything myself?” they say as their hand moves behind them.

Fucking Christ. I’m not inexperienced in this, but I might as well be in this moment. No one’s ever put on a show like this for me, and even if someone had tried, I doubt they’d measure up to a naked, gyrating Avery riding their own hand, lips parted around deepening breaths, cheeks flushed, beautiful cock stiff between their legs.

I scramble for the packages, fumbling until I choose the right one and manage to tear it open and sheathe myself. I do even worse with the next packet, nearly getting more on Avery’s couch than my cock. Avery watches my every move, chewing on their lip as I stroke myself, plunging their fingers more forcefully into themselves, as though what I’m doing could possibly be even a fraction as enticing as them opening themselves up for me.

“Avery,” I groan.

“Fuck, you look so good,” they say. “I need you.”

They pull their fingers out and all but leap into my lap, apparently as eager as I am, as absurd as that is. They straddle my thighs, reaching for my cock immediately so they can angle it at themselves. Their experience is apparent as they work themselves onto me, self-assured and brash. The nails of one hand dig into my shoulder as they ease down, taking me in an inch at a time. Harsh breaths gust against my face, each seeming hotter than the last, as though me filling them is overheating their whole body. I cling to their slender waist, trying to steady them, to do more than sit here uselessly, but Avery has their own ideas, clearly, and they need very little assistance from me to make them happen.

Soon, they're all but sitting in my lap. I'm leaning back, holding their waist, looking up at them as they brace on the edge of the couch on either side of my head and gaze down at me. And they're just so God damn gorgeous I can't stand it. I reach a hand up to pull them to me. Avery moans against my mouth as the motion of bending down apparently shifts me inside them. The moment our lips touch, they wriggle in my lap, a slow roll of their hips that moves my cock around within their tight, hot walls.

Both of us are groaning, lips sloppy and often missing each other as we try to kiss and writhe all at once. I grab at their hair on impulse, feeling blindly for the tie restraining it. When I get it free, all that silky black cascades around us, so long it tickles my chest as it spills past their shoulders.

Avery sits back a little, smiling at me like my freeing their hair amuses them. I don't care. They can laugh all they like. Shrouded within the curtain of their hair, our boiling body heat cocooning us in a cloud, I don't care about anything but touching them.

I run a thumb along their lips, and before I can pull it away they take the digit into their mouth, clamping it gently between their teeth. They flick the tip of their tongue at the pad of my thumb, and the sensation shivers through me. I shift my hips without

thinking, and Avery gasps and releases my finger.

They grip the back of the couch harder, head bowed as they start rocking atop me in earnest. Their tight heat grips me as they slide up and down. I watch their sinuous body roll closer on the way up, then backward on the way down, every motion a little deeper, a little harder, a little faster.

“God, Avery, that feels so good,” I groan.

“Your cock,” they respond, breathy and broken. “I want more.”

My hands fly back to their waist, eager to obey, to indulge their every desire. I try to jerk my hips up at them, to give them whatever I can, and they shout the first time our bodies meet with a slap. They have all of me at their disposal, every atom in my body turned to their pleasure. When they grip the couch hard enough to make it creak and throw themselves at me, I snap my hips upward to meet them.

“Oh fuck,” they cry, throwing their head back, sending all that long, dark hair flying around us.

It’s like a vision out of a fantasy, their hair, their body, the haze that washes through me as pleasure surges upward. I forget to close my eyes, too caught up in watching them as they take what they please from me, take everything I have and more, and I gleefully offer it up to them.

Amid the tumult, I reach for their cock. It’s hard, the head slick with pre-cum. I move my hand along them in rhythm with their body, and they scream at their ceiling, bucking even harder in my lap. Their body clenches, and I choke on my own breaths, the pressure and heat overwhelming me all at once. Finally, my eyes snap closed, but it almost doesn’t matter. Everything is so tense within me that I’m only left in that warm darkness for a moment before I’m shoving my hips up at Avery, rigid with

tension as pleasure erupts out of me.

Avery groans and whimpers and fucks into my hand until they're spilling over it. They clench around me, and I can feel the overwhelming tension corded through their whole body. A few more jerky jabs of their hips and then it's over. They're sinking onto me, breath blowing hot against my chest as they sag forward to rest their head against my shoulder and pant.

I'm softening inside them, my whole body weak with satiation. The heat that poured off us is dissipating, cooler air prickling my skin, but I make no attempt to move, letting Avery sit on me as long as they like.

When they finally stir, it's to nuzzle their nose against the side of my neck. I chuckle as the motion tickles me, and they kiss that same spot.

"I love you."

It comes out so casually, so easily, like a sigh. Avery doesn't even seem to know they said it out loud. It was just an errant thought that happened to escape.

It's not just an errant thought to me.

They really said that. They really blurted that out. And it didn't sound like it was the first time the thought had crossed their mind.

I tense, and Avery must feel it because they stop their playful nuzzling, languid muscles clenching. A silence stretches between us, and I know I'm supposed to fill it. I'm supposed to say the words, return the feeling, but how can I do that when I'm not even supposed to be here? I'm not supposed to be touching Avery, let alone loving them. Even when this semester ends, I have no idea what I'm going to be able to give them. This very same night, I was questioning whether I could give them anything

resembling a relationship, but love? Actual love? That hadn't even crossed my mind yet.

Liar , a little voice inside me says.

I swallow hard, choking down the accusations rising up my throat. Some piece of me knows. Some piece of me has always known. But to give voice to that is to invite a hurt I'm not strong enough to bear. This isn't supposed to be happening at all. At best, it's a secret we need to keep for months, possibly years. How can I make a declaration like love in a situation like that?

And what if I go home? What if I need to go home? What happens to this then? What happens to Avery?

My heart is racing, sweat slicking my palms. I don't know what the right words are for this, but I know I've already waited too long to say something, anything. The moment has stretched too far, and it's obvious that I'm not going to respond in kind, that the words Avery's waiting for aren't going to happen.

It simply isn't the right time for that. Everything is so perilous. The future is shrouded in a fog of uncertainty, and I won't know that we're safe until we make it to the other side. How could I lead them on when everything is so unsure? How could I give them hope when I might have to shatter it? I couldn't live with myself if I did that, no matter what words may lie locked behind my heart, sequestered in a place where I thought they couldn't hurt us. On top of all of that, Avery has no plan for their own future. They've said as much themselves. They plan to graduate and simply go get a job, when they could do so much more. I want more than that for them, but I don't know how to say that and those words they're waiting for.

"Avery, I..."

Avery sits up, sliding me out of them so they can clamber off my lap. They smile like they didn't speak. Or perhaps they're smiling as though I did speak, as though I had the courage to take that leap without knowing whether we'd land safely or crash and burn.

"I'll grab us a towel," they say.

Their voice doesn't waver. They stride away, steady and casual. It's only because I know them so well that I can detect the stiffness in their shoulders, the slight rigidity in every step. Where they should be floating through their home, they're marching, and it's clearly my fault.

This is why I couldn't say it. Please understand. If I said it now and it hurt you, it would be so much worse than this.

I don't actually attempt to explain. I just sit there on the couch, Avery's words ringing in my head, and wonder what sort of disaster I've unwittingly unleashed.

Chapter Twenty-Five

Avery

THE MOMENT THOSE words left my mouth, I knew I fucked up.

I haven't repeated them. Neither of us have brought it up again. That night, we cleaned up, watched another movie and fell asleep cuddled up. In the morning, it was like none of it had even happened.

I meant what I said, but I'm not going to push it. Diego either doesn't feel the same or isn't ready, and while both answers are crushing, I can't force someone to love me. Maybe I'm too young. Maybe it's that I'm still in college. Maybe it's the fear that's chased him this entire time. Maybe I'm simply not the type of person he could love.

Ouch. Okay, let's not think about that last one .

I swear I miss half his class while I'm trying not to focus on what he said, and didn't say, the other night. I startle when an essay flops onto the desk in front of me. Diego moves on before I can react, distributing the rest of the class's essays.

I flip through it, mostly because everyone else is. They're all eager to see their grades, and why shouldn't they be? I'm the only one who couldn't possibly care any less about what's written on this paper.

But when I get to the back, I find a handwritten note.

Please see me during my office hours.

My heart thuds. Is this a TA-Diego note or an at-home-in-private-Diego note? It's impossible to tell, but I know which one I want it to be. The essay otherwise has very few corrections. The notes in the margins are mostly praise such as "good source!" and "excellent job tying these two concepts together." I thought teachers made you go to office hours because you were failing, so is Diego just trying to get me alone?

It doesn't make sense, not after the other night and how awkward things have been since then, but I go the next day anyway, hugging my backpack against my chest to help with the crackle in my nerves as I enter the liberal arts building and climb to the second story. I was so much more excited about this the first time I visited Diego during his office hours. That was only a month or so ago, but it feels like a whole different lifetime. Back then, I simply wanted to flirt with my hot TA and see how he'd respond. So much has changed, however, that I genuinely don't know if I'm marching to this office for a breakup or an academic advisory or something else entirely.

I tap at the door and Diego calls for me to come in. I do, but with way less enthusiasm than the first time.

Diego's sitting behind his desk working on something on his laptop. Probably a paper for one of his classes. He has a ton of coursework of his own. He's one of the few people on this campus as completely overloaded with responsibilities as I am, yet we've managed to find time for each other. We've found time to grow, to make something of this thing between us. Can't he see that that means it's real?

I settle across from him. He keeps typing for a few seconds, and I hug my backpack tighter and tighter, like it's a teddy bear and I'm a kid who woke up from a bad dream. Maybe I'm in the midst of the bad dream right now.

Diego finishes whatever he's typing and finally regards me. He looks like he's fighting not to flinch. I don't say anything, leaving it to him to set the tone. Are we going to pretend we're not fucking, even while sitting in his office with the door closed?

"Avery," he says, and the way his mouth forms the shape of my name is more than professionally friendly. I relax just a little. "Sorry for making you come out here. I know you're always really busy. "

"I don't mind," I say. Was that too fast, too eager? Is it obvious I'm desperate for him to give me any scrap of how he feels after the other night?

