



Tameron (Honorably Discharged #3)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Losing my hearing has far more consequences than I expected.

The physical part is frustrating and annoying, but the emotional part is so much harder. I don't belong anywhere anymore, always an outsider.

And now there's Dayton, the older, sexy firefighter who keeps popping up everywhere I go. At my gym, in my house, in my dreams.

Wait, why am I dreaming about him?

I don't even like him—though that doesn't seem to be mutual.

Surprisingly, Dayton understands my struggles better than anyone else, and before I realize what's happening, he's decided we're friends.

Except I'm