"I wanted to talk to you about your academic career," he says.

"My ... what?" Of all the things he could have said, that was perhaps the one I expected the least.

"Do you have the paper I returned yesterday?"

"Yeah, um, it's somewhere in here." I set my backpack on the floor so I can root around in it and extract the slightly crumpled essay with Diego's note to meet him. I smooth it on the desk between us.

Diego doesn't flip through it. He simply sets his hand on it, like it's a soap bubble and he doesn't want to pop it.

"Avery, this paper is excellent," he says. "Really excellent."

"Thanks." The praise is nice and all, but I gotta admit — I don't care all that much what he thinks of an essay at the moment. Do you love me or not?

“Avery.” Diego lowers his voice, as though there’s anyone in this room but the two of us. He leans forward at his desk. “I’m serious. You’re far beyond any of your classmates. It’s ... a bit ridiculous.”

Okay, cool. Again, appreciate it, but come on, man. This can’t be the reason you asked me to see you a couple days after what happened on my couch.

Except ... it could be. This is Deigo. He could have called me here for this reason and nothing else. It wouldn’t surprise me in the slightest. I simply don’t want this to be the reason. Is he really going to ignore what we did, what I said? Has he forgotten about it that quickly? Did he sweep it aside the moment it happened? Despite all the nice things he’s saying, I somehow only feel worse and worse.

“Are you listening?” Diego says.

And I don’t know. Something about his tone, his teacher-y, detached tone — it snaps something inside me. He’s really going to spend this whole meeting talking about a God damn essay.

“What?” I say, sharp and hard. “What do you want me to say? It’s an essay, Diego. I’m glad you like it, but I don’t really give a shit right now.”

That breaks him from this professional distance thing he’s doing.

“We’re in my office,” he says in the same tone as “eat your vegetables.”

I wave at the shut door behind me. “Yeah, we are. With the door shut. With the halls empty. No one is around. So stop talking to me like I’m a stranger.”

“I’m not speaking to you like a stranger. I’m trying to keep this professional. I’m trying to be your TA talking to you about an essay.”

I shoot to my feet before I can stop myself and snatch up the essay so I can fling it to the floor. “Fuck your essay, Diego. I don’t care about the essay. If all you have to say to me is ‘nice essay’ then I have better things to do.”

He remains sitting, jaw and throat working as he apparently selects and discards whole paragraphs. Before I can unload any of the paragraphs waiting behind my own clenched teeth, I grab my backpack and start heading for the door.

“Wait,” Diego says. His chair clatters from how abruptly he stands.

Stupidly, I turn back. He’s standing, his hands planted on the desk.

“I didn’t just want to compliment your essay,” he says. “I wanted to talk to you about your plans for the future.”

My eyebrows try to knot themselves together. “The future?”

“Yes. After this. After you graduate. I’ve asked you before but you didn’t have an answer.”

I remember that conversation. I’d laughed and told him I would probably go get a job. That answer hasn’t changed.

Diego slides around his desk and approaches, slowly, like I’m a bird who might take flight if startled.

“I know you intend to graduate and get a job, but what if you didn’t?” Diego says.

“What?”

“Listen, the semester is ending soon. Then you’ll only have three semesters left here,

a year and a half. Do you really intend to simply get your degree and move on?"

"Why wouldn't I?" I say. It's not like a major in History of Race, Power and Gender is good for much other than a desk job or teaching.

Diego inches closer, perhaps without even realizing he's doing it. "Because you can do so much more than that. And that essay—" He jabs a finger at the paper on the floor. "—is the proof. You could keep going, keep researching, keep contributing to the field. You're brilliant, Avery. You don't need to end up in some cubicle wasting eight hours on your phone and waiting to clock out each day. You could make a real difference to this field, and I'd be a terrible TA if I didn't tell you so."

My anger cools in a gust of surprise. This is what he wanted? He's mentioned it before, but never with such passion. He reaches for me, taking my hands in his and squeezing.

"Avery, you can do this. You can do so much. You're way smarter than I ever was. And I know you love this. I know you're passionate about it. I could help you look at programs and fill out applications. There are places all over the country, all over the world, and I'm sure several of them would be thrilled to have you."

My heart sinks. All over the country. All over the world. Is this just a chance for him to send me away? We haven't even gotten an opportunity to do this for real, and he's already giving up. If I got accepted to some graduate program far away, it would solve all his problems, though, wouldn't it? I'd be on the other side of the country or something, and he'd have nothing to worry about. Why bother saying "I love you" to someone you physically can't reach?

I yank my hands away, and confusion closes Diego's face.

"Is this just a really academic way of dumping me?" I say.

“What? No.”

“Then why are you saying this? Why are you trying to send me away? Is it because of what I said the other night?”

Diego winces. “I’m not sending you away. I’m telling you this because I think you could do more in life than sit behind a desk. I think you should do more. Please, at least consider it.”

My head hears what he’s saying, but my heart screams that it’s a lie, a pretense for getting rid of me. The wound I’ve been ignoring ever since the other night aches, a chasm in my chest. I want to sink to the floor and close myself up around it, but I can’t. Not here.

I need to get out of this office.

“I’ll think about it,” I say, but it rings hollow even in my own ears.

Diego watches me, concern creasing his brow. “Avery, I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to imply that—”

“I know,” I cut in. “I know. You’re just doing your job.”

“I’m not merely doing my job. I care about you. I want you to succeed.”

“I know.” Why can’t he see that success is more than a job to me? It’s more than making money or having your name on a paper. What’s the point of those things if you’re a hollow shell? “I’ll think about it. Thanks.”

I head for the door. Diego calls out for me, but he doesn’t stop me when I open the door and slip out into the hallway. He’s said all he wants to say, evidently. I don’t

need to hear any more.

Chapter Twenty-Six

Diego

HOW DID I MANAGE to make this worse?

I didn't reply when Avery said they love me, and it was the wrong thing to do. I did say something to them today, and that seemed like the wrong thing to do as well. What the hell is the right answer here?

I'm more confused than ever by the time Avery leaves my office. Their crumbled, discarded essay lies on the floor, and I pick it up and smooth it out on my desk. I know there's digital copies, but it seems a shame to throw thoughts and words this brilliant on the ground like trash.

I sit behind my desk with that paper, my conversation with Avery replaying in my head. They seemed so mad, so hurt, and all because I wanted to talk about their academic career. Is it because of what I didn't say the other night? Would they rather I say nothing? They seem to grow restless any time I go quiet. I thought I was doing the right thing by staying in contact instead of hiding from them like I might have in the past.

I groan and cradle my head in my hands. How am I getting this so wrong no matter what I do? Casually dating guys who live five towns over did not prepare me for any of this. Despite their youth, it's Avery who feels like the experienced, worldly one here.

I'll think of some way to fix this. Maybe I can explain that I don't want them to squander their opportunities. That backfired today, but maybe with a little more time, I can get Avery to understand.

I snap my laptop shut and start packing up my things. I'm supposed to be here for another hour, but no one but Avery ever comes by, and it's obvious all I'm going to do is think about them. Better to do that at home if all I'm going to accomplish tonight is wallowing.

It's a short drive from campus back to my apartment. I could walk it, as I've walked home from Avery's house every time, but the days are getting colder and wetter, and the forecast called for rain today. Sure enough, by the time I spot the apartment complex, thick drops patter against my windshield. I park and rush up the steps and inside, hugging my bag to my chest to protect my laptop.

Leo isn't home, likely at a class or doing his own office hours. That's fine by me. I dump my stuff on the couch and drag myself through a shower. The warm water doesn't clear my head, but it makes me feel a little calmer about the mess I've somehow made. I took one tangle of emotions and snarled them up in a new one, creating a knot I can't even begin to unpick.

After my shower, I make myself a microwaveable meal covered in plastic. It's probably full of chemicals, but it tastes alright and I don't have the energy for better, so I sit on the floor with my back against the couch, turn on the TV and eat, barely seeing the old comedy autoplaying in front of me.

"Wow, bad day?" Leo says when he comes in.

It could have been an hour. It could have been four. I've been so busy replaying that conversation in my office that I have no idea. The microwaveable meal is cold on the coffee table and my back is starting to ache, so I assume it's been more than a few

minutes.

“It was a normal day,” I say.

Leo closes the door and tosses his keys on the kitchen counter, then joins me in the living room. He settles on the couch, leaning forward to sniff at my meal. He reels back immediately.

“That shit is gross. Did you really eat that?”

“It wasn’t that bad,” I say.

“I’m starting to hope you did have a bad day and this isn’t actually normal for you.”

“It was fine,” I say. “I just...”

Leo doesn’t know much about my situation with Avery. He knows I left that club with them. He knows I have some sort of complex interaction with a student. He hasn’t prodded me for any further details, and I’m not eager to give them, but tonight his nonchalance emboldens me to speak.

“I have this student,” I start.

“That student?” Leo says.

“Yes, that student. But this isn’t about ... whatever’s going on there. This is about them as a student. Really,” I say, when Leo cocks an eyebrow. “They wrote this paper recently, and it was brilliant. It was incredible. It’s like they’re taking a completely different class than the rest of the students in that session. Nothing else I graded even came close to the care and research and detail in that paper. I have a feeling that if I let them fill twice as many pages, they would have, and it would have

been just as brilliant.”

“But?” Leo prompts.

“But that’s all this is to them. It’s just a paper. Just a class. I asked them to see me during office hours so I could talk to them about their plans for after graduation. They said they’re just going to graduate and look for a job.”

“Not everyone wants to be a student until they’re thirty, Diego.”

“I know, I know, but if anyone should keep pursuing this field...”

Leo pats my shoulder. “I know you’re super passionate about this. You wouldn’t be here if you weren’t. But not everyone wants a life in academia. It’s grueling. It’s thankless. Maybe they have other plans.”

“That’s the thing,” I say. “I don’t think they do. I think they’re going to graduate and get a job because they’ve never thought about doing things differently.”

“Is that so bad? It’s what a lot of people do.”

“It isn’t bad. I’m not saying it’s bad.” My words start running out ahead of me, tumbling past my lips before I can temper them. “For most people, it’s not bad, but for them, it’s a tragedy. They’re so brilliant, Leo. They could be taking any of my courses. They could be teaching my class instead of me. I’m not sure I’ve ever met someone as intelligent as them. And they’re going to throw it away when they graduate. All this will become a line on a resume and nothing more. I can’t stand thinking about it.

“So I told them that. I asked them what their plans are and told them I think they can do more, but they didn’t respond well. They seemed upset. I have no idea how to

reach them. I have no idea how to make them see that they can have anything they want. And I just..."

My hands are balled into fists in my lap, my frustration physically biting into my skin as I dig my nails in.

"I want more for them," I say. "I want them to go on and be better than I ever will be. I want them to change the world with that mind of theirs. They could really do it. They could publish in any journal, and it would be the kind of stuff that changes society, the kind of stuff that makes an actual difference. They could take a field that's so new and so fragile and so ... so under attack by half the politicians in this country and make it indispensable."

I only realize how long I've gone on once I finally stop. I need to catch my breath, and Leo is watching me with a smile tugging at one side of his mouth. Heat tickles the back of my neck, and I turn my face away before it can climb any higher.

"You really care about this," Leo says.

I nod mutely.

"You really care about them."

This time, I don't even nod. I hold still, my heart in my throat and threatening to spill out of my mouth. I guess it already did, in a way. I thought I was talking about academics, but Leo heard the deeper truth under my gushing description of Avery's intellect and potential. Rewinding the monologue in my head, I hear it too.

Shit. I didn't intend to come out and say that. It happened before I could stop it, and now Leo's grinning at the secret dumped into his lap.

All of me likes you, Avery.

I admitted that what feels like ages ago, and it hasn't changed. If anything, the feeling's intensified the more I've gotten to know them. Yet I haven't been able to take that next step and use that bigger, scarier word.

"I guess," I say. "But I'm still their TA. We're trying to be careful, at least until next semester. Even then, we should probably be cautious. It's not illegal or anything, but the department would not be happy about it."

"I'm sure they wouldn't," Leo says. "Look, I get it, man. I said that from the start. But it sounds like they don't want to hear about their grades from you."

"What else am I supposed to say? We were in my office."

"In your office alone, I assume."

"Sure, but..."

"They want you to let down the defenses," Leo says. "Isn't it obvious? You're there talking about grad school and they're trying to get something real out of you."

"That is real," I say. "I really want that for them. I really care about their future."

"And what about your future?"

That pauses me. "What?"

"You talked to them about a future that takes them far away. Even if it keeps them here in Montridge, it's a future that locks them into some program that you'll complete long before them. You basically told them there's no future for the two of

you together, dummy.”

“I never said any of that.”

“I know,” Leo says. “But that’s how it sounds . They care about you, and you just said the best thing they can do is go off and be without you. That’s kind of cold, don’t you think? ”

I blink. That’s not what I meant to say at all. It’s not what I thought I was saying. But when Leo describes it like this, I understand how Avery could get there. And right after they said they loved me and I didn’t respond.

Oh, Christ. What have I done?

I fold forward, putting my head in my hands. Leo scoots over on the couch and rubs my back. For a straight guy, he’s way too good at all of this.

“They said they love me,” I groan into my arms.

Leo’s hand stops. “Come again?”

“They said they love me. And I didn’t say it back.”

“Oh, Diego. Buddy. And you ... you had this conversation about grad school shortly afterward?”

I nod, too ashamed to speak. Leo blows out a long breath, his exasperation gusting over me.

“Okay, so, you have some damage control you need to do here,” Leo says, “if you want to fix this.”

“I do.”

“Good. That’s step one.”

I lift my head. “What’s step two through ten?”

Leo’s grimace is too sympathetic for my liking. “If this was a girl, I might say flowers and chocolate. I don’t know how your person feels about that sort of thing, but it couldn’t hurt, right? Whatever it is, it needs to be sincere. You’re in deep, dude. You obviously care about them, whatever words you do or don’t use for that. How much does that mean to you? ”

It means everything.

The answer is obvious and immediate. Fixing things with Avery means absolutely everything to me, and as I sit here hating myself, I suddenly think I might know how to do it. It’s not flowers and chocolate, but for Avery, for me, for us , it makes a lot more sense.

Chapter Twenty-Seven

Avery

THE WEEKEND IS a welcome reprieve from the tumult of this past week. I don't have plans, which Mia has already expressed her intense displeasure with. She doesn't know what's been going on between Diego and I, however. I've kept Diego's secret and honored his privacy by not telling anyone, even her.

She has, however, insisted on hanging out with me. "If you're going to be a shut-in, at least don't do it alone," she said before inviting herself over.

In truth, I don't mind. Watching movies and eating ice cream with her has kept me from falling into the temptation of wallowing, which I'd definitely be doing if I was alone.

"This is breakup behavior," she remarks as we start another '90s comedy on a streaming service.

"I didn't break up with anyone. I'd have to be dating them first." And I would not call what Diego and I were doing "dating."

"You say that, but this is major breakup behavior," Mia says around a mouthful of rocky road.

"So now I'm a shut-in and broken up with? Your opinion of me continues to plummet."

Mia shrugs. "I'm just calling it how I see it." The movie plays on, with some hapless golfer attacking an alligator. "You can talk about it if you want."

"Nothing to talk about."

"It's what friends do for each other," she continues, undeterred. "We listen to each other's boy troubles while eating ice cream. Comes with the whole 'friend' thing."

I sigh and set my spoon in the open carton of ice cream on the coffee table. Mia and I are cuddled under a blanket, not completely unlike the way Diego and I cuddled under a blanket and watched a movie on this couch before I disastrously confessed my feelings to him.

"What?" Mia says. "You just looked at me and winced. Do I have chocolate on my face?"

I chuckle despite myself. "No, you're fine. It's..." I heave a sigh. Fuck it. Why am I keeping secrets for a man who sort of, kind of, very academically told me we have no future? "There was a guy, but it was supposed to be a secret. "

Mia's eyes widen with interest.

"You remember when we went to that club once?"

Her eyes widen further as I fill in the missing details in that night for her. Then comes the big confession. "And he's ... he's my TA."

Mia's eyes are going to pop out of her head if they go any wider. She grins wickedly, tossing aside her spoon and twisting to face me on the couch.

"Oh my God, Avery. Good work!"

“Not good work,” I say. “He told me it can’t work.”

“I knew this was breakup behavior! Ha!” Mia cries triumphantly.

“It’s not breakup behavior. We were never dating.”

“If he has to tell you there’s no future, you were basically dating.”

I surrender to her logic, groaning and wilting forward until my head is in her lap. She pets her fingers through my hair.

“Oh, baby, you really liked him a lot, huh?” she says.

“I told him I love him.”

“Oh, Avery.”

The amount of sympathy in her voice compels me to turn my head against the blanket over her lap and hide my face completely. She doesn’t prod. Nothing but the wacky antics happening on screen disturbs my self-pity session. Mia already knows me well enough to let the silence stretch and simply go on stroking her fingers through my hair to let me know she’s here. I truly don’t deserve her.

I lay that way for a while, hiding from my problems, when suddenly a knock sounds on my door.

I pop my head up and share a startled look with Mia.

“Did you order takeout?” she says.

“No, did you?”

“Definitely not.”

Our mutual confusion deepens. It’s too late for it to be someone with a pamphlet about their church or a door-to-door salesman, but who else would be knocking on my door at all, let alone at this time of night?

A second knock comes, this one louder and more urgent. Then a voice calls through the door.

“Avery, are you home? It’s me.”

The surge of emotion that explodes in my chest must overflow onto my face, because Mia’s eyebrows shoot up.

“Is that him?” she mouths, barely pronouncing each word.

I nod mutely.

“Holy shit,” she mouths.

Then she flies into action, smoothing down my mussed hair. I left it loose, too lazy to do anything with it, and she quickly arranges it around my shoulders so it falls neatly onto my chest.

“I’m wearing sweatpants and an old T-shirt,” I say. “What do I do?”

“Answer it, bitch. Stop pretending you’re not gorgeous just because you’re in sweats.”

Mia all but pushes me off the couch, and I force myself onto shaky legs. I can’t bring myself to approach the door, however. What possible reason would Diego have for

coming here after that conversation we had in his office a few days ago? What is suddenly so urgent that he needs to march out here at this time of night? Is this him putting the final nail in the coffin, pushing me away for good, tying up loose ends so I know there's not even a glimmer of hope left? No, that doesn't make sense. He could do that over text. He's here in person for a reason.

"Avery," he calls. "Please answer. Please."

His pleading finally motivates my body to move, but it's like I'm floating toward the door instead of walking. I can barely feel my legs. My chest is fluttering and thrumming like my heart is a bee hopping anxiously from flower to flower. I'm hardly breathing when I reach the door.

The thud of the deadbolt unlocking beats like a hammer against an anvil. I crack the door open and there he is, standing on my doorstep looking absolutely frantic. The fear in his face has me throwing the door open wider. Diego sweeps inside, but his gaze darts immediately to Mia on the couch.

"Hey," Mia says, waving awkwardly. "I'll just ... um..."

"I'm sorry," Diego says. "I didn't realize... I didn't mean to interrupt. "

"We were watching movies," I say, numb, hollow, my brain locking up like an old engine as I try to process all of this.

Mia is already getting herself up off the couch. "I'll head out."

It takes until she's throwing her coat and shoes on at the door for me to catch up.

"Wait, Mia. I'm sorry. I'm not kicking you out," I say.

She pauses, smiling at me. Mia pats my shoulder and leans in close to kiss my cheek. As she does, she speaks low and quiet in my ear.

“Go get him, Avery. You’ve got this.”

My heart swells with gratitude. I hug Mia before she can slip away, and she squeezes me tight. She gives me one final smile before she sneaks out the door.

Then it’s just me and Diego. Me and Diego standing in the foyer in awkward silence, staring at each other, waiting for the other person to start speaking.

“Her name’s Mia,” I say. “She knows. She was at the club.”

I expect Diego to reel back from that news, but he nods and gathers himself. “My roommate Leo was there too. He knows. I told him about ... all of it.”

My eyebrows flicker up with surprise. “You told someone?”

“I had to,” Diego says. “I ... wasn’t doing well after the last time we talked.”

He wasn’t doing well? He’s the one who pseudo-broke up with me ! What right does he have to be the one “not doing well?”

“Listen, Avery, I messed up,” Diego says. “Last time we talked, it all came out wrong. You’d just said ... you’d just said that to me, and I tried to talk to you about schools that are across the country, across the world. I was an idiot, a complete idiot. I didn’t realize how it was going to sound because ... because I haven’t really done this before. Nothing in my life has prepared me for ... for you.”

“Me?”

“I come from nowhere, Avery. I come from a place you wouldn’t even call a town. I used to drive for hours to get a drink with a guy. I’ve never really done this. But I want to do it with you.”

All I can do is blink. My breath is caught in my chest, frozen between my lungs and my mouth. It takes a beat before I remember to breathe.

“I don’t understand,” I say, voice thin. Where is all this coming from all of a sudden? What is he saying?

Diego digs into the pockets of his coat. His hand emerges clutching several printed out sheets of paper. He holds them up like those crumpled pages explain everything.

“Can I show you something?” he says.

I don’t know how to answer that, so I wave at my coffee table, where me and Mia’s ice cream sits melting into soup. Diego kicks off his shoes and heads there. I follow more slowly. By the time I reach him, he’s pushed the ice cream aside and is smoothing those papers down on the table. As I settle beside him on the couch, I realize they’re brochures and information pages from various websites. When they sit side-by-side, I spot the words “graduate program” in repeating in bolded fonts.

My first instinct is to be pissed as hell.

“I did some research,” Diego says. “Before you get mad, hear me out. These are all programs I think you could apply to someday. If you want to. But this one—” He pulls out one paper in particular and sets it atop the rest. “This is Montridge’s. The one I’m in. The one I’ll be in for the next couple years.” He glances aside at me, but I sit very still, trying not to betray my thudding heart. “You can see that it compares well to these other programs, some of which are the top places to study gender and sexuality in the world .”

“What are you saying?” I manage.

Diego leaves the papers on the table and turns as much as he can to face me. His knees bump into mine. He scoops my hands into his, holding them and meeting my eyes.

“I think you could do this,” he says. “I think you’re brilliant and amazing and could change this field if you stayed in academia. I think you could change the world, Avery. You’re that incredible. And ... and I want to be there when you do it. I want you to choose Montridge because ... because that’s where I’ll be. That’s where I’ll stay. If you want me to.”

My lips fall open. I breathe in short sips. Diego’s eyes never leave mine, but they waver behind his glasses, that soft brown filled with anxiety over my response to this audacious proposal.

“Stay and study with you?” I say.

“Yes,” he says. “Yes, if you want to. If you’re willing. But if you want me to leave, I’ll do it. I’ll get out of your life and out of your way. You deserve this more than I ever did.”

“That isn’t true.” I find my voice at last, and squeeze his hands hard. “That isn’t true at all. I never even considered doing this until I met you.”

Diego opens his mouth to argue, but I press a finger over his lips. Now that I’ve started speaking, I know exactly what I need to say, what my heart needs to say.

“And I can’t imagine continuing to do it without you,” I say. “I can’t imagine doing what I love without the man I love.”

I've said it again, but I don't care. Diego came here for a big revelation, for a last chance. Well, there's mine. I love you, idiot. Take it or leave it.

"I won't do this halfway," I say. "I'm either all in — or nothing at all. "

I've put myself out there, played all my cards. I'm touched by Diego's consideration, by the effort he went to to show me the future we might have. It shows that he does care, but caring isn't enough. I'm going to do this for real, or I'm going to walk away.

It's up to Diego.

Chapter Twenty-Eight

Diego

ALL OR NOTHING. I should have known. Avery has never been anything but unapologetically themselves, and that refreshing authenticity is one of the things that drew me so strongly to them.

Now I have to match their bravery.

My heart is slamming against my chest like my fist pounded on their door. That frantic, irrational organ led me here, so I guess I need to trust it. I'd hoped that my actions would speak for themselves, but that was cowardly of me. Avery isn't stupid; they know what this means. But I can't blame them for wanting me to say it after all I've put them through. From the very beginning, I've done nothing but run. Even when I wasn't running, I hid from the truth, dodging anything that seemed too big, too scary .

If that ain't the story of my time in Montridge, I don't know what is.

The second I arrived, I thought about turning back home. Then Avery happened and I was so terrified I nearly packed my things and bailed. Seeing my family added a stab of homesickness to the stack of reasons to run.

But Avery made all of those things better. They showed me around this crazy town, they charmed the hell out of my parents, they gave me something worth staying for.

That something is them.

“Avery,” I say.

The feel of their name on my tongue strengthens my resolve. That familiar, gentle sound warms me like freshly brewed tea. I clasp their hands in mine. Or maybe they’re the one holding me. It’s difficult to tell when it feels like the whole world is tilting away from me.

“If I stay,” I say, “if we both stay, if we stay here together, it’s because ... it’s because I do love you.”

There is so much more I need to add on to that, but it was hard enough getting those words out. I lack the strength for more, especially because Avery isn’t responding. They’re simply sitting there watching me, light eyes picking me apart like I’m a tapestry unspooling under their keen gaze.

“Say something,” I plead.

I didn’t know I was going to say those words tonight. I didn’t come here planning to say them. But now that I’ve spoken that fragile feeling aloud, all I can do is wait.

Avery takes an unsteady breath. “I mean, I need to see what the applications require. And I’m only a junior. I have to figure out the timing, money, scholarships, if I’d really stay here or go somewhere else or...”

“Does that mean you’ll consider it?”

They meet my eyes. “Yes. Yes, I will. If you’ll give me a chance.”

“You can’t do this for me, Avery.”

“I’m not doing it for you,” they say. “But I never thought about any of this until I met you. I never imagined myself continuing on and being some kind of researcher or academic. When I think about it, it’s scary, honestly. It feels too big for someone like me. But if you were with me, I think I could handle it.”

“I will be,” I say. “If you want me to be.”

Finally, a smile breaks through the tension on their face. “I do. Of course I do.”

I can’t take any more. All the tension, all the build up, all the uncertainty — it breaks like a storm suddenly erupting out of a clear sky. I release Avery’s hands so I can cup their face and pull them to me, smashing their lips into mine. They taste like surety, like confidence, like home. As they grab the front of my shirt and kiss me back, all those fears I’ve held onto all semester melt away, and I know for the first time that I’m exactly where I should be, doing exactly what I should be doing .

As we go on kissing, Avery crowds into my space. I sit back, and they sling a leg over my thighs to sit in my lap. My hands rest on their hips, theirs on the stubble shadowing my jaw. Their thumbs rub against it, a coarse prickle.

“I thought you were trying to break up with me the other day,” they say, and the hurt in their voice pierces straight through me.

“Why the hell would I do that?”

“Because this is complicated and messy and new and scary?” they say.

I chuckle. “It is. It is complicated and messy and new and scary. You freaking terrify me, Avery. I’ve never known anyone like you. I’ve never lived in a place like this. I’ve never done half the things we’ve done together. But you make me want to try everything I’ve never done. You make me want to explore the whole world.”

Avery's smile is soft and smitten. I hope some echo of it shows on my face.

"I can't believe that when I met you you thought Montridge was a city," Avery says. "And now you want to travel the world. Quite a change for my small-town boy."

"I might be getting ahead of myself, but I think if I was with you, I could do all of the things that used to scare me."

"I want to show you those things," Avery says. "I want to go everywhere and do everything with you. "

They bend down to kiss me, slow and sensual, licking into my mouth. Heat builds between us, and my hands wander to the small of their back, riding the slow wave of their body as they shift atop me. There's no chance of misunderstanding when we're like this, our bodies screaming the words we might stutter otherwise.

Avery groans and drags themselves away from my mouth. When they sit back on my thighs and chew on their bottom lip, I just about lose my composure and throw them onto the couch cushions then and there.

"I wasn't expecting this," they say. "Everything's upstairs. Come on. I don't want to do this on the couch, as fun as that was last time. No one will ever hang out with me again if they find out that this is how I use my living room."

They slip off my thighs, and I mourn the loss of their weight and warmth. Avery offers me a hand, and I take it, letting them drag me to my feet. The forgotten ice cream is a puddle in its container on the table, but Avery doesn't seem to care as they lead me out of the living room and toward the stairs.

Our footsteps thump in time with my heart. As we walk, our conversation echoes in my head. I don't regret a word of it. I should have said most of it sooner. But one part

in particular keeps coming back to me, the part about trying everything with them, going everywhere with them, doing things I'm afraid of with them .

Maybe it's time I give them my trust, my full trust. Maybe it's time I take a leap of faith with them.

A flurry of doubt rises in my mind like a cloud of buzzing insects. What am I thinking? I just confessed the words I'm most afraid of, and now I'm trying to leap into even more uncharted territory? It has to be the adrenaline of the moment, but despite my doubts, I can't dislodge the thought from my mind once it arises. It's like a pebble in my shoe, persistently digging at me until I give it attention.

Avery drags me into their room. They don't bother closing the door before they turn to me and start sliding my jacket off to pool on the floor.

"We are not doing this with a bunch of clothes on again," they say, laughter edging their voice.

I'm too tense to say anything. I peel their shirt off, then let them do the same to me. Their hair is loose around them, silky and dark against their pale skin. I run a hand through it as I draw them back to my mouth for a deep kiss full of probing tongues. Avery runs their hands over my bare chest, squeezing as they go, enjoying every detail of my body, and I can vividly imagine the way they'd lavish every inch of me with attention if I gave them the go-ahead to do so.

So really, what the hell am I waiting for?

I start walking them toward the bed, and they go gleefully. We separate to climb onto the mattress. Avery throws aside their sweatpants about as quickly as they can. I'm a bit slower in getting my jeans and boxers out of the way, partially from nerves. The sight of their long, lean body entirely naked for me helps. It helps a lot. I couldn't

keep myself from following them into bed even if I wanted to, and I certainly don't want to.

Avery grins, shuffling backward as I pursue them onto the mattress. I end up over them, and they lace their fingers into my hair to pull me to their mouth. Our bodies are boiling hot when our skin meets, our tongues sloppy as we plunder each other's mouths. We grind against each other, incapable of keeping still when we're naked and close and touching. It's like this energy that simply has to come out of us, this desire that has to take physical form lest it explode and destroy us instead.

Maybe it's that desire that gives me the strength to pull away and speak.

Avery looks confused at first. Lying under me, their hand tangled in my hair, a question waits in their eyes. I draw a deep breath and make myself say the words that popped into my head as we ascended the stairs.

"I want you to be the one to do it tonight," I say.

They blink rapidly, confusion and understanding warring for dominance. "The one to do ... that?"

"Yes," I say.

"Is that something you've tried before?"

"Only once."

"And? "

I swallow to steady myself. "It wasn't the right time. It wasn't the right person. But this is, and you are. And if you're willing, I'd like to try it again. I'd like to know ...

what it's like with someone like you, someone I care about this much."

"Diego," they say, soft with wonder.

"You've broken down every line and barrier and binary that I thought I knew. Why not break this one down too?"

I try to chuckle, but I'm so nervous the sound trips out of me, clumsy and a little too high.

Avery strokes their hand through my hair. "Diego, I'd love to try this with you."

A held breath blows out of me. I'm smiling. I'm relieved, I realize. I didn't know I was so tense while waiting for their response. I didn't know I wanted this so badly that I was hanging on the edge.

Avery pushes themselves up, swapping our positions. I end up on my back gazing up at them, and I can't imagine a more wonderful sight.

"I'm going to make you feel so good, baby," they say.

And then they take me into the unknown.

Chapter Twenty-Nine

Avery

I CAN'T STOP kissing him. I know I'm supposed to be focusing on other things, but I linger against his mouth, letting our bodies rest against each other. I wiggle my hips to feel him against me, and Diego makes a little sound into my mouth.

It's absolutely addictive.

I definitely didn't think this was how my evening was going to go. I thought I'd watch movies and eat ice cream and fall asleep on the couch until Mia shook me awake. As much as I love Mia, this is way better.

My hands can't stay still, and neither can Diego's, apparently. Our touches are sloppy and aimless. Even with a goal in mind, neither of us are in a rush. For the first time, we're doing this with a big, open, thrilling future ahead of us, and it makes me want to take it slow and savor every second.

Despite my best intentions, however, I do eventually need to breathe. When I break from Diego's mouth, I find him rosy beneath me. His cheeks are darker than usual, his amber brown eyes liquid with heat, like chocolate melting on my tongue. I can't believe I get to have him. I can't believe we're going to do this together.

I find myself scrambling for the nightstand beside my bed. Diego watches every movement, his anxiety prickling at me. I set the supplies on the bed, but leave them lying there and go back to Diego. I get that this can be intimidating, especially if he's

tried it before and it didn't go that well, but I'm not about to let him feel anything but incredible tonight.

I return to his mouth. Touching conveys my determination better than words. I'm not going to tell him what I can show him instead.

My hand sneaks down him, taking a wandering path over his body. I feel down his abs, over his flat belly. I give his cock a lazy stroke, play with his sac, grip his thigh to move one leg a little wider for me. The way he stays relaxed encourages me to keep going. I trail my lips down his neck, then enjoy his chest while feeling around for the lube. He might notice my hand moving, but he forgets when I flick my tongue at his nipple, then tug it between my teeth. Diego inhales sharply, his chest swelling under my lips .

As much as I want to keep toying with him, his breathing is raspy and I can't actually open the container with one hand while not looking, so I interrupt myself to deal with it. Diego is watching, and I lean forward and pluck off his glasses to make him stop. I stretch to set them on the nightstand, but my other hand goes low, touching him, grazing against him. He sucks in a breath, even though this isn't remotely new territory. It merely comes with new implications this time.

"Are you going to go this slow the whole time?" Diego says.

His impatience surprises me, but a beat later I grin wickedly down at him. "Yes, if I feel like it. Are you complaining?"

"Not yet."

"Wow, suddenly we're making demands? I guess I'll have to take good care of you, hm?"

His lips twist like he's holding back laughter. As we spoke, I kept feeling him, kept prodding, enjoying myself with lazy presses. I slip inside him now, and his mirth melts into open desire. Good. I want him to keep looking at me like that. I want him languid and wanting and hot.

His expression opens as I squeeze my fingers into him, working him loose. As badly as I want his lips again, watching them part as his breathing shreds into tatters is its own sort of enticement. I almost lose track of my goal as I spear my fingers into him and watch him shatter on them, his hips starting to work as he begins to crack and lose control.

"That's it," I say, breathy and quiet. The words come out on their own, like I can't help encouraging him as he lies beneath me so handsome and wanton.

I almost push it too far before I manage to stop myself. God, it's hard. It takes a real effort to remind myself what I'm supposed to be doing when I could spend the whole night touching him this way, slowly, slowly working him over until he breaks again and again for me, until he's begging me to stop, until he can't take any more.

Some other night, perhaps. We have that kind of time now, I remind myself, and the thought leaves me giddy.

I slip my fingers free, and Diego turns onto his side.

Interesting. So he does have some ideas about this. Well, I'm certainly not complaining.

I get ready as quickly as I can manage it, then slide close. At first, I merely touch my tip to his rim, letting him feel me there. With him on his side, I can hunch over him. I can even bend down and kiss his shoulder, my hair cascading past my neck as I do.

Diego shifts his hips, perhaps an involuntary motion, but we both feel it when it makes his ass rub against my cock. I reach a hand down and angle myself at him with more intention this time, and with just a bit of suggestion I start squeezing into him.

Tension streaks through Diego, but I simply pause and let it pass. He reaches back, holding his own cheek like he's physically opening himself to me, and I push a little more. It's tight and hot inside him, and I struggle to hold back wanting to sink even more of myself into the clench of his ass.

"Avery."

I don't realize that I'm hanging my head and concentrating so hard until Diego's voice calls me back. He doesn't say anything more, just reaches up and threads my long hair between his fingers, then slowly pulls me down to him. The motion makes me shift, pushing more of me inside of him, but he doesn't stop, not until I'm all the way to his lips, tasting his groan as his body clutches me tight.

Fuck, this is heaven. His mouth. His ass. Us locked together like this. With each beat of my heart, the swarm of sensation swells, and I'm caught in the center of it. More and more of me slides into him as Diego encourages me to delve deeper. He chews at my bottom lip as I roll my hips experimentally, and, well, I don't need to be a scientist to interpret the results of that test. I do it again, shifting however feels good, and Diego moans. I dip my head, kissing along his neck. It's not that I don't still want his mouth, but if I kiss him here instead those noises he's making will have nowhere to hide.

I start going faster, sensing Diego's growing need. His hand tangles more tightly in my hair, almost yanking me down against him. I suck hard on his neck and let my hips go at last, let them pivot forward with a bit of a snap.

"Oh," he gasps, halfway between a gasp and an expletive.

I almost lose my composure and laugh. Of all the things to say in a moment like that, “oh” is just about the most mild Midwestern Diego thing he could have chosen.

I hang on, moving my hips harder, driving my cock into him now that I know it’s welcome. Maybe I can make him say something else, something actually harsh or filthy. I’ve at least got to try, right?

I prop myself up on my arms to get better leverage. Diego’s still pulling on my hair, like he can’t stand to let it go, but the prickle is pleasant as the motion of my body moves us both. Diego’s eyes are screwed shut, his head tilting back, his mouth open around broken whimpers. He’s always the quieter of the two of us, and that holds true even tonight. The moan I let out every time I sink into his blissful heat is much louder than his little whines.

I’ll have to work on that.

I dive into him, shifting subtly until I find an angle that makes his whole body jerk. That’s it. That’s what he needs. That’s what I need, if I’m going to shatter him the way he shatters me.

I chase after it, doggedly determined, thrusting into him with all I have so I can hit that particular angle again and again. Finally, Diego’s voice rises. Finally, he moans from every thrust. Finally, he’s pitching louder than me .

He releases my hair and grabs at himself, so overcome he actually fumbles his own cock at first. Then he has himself and he’s moving in shaky little jerks, begging for relief.

“That’s it,” I say. “That’s it, baby. You feel good, don’t you?”

It’s not a sincere question. The answer is written in every breath, in the heat billowing

off his skin, in the sounds leaping from his throat. But I'm greedy. I want to hear it anyway.

"Don't you?" I push.

"Yeah," he gasps. "Yes. Fuck. Yes. I do. I..."

His body goes taut. I don't push him more. He's already dancing along the edge, and I have to rush to keep up. I can't believe that after all this it's Diego who breaks first, who shouts and comes over his fist while I'm still diving into him searching for release.

I thrust hard and fast, not wanting to overstimulate him but needing the relief promised by his body. His orgasm thunders through him, and he clenches around me. My eyes snap shut as the pressure threatens to blind me. I pound into him, thinking of nothing but the warmth, the tightness, the feel of my entire cock clutched inside his body.

I definitely shout louder than him when I follow him.

The sound explodes from my throat as I empty inside him. I can't hold it back even a fraction. It scrapes along my tongue before filling the bedroom, and I lose sight of everything but pure, head-spinning pleasure.

I swear I've never had an orgasm like this. I swear I've never come so hard. I'm floating out of my own body, leaving behind everything but this warm feeling of total bliss.

When I come back to myself, I find myself lying atop Diego, panting for breath while he combs his fingers through my hair. Shit, I don't know how long I've been lying on him like this. It can't be that long. He's not complaining, and there's still sweat slick

on our skin where we touch. Even so, I force myself up on arms that feel like they don't have a single bone left in them and pull myself out of him.

Leaving the bed even temporarily is torment. I return as swiftly as I can and get us both under the sheets. I lie on Diego, my head on his chest, a leg thrown over his thighs, his fingers right back in my hair where they constantly seem to end up.

“Was it okay?” I say.

Diego's laugh rumbles under me. “You're joking, right?”

I push myself up enough to meet his eyes. “No. You said you only tried it once before. You seemed nervous. I want to know.”

Diego's gaze is unsteady with his glasses set aside. He keeps threading my hair between his fingers like a ribbon. “Yes, it was okay,” he says, but he wears a smile that says it was a whole lot more than okay. “Shall I write up a proper review?”

“You would.”

“And you would actually read it and take it seriously.”

We dissolve into laughter, and I settle my head back down on his chest. For a long time, we're quiet, just breathing, just being here like this, just feeling the new rush of a future that's big and wide and thrilling. And suddenly I realize the answer to what he asked me when he banged on my door tonight.

“I've been thinking,” I say eventually.

“You were thinking during that?” Diego says. “Because I definitely couldn't.”

I chuckle. “Not really. Okay, sort of. Look, my brain kind of never shuts up.”

“I believe that.”

“The point is,” I say, “I was thinking about everything you said when you showed up tonight, what you proposed. And maybe it’s just endorphins or whatever, but I feel like if I did this I’d want it to be an adventure. I wouldn’t want to stay in Montridge. If I’m going to do this, I want to go all the way. I want to travel the world. I want to experience something totally new.”

“Totally new, huh?” Diego says, a thread of tension winding through his voice.

“Yeah,” I say. “We have such a crazy opportunity, Diego. We could go anywhere. We could do anything. We’re young, and we have each other, and that’s not a chance everyone gets. I want to do it all with you. I don’t want to sit around and study in a place where I’ve lived for four years, a place that’s a couple towns away from my parents’ house. I want to experience something.”

I get more excited with each word, but Diego is quiet and still under me. I push myself up again, anxious to see his reaction. He’s watching me calmly, a shadow of a smile on his lips.

“You’re going to run me ragged,” he says. He tucks my hair behind my ear, fingertips grazing the side of my face. “If that’s what you want, then that’s what you should do.”

“And what about you?”

My heart is going way too fast when I should be calming down, riding the cooldown.

Diego sighs. “I’ll miss home,” he says.

My heart skips its next several beats. “Does that mean?”

His smile widens. “Yes, Avery. I told you, you keep breaking down every barrier I think I know. Why stop now? You’re going to drag me around the world, and it’s going to be the most wonderful adventure of my entire life.”

I grin so hard my cheeks hurt. A swell of emotion expands my chest. I’m a balloon about to pop and spray confetti all over this room, but the thought of going on this grand adventure with Diego beside me is beyond my wildest dreams .

“It’s going to be so amazing,” I say. “I promise. I don’t know where we’ll go yet, but it’s going to be so, so amazing. It could be Japan or England or Italy or Brazil or Ireland or ... or I don’t even know. There’s so many places out there, and I want to see all of them.”

Diego chuckles and guides me down to his mouth to stop me from rambling on.

“How about we take it one at a time?” he says. “For my sake.”

I kiss him as hard as I can, too hard, but it’s the only way to explain all that’s overflowing out of me. “Yes,” I say. “We can do that. I can be patient.”

There’s no more anchor weighing me down. I’m free to dash off in any direction I choose. The future isn’t easy, but it’s not nearly as overwhelming as it seemed when I moved into this house. With Diego beside me, I’m ready to take it on.

Chapter Thirty

Diego

A year and a half later...

AVERY SQUEEZES MY hand. “It’s going to be fine. Calm down.”

I cannot calm down. I cannot calm down at all.

We’re standing on a mat that says “WELCOME” in huge letters with flowers all around it. Avery doesn’t bother knocking on the door before us. They simply open it, and a wave of noise and laughter and good food smell washes over me, warm as a hug.

Avery pulls me into their parents’ house.

We’ve waited a year and a half for me to meet them. We wanted Avery to graduate so that there couldn’t be any weird questions about the relationship. Avery insisted their parents wouldn’t care, but I couldn’t face Avery’s parents while there was any possibility they’d see me as a creep or something. Not a chance.

In the meantime, I’ve dragged Avery out to Wisconsin more than once. Well, not dragged. Avery all but insisted on joining me and meeting my family. They charmed my parents as easily the second and third time as they did on that first coincidental meeting at the university. My siblings were easy marks for their bubbly personality and quick wit as well. It was almost distressing how much my entire family instantly

loved Avery.

We went to the farm down the road that makes fudge. We went to my tiny middle/high school. We even went out to the gay bar. Avery experienced my whole world, and they took it in with open arms.

It's my turn to experience their world.

My hand is so sweaty I feel like it might slip right out of their grasp as they pull me into their parents' house. A middle-aged woman calls out in delight the moment we're inside. Then it's like an avalanche of affection. Avery's sisters pound down the stairs to see them. Their dad insists on sitting us down on the couch and getting us something to drink.

"They can be a lot the first time," someone sitting in the window seat says.

This has to be Gabriel, Avery's older brother. He's dark-haired and dark-eyed, and he sits cuddled up against a silent stone of a man with shaved sides and a blank expression.

"Trent survived it," Gabriel says, nodding at his boyfriend. "If he can do it, you'll be fine."

I appreciate the sentiment, but at the moment I'm so overwhelmed that the couch is like a boulder I cling to for safety in the middle of a rushing river. I sit pressed up against one side with Avery beside me, their hand on my thigh like they're anchoring me in place.

"However," Gabriel says, "I do have questions."

"Gabriel, be nice," Avery says.

“Who suggested I’m not going to be nice? I just have questions.”

Avery rolls their eyes but does not stop their brother from continuing.

“You two have been dating for a while now, huh?” Gabriel says.

I swallow. I know Avery explained the whole thing to him, even the TA part. While Avery was willing to keep this from most of their family, they’re close with Gabriel and wanted to tell him the full truth.

“Yes, we have,” I say.

“And now you’re taking my dear sibling out of the country, huh?” Gabriel says.

I shoot a look over at Avery. “It’s not ... like that.”

I am not at all acing this. The weight of Gabriel’s gaze pins me to the couch and leaves me sweating through my T-shirt. Trent is silent and imposing beside him. I have no idea what the guy is thinking, if he’s completely checked out or combing over my every word. He’s impossible to read, and offers not so much as a twitch of his lips.

“I...” I gather myself. “When Avery was a student, I realized that they’re ... they’re really brilliant.” I look at Avery instead of their brother as I get going, and the words come easier. “They were far beyond their classmates. Every essay, all that research they did — it was clear they could do so much more than graduate and go straight into some office job.”

I finally turn my gaze back to Gabriel, but I’m more determined and steady now. “So yes, I encouraged them to apply to graduate programs and keep studying, keep researching, keep contributing to the field. And I promised I’d go with them wherever

they wanted to go.”

Gabriel’s eyebrows rise. Trent cracks the thinnest of smiles, one side of his mouth pulling up ever so slightly.

“He’s right,” Trent says quietly, and somehow I know that means I’ve survived.

Gabriel breaks into a smile every bit as bright and charming as Avery’s. I see the resemblance now, and perhaps even the reason they’re so close. There’s a similarity to the mannerisms. As Gabriel’s stern older brother act falls away, I glimpse a glimmer of Avery beneath it, a face made for joy and smiling.

“This program is incredible,” Avery chimes in. “It’s one of the best in the entire world. I can’t believe I even got in. ”

“Of course you got in,” Gabriel says. “You’re brilliant, like he said.”

Avery shakes their head but doesn’t disagree. “It’s kind of intimidating, to be honest. Going so far from home and everything. But it’s exciting too. Especially because I’ll have someone I care about with me.”

Avery catches my eyes, and for a moment there’s no one else in the entire house, just us sitting there on the couch clinging to each other and smiling about the bright future awaiting us.

“Oh God, stop it, you’re so cute I’m going to throw up,” Gabriel says, but he’s laughing. “Alright, alright, I get it. I just had to be sure. You’re my baby sibling, and Mom is about to lose both of us once Trent and I make our big move out to Seattle. It’s going to be hard on her, and I had to know it was worth it.”

He rises and comes to stand before us. Gabriel ruffles Avery’s hair and leans closer

so he can lower his voice.

“But clearly it is, and I’m really, really happy for you.”

Avery’s eyes shine with emotion. They surge up to wrap their brother in a hug. “I’m really happy too.”

Trent and I share a sympathetic glance as Gabriel and Avery dive into some deep sibling conversation that doesn’t involve either of us. It’s kind of adorable, and I tuck it away to tease Avery with later.

Avery’s father interrupts the sibling reunion to call us into the kitchen for dinner. It’s a tight fit with me and Trent adding to a family of six. But everyone squeezes in without complaint, completely happy to sit elbow-to-elbow with whomever is beside them.

Mashed potatoes, carrots, roasted chicken, green beans, dinner rolls. The table is overflowing with food, and everyone starts jostling to get some onto their plates. It’s lucky for me that Avery is a pro at navigating this, because I’m pretty sure I would sit here looking stupid and not manage to eat a single thing if it weren’t for them filling my plate for me. Trent is on my other side, and I notice Gabriel doing the same for him. Apparently, being a boyfriend to one of the Aaron siblings comes with privileges.

The conversation is light. Mostly, Avery’s sisters want to catch up with them now that they’ve graduated. And of course, Avery’s parents have all the usual questions about how school was, how saying goodbye to their friends was, all of that. I sit back and keep quiet, more than content to be overlooked during this family get together. Trent seems to have the same idea. Except that when Mom’s attention swings toward the two quiet shadows at the table, she leaves Trent be.

(“Gabriel has known him since they were kids. Trent’s eaten dinner at our house like a hundred times. No one expects him to talk,” Avery explains to me later.)

“So, you went to school with Avery?” Mom says .

I barely choke down my mashed potatoes. Here it is. I promised Avery I wouldn’t lie, but I also don’t really want to tell their parents the whole story. I’m still convinced they’d be horrified by the fact I first met Avery when they were my student and I was their TA.

“Yes, though I was a graduate student,” I say.

“But you’re also studying gender and sexuality?”

“That’s right. So we had some opportunities to run into each other on campus and stuff.”

“I see.”

My chest clenches. I don’t know if that’s a bad “I see” or a I’m-going-to-murder-you-for-taking-advantage-of-my-precious-child “I see.”

“We did research together,” Avery says. “Since Diego was in a graduate program, he knew a lot of things I didn’t. He was really kind, actually, mentoring me and stuff. I learned a lot of things I wouldn’t have without him.”

“Boring,” one of Avery’s sisters mutters.

“Cora, stop it,” Avery’s mother says. “It’s not boring to them.”

Cora, the youngest Aaron at the table, rolls her eyes dramatically. “You two are such

nerds.”

“That’s why they’re meant for each other,” the other young sister chimes in, elbowing Cora.

I can feel the heat crawling up my face.

“Nerds are cool now. Shut up,” Avery says. “And your room is full of fantasy novels so who are you calling a nerd, Abigail?”

Abigail flushes scarlet and looks like she wants to launch a fresh attack, but Avery’s father cuts in.

“We’re not fighting at the dinner table,” he says. “We have guests.”

“Trent doesn’t count as a guest,” Abigail says. “He’s practically lived here since him and Gabriel were kids.”

“Then we have guest,” Avery’s father says. “And we’re going to mind our manners.”

“Whatever,” Abigail grumbles.

“Anyway,” Avery’s mother says, “it sounds like you two have a lot in common. And now you’re going all the way to London to keep studying?”

She’s trying to sound casual, but I can hear the motherly strain in her voice. Her baby is flying to a whole different continent at the end of the summer. It’s got to be rough on her.

“It’ll mostly be Avery doing the studying,” I say. “I’m transitioning between programs.”

In truth, I'm not sure exactly what I'm doing next. I have my graduate degree. The program is only two years. But I never thought I'd get it and then dash to London. The future is a huge unknown, but that doesn't scare me the way it used to. In fact, I'm kind of excited about it.

Avery's parents let me off the hook for the rest of the dinner, moving on to easier topics. I don't have to talk a lot, and when everyone's done eating, I insist on helping clean up while Avery and their siblings hang out in the living room. Eventually, it's just me and Avery's father in the kitchen, silently washing dishes.

"Take care of them, alright?" Avery's father says.

His voice is so soft and mild that I almost lose it under the rush of the water gushing out of the tap. A lump clogs my throat at the quiet sincerity of his plea.

"I will, sir," I say.

He smiles over at me. "I know. I can tell. And it'll do me and Avery's mother good to know they're with someone who cares about them when we aren't there to protect them."

I can't speak. I swallow and swallow as we finish with the dishes, but my throat never clears.

When the dishes sit in a drying rack, Avery's father and I wipe off our hands. The living room is a tumult, and we watch it silently for a moment before Avery's father sets his hand on my shoulder and gives it a squeeze. Avery notices us, and waves to urge me to join them on the couch.

"Go ahead," Avery's father says, and it feels like more than just encouragement to join the conversation in the living room. It feels like a blessing, like he's almost

passing Avery into my care. I know Avery can take care of themselves, but I also know what their father is asking of me.

“Okay,” I say. “I will.”

That’s a promise I mean to keep.

Chapter Thirty-One

Avery

MOM IS ALREADY crying. Abigail and Cora's eyes shine with tears they refuse to shed. Dad is keeping a calm exterior, but he's asked about our flight schedule and how long security is going to take about a dozen times.

"And you're sure you have everything?" he says. "You didn't forget your passport? You have enough clothes and toiletries? What about your toothbrush?"

"I'm pretty sure they have clothes and toothbrushes in London," I say. "And my passport is right here."

I hold it up to show him, but he starts rattling off other items I might have missed or forgotten until Mom sets a placating hand on his arm. She doesn't speak, just shakes her head, her lip trembling, a tear rolling down her cheek.

"Oh, Mom, don't cry," I say .

I leave my rolling suitcase with Diego and bundle her into a hug. She breaks against my shoulder, crying into my hoodie while Dad rubs her back.

"I'm not disappearing, Mom," I say. "I'm just going to school. Same as when I was at Montridge."

"I could drive to Montridge," she sobs. "I can't drive to London."

“No, but you can come visit. And by the time you do, I’ll be like a local. I’ll show you everything. It’ll be incredible.”

My mother’s never been out of the country. The fact that I’m going to live across an entire ocean for at least the next couple years is hard on her, especially since Gabriel and Trent left a couple days ago to fly the opposite direction and start their lives in Seattle. Abigail and Cora are going to start college soon. All of her babies are scattering, her noisy, crazy, busy, loud home full of love and fights and holidays and chaos is going to become a lot quieter all of a sudden.

“I’m sorry, Mom,” I say. “I’ll visit as much as I can. And you come visit me, too, okay?”

“Okay,” she says.

She drags herself away, scrubbing at her face and sniffing. And that’s when I spot Dad red-eyed and wet-cheeked as well.

That’s what finally breaks me.

I sniffle, wiping hard at my eyes, but it’s all over. I’ve never seen my dad cry, and now he’s breaking down in Newark International Airport in the middle of the day.

“Dad, please, not you too,” I say.

He laughs, unashamed, and pulls me into a crushing hug. I hide my tears against his chest while he squeezes me tight.

“You be good, okay?” he says. “Study hard, but not too hard. See the place. Travel around. I hear you can take a train all the way to Italy.”

He lets me go, and his gaze darts to the man beside me. Diego doesn't flinch, but I can tell it's a near thing.

"And you," Dad says. "You take care of them, okay? That was our deal."

I don't know what "deal" Dad could be talking about, but Diego nods. "I will, sir."

Dad smiles, seeming genuinely comforted by Diego's response. Did they talk about this behind my back or something? When the hell were these two making deals about Diego taking care of me?

Abigail and Cora are next. They practically tackle me to the floor in front of the check-in kiosks. Busy travelers swerve around us, casting annoyed glares our way, but I don't care. These are my baby sisters, and I'm going to say goodbye to them before I don't see them for months.

"I'll be back for the holidays," I say. There's a break in the class schedule at the end of December. It doesn't perfectly match up with Hanukkah this year, but it doesn't matter. I'm already planning to fly home to see them, and Diego will be doing the same with his family until we need to go back in January.

"I know," Cora says. "But that's a long time."

"It won't be so long," I say, petting her hair.

Abigail pulls away and starts digging through her bag. She produces a beat up paperback barely clinging to its pages. A tattered bookmark juts out.

"Here," she says. "It's my favorite and I know you've never read it. You'll need it for the plane."

I take the book gingerly. This isn't merely her favorite. Abi has read this book dozens of times. The pages are yellow. A map of a fantasy world almost falls out of the book when I clutch it. I hug the book to my chest, and fresh tears burn the backs of my eyes.

"Abi, are you sure?"

She nods, biting her lip to keep it from trembling.

I hug her tightly. "Thank you. I'll read it. I promise. I'll message you the second I finish it."

"You could message while you read," she suggests timidly. "If you think of anything."

"Then I'll do that."

She nods and seems just slightly less likely to burst into tears.

I can't say the same for myself. I endure one more round of hugs, then Diego softly reminds me that we have a plane to catch. And that's it. I turn away and roll my suitcase toward the TSA security lines, trying my hardest not to look back. By the time I give up and do it, my family has left the airport.

Diego rubs circles on my back. "You okay?"

"Yeah. I'm alright, I think." I swallow down the tears, saving them for later, but my breath is shuddery and I still haven't released the book Abigail handed me. The memory of her fingers carefully turning the pages over and over lingers on every page.

We shuffle through the security line, taking off shoes and hoodies and belts, dropping all our belongings into bins for scans that probably don't even do much more than make getting to your flight a hassle. We make it to the other side, redress, gather our belongings and search the departures board for our gate. International flights are a shuttle ride away, so it's a good twenty or thirty minutes before we finally reach a terminal that says "London" on it with a departure time that's less than an hour away.

Holy shit. This is real.

A giddy thrill races through me, clashing with the lingering sadness of saying goodbye to my family for the next several months. Diego asks if I want anything to eat or drink, but my stomach can't handle that. I sit with our bags while he heads to an airport coffee stand, returning with two coffees and some baked goods anyway.

"It's not exactly your Boyfriend Café, but if you need to talk, I'm here," he says as he sets the food and drinks on the table before us.

We're sitting on high stools facing the gate, watching the airline employees deal with fussy travelers, observing the people we're about to spend eight or so hours with during a trans-Atlantic flight. Are any of them already as homesick as me? Or maybe some of them are headed home instead of jetting off into the unknown. It's impossible to tell from the roller bags and ereaders and handheld gaming consoles they carry.

"I'm going to miss them," I finally say. I sip on my coffee, except it's not coffee at all. "They had jasmine tea?"

"Yeah, I thought you'd like it better."

"You're more cut out for the Boyfriend Café than you give yourself credit for, Diego."

He chuckles shortly. "I guess I learned a thing or two. But really, are you alright? We can turn around and walk away."

"No way," I say quickly. As much as it was hard to say goodbye, the second he proposes abandoning our plans I push back. "We're doing this. And it's going to be amazing. I just haven't been away from my family for so long before. We've always been close."

"Me neither," Diego says. "It wasn't much better on my end, if that makes you feel better."

Having met his family, I can easily imagine that they were as emotional and broken up as my own, especially his mother. But I also know she would have encouraged Diego more strongly than anyone to stick with this, to go out and experience the world.

"I never imagined when I got to Montridge that I'd ever decide to go even farther away than that," Diego says.

I chuckle, recalling the terrified man who called Montridge a city when he first arrived.

"Sorry for messing up your life," I say, joking.

Diego smirks at me. "Yeah, you've really ruined my plans of being a sheltered hermit who studies my own community from afar. How dare you?"

"I guess I'm a bad influence."

The joking lightens the mood. I find that I do actually want my tea, and the chocolate-filled scone Diego selected for me too.

“You’re the best influence,” Diego says, turning serious. “If I hadn’t met you, I probably wouldn’t even have made it through my time in Montridge, let alone taken such a huge leap to go live across the world.”

“I wouldn’t have either, though,” I say. “I wasn’t going to continue studying. I was probably going to stay in New Jersey and work some office job. You’re the reason I’m sitting here today. You might not want to give yourself credit for that, but it’s true.”

Diego arrived in Montridge terrified, wanting to turn around and run right back to his small town out in Wisconsin. But together we discovered a hunger to travel, to explore, to dive into scary new things as long as we do it together. I might have been more bold to start with, but I wouldn’t be sitting in this airport waiting for an international flight if I didn’t have Diego next to me.

The PA system crackles with static and an airline employee starts rattling off instructions they’ve probably said a hundred times. “Boarding will begin shortly. Please check your ticket for your boarding group,” they finish.

Diego and I startle up to our feet. Diego gathers our trash while I make sure we have everything we need back in our bags. We roll our luggage into the line, but as we stand there waiting for our boarding group, Diego grabs my hand. His is shaky and a bit too warm, and boy, can I ever relate. We’re about to do this. The moment we step into that tunnel, we’ll be walking onto an airplane that will take us across an entire ocean and far from everything we know.

But now that the moment’s here, I couldn’t be more excited.

“You okay?” Diego says when the line starts to move, ushering us toward the plane.

“Yeah,” I say, and I really mean it this time.

I beam over at him, and my enthusiasm must be apparent, because he smiles as well, soft and genuine and relaxed. His hand is steady in mine, but I give it a squeeze anyway. We're about to walk away from everything we know, everything that's safe, everything that's familiar. We're about to leave it behind to go on a grand adventure, and we have no idea what the end result will be or what the future holds for us.

But we're both okay with that.

We step into the tunnel leading to the airplane, and our lives change forever.

Diego

Two years later...

THE STOREFRONT IS nondescript. It could be a convenience store. It could be a hotel. The windows offer a view of a sedate foyer where a single employee in black mills around aimlessly. I check my phone, but it claims this is the place.

What the hell have you dragged me into this time, Avery?

I stuff my phone in my back pocket and creep into the shop. Wood and vanilla wraps around me, a warmth that chases away the gray drizzle awaiting me outside on London's streets. I had to take the tube after work at a university across town to get here. In all my and Avery's two years here, I haven't yet ventured to this part of the sprawling city, and I feel the way I did when we first arrived two years ago: Completely lost and tremendously overwhelmed.

A lot has changed in those years. I found teaching work in gender studies, and I even get to continue doing research as part of my job. Avery is finishing up their degree, but when they do, we're thinking of staying here. We've come to love London. We've settled into a cute apartment near Avery's university, met a circle of friends in and outside of academia, and carved out a life for ourselves. Even the distance from our families has become manageable. I call home once a week and fly back whenever there's a break from classes.

But something that has never changed in all that time is Avery's propensity for dragging me off on some new adventure I never could have fathomed.

Today, it's this strange little shop in a strange corner of town.

"Hello, sir," the only employee says when I enter. "Do you need help finding something?"

She gestures around the room, which is empty of any apparent product. There's shelves bearing dishware and a desk that might be for the staff. That's it.

"No," I say. "I have a reservation, I think."

"Ah," she brightens as though I've uttered a magic password. "Last name?"

"It would be under Aaron."

She finds Avery's reservation on a program on her tablet, then motions for me to follow her. She takes me down a staircase set to the side of the room. At the bottom, a door awaits us. She actually pauses to knock on it before pushing it open and leading me inside. I'm either about to get murdered or step into Narnia.

We enter a room that's all dark, stained wood. Small tables sit spaced out in the center of the room. The same shelves as upstairs line the walls, these bearing even more elegant dishware, glasses in various sizes, clear teapots with flowers blooming inside them. There's also tins, and I can guess from the fragrance of earth and grass and vanilla and jasmine flowers what they contain.

So, Narnia, I suppose.

Avery stands up from a chair and rushes to greet me.

"You made it," they say. "I was worried you'd be late."

They're as handsome as ever in slacks and vest, a purple tie lying down their chest.

They've pulled their dark hair back into its customary ponytail. Gloss shines on their lips, and I nearly bend down to taste which flavor they've selected today before I remember the employee who escorted me down here.

"Please take a seat," she says. "Your server will be with you in a moment."

Avery all but drags me to one of the tables. There's nothing on it right now, but after only a few minutes a man dressed like a waiter comes out and sets several palm-sized clear glasses on it. Each one contains a different liquid, from one like pale spun gold to amber to a rosy brown. The aroma strikes me immediately, tender jasmine that adds the faintest floral perfume to the air.

"As you requested," the waiter says, "this is a selection of our jasmine teas for you to enjoy today. The jasmine mandarin is a white tea base that contains fragile leaves picked at dawn to perfectly perfume the tea, while the jasmine chung feng is a green tea base with a delicate jasmine scent. The bright yellow tea is our bohemian jasmine blend with jasmine and vanilla. You might also try the jasmine white and the jasmine mist, both white teas. Please enjoy."

The waiter bows a little and backs away, leaving Avery and I alone with our flight of tea.

"All this for tea," I say.

"Tea is very important," Avery says.

"So I see. You dressed up."

"Well, I can't give you the true Boyfriend Café experience otherwise, now can I?"

They've been threatening to show me their Boyfriend Café for years now, and I've always laughed it off. It seems Avery wasn't joking, however. They choose a tea and

take a sip, then pass a pale brew to me. I sip tentatively, only to discover that it's perfectly brewed. Just the right temperature. Light and sweet but not too sweet. And the scent of jasmine that hit my nose as I tipped the cup back added a whole extra dimension of flavor .

"This is incredible," I say.

Avery beams. "I know. It's supposed to be the best. I guess I see why."

"It must be expensive though." Everything in London is expensive, and Avery's still in school.

They shrug. "It is, but it's okay. We can treat ourselves one time. I promise."

"We're going to have instant noodles to eat for the rest of the month."

"It's worth it for this. Trust me. Try this one."

They pass me another tea, and I sip it. Somehow, it's completely different from the first, despite the white tea and jasmine being exactly the same. The difference is so subtle I can feel it more than I can name it.

"You're going to ruin all normal tea for me forever," I say. "This is like having some of that Swiss chocolate and then going home to your parents' place around the holidays and being handed a Hershey's bar."

Avery laughs. "They think we're such snobs for that."

"It's not our fault. They'd understand if they tried it. Didn't you send them those chocolates we got for them?"

"I did," Avery says. "My mother insists there's no difference. I think my dad is

coming around though.”

We try more of the teas and chat about nothing and by the end I think I understand the whole Boyfriend Café thing. Avery always described the café as a place for students to relax for a while, to forget about their classes and their roommates and their petty college drama and kick back. By the time we’re through the flight of jasmine teas, I understand.

The waiter re-emerges like he was watching us drink and anticipating the exact moment when we’d finish. He takes away the empty cups, but after only a couple minutes, he reappears. I assume he’s about to ask us very, very politely and Britishly to get the hell out, but he’s wheeling a cart toward us. He stops it before our table, and places two clean glasses before us. Into these, he sets metal steepers, each with a heart shaped wad of tea inside.

“For your final tea,” he says, “we offer the sweetheart tea, a green tea bud hand-shaped into the form of a heart.”

The last item on his tray is a steaming hot kettle. As he pours the water inside it into our cups, the little tea buds unfurl, destroying the heart shape but opening up into their full bloom. After two minutes (which the waiter apparently counts out in his head), he removes the steepers, entreats us to enjoy our tea, and wheels the whole contraption away.

“Did you know about this part?” I say.

“I might have,” Avery admits, smiling around the rim of their cup.

It had to cost extra on top of what is surely already an exorbitant tea experience, but I’m not about to complain. It was beautiful, and it tastes every bit as good as it looks. This time around, I’ll absorb the hit to our finances and keep my mouth shut.

Besides, it clearly makes Avery happy. We've shared a lot of adventures in the four years since we met, but Avery has always seemed sad that I didn't experience their café back at C U of M. They still see many of the folks who worked at the café. Gabriel, their brother, and Trent are around for every holiday, of course. But I've also come to know Rhett and Albert and Mal, even the newer guys, the ones who were there when Avery was in charge, Julian, Cameron, Henry and manager Mia. They're quite a crew, especially with all their partners and friends in tow. Albert's annual New Year's party in Brooklyn is starting to burst the seams on his and David's home. So it's genuinely nice to experience an approximation of what they all built together while they were at Montridge, that silly café that grew to become so much more as the people behind it poured their love and care into every cup of tea they served.

"Thank you for doing this," I say. "I wish I could have experienced the real thing."

"Who knows?" Avery says. "Maybe someday you can. The café is still going strong. Jack says there's someone coming by several times a week to pick up baked goods. As long as someone at Montridge cares enough, the Boyfriend Café will never truly die. It'll just keep getting passed down, like a family heirloom. "

"That's one strange family heirloom."

"It is," Avery says. "But that's the best part about it. This is our family and our family heirloom. And I have a feeling it's going to stay that way for a long, long time."

We might be sitting across an entire ocean from Montridge and the university and the café, but I like the sound of that. I like feeling that tether back to home. It reminds me that no matter how far Avery and I travel, no matter what new adventures we find, there will always be something worth going back to.

"I don't think I can drink another drop," Avery says.

"Me neither. My bladder is about to explode."

We hit the bathroom before leaving the shop. London's trademark gray drizzle tickles our cheeks as we make for the tube that will take us home. Well, to one of our homes. We haven't quite decided what "home" home is going to be yet. There's a whole big world out there to see, and we aren't sure where our research and our curiosity is going to take us in the end.

Maybe home is here, the old, narrow, winding streets and gray drizzle. Maybe it's New Jersey, where Avery's parents live. Maybe it's my small town in Wisconsin with its fudge and its single lonely gay bar. Maybe it's somewhere else entirely.

Maybe it's wherever Avery is.

Whatever the answer is, I kind of can't wait to find out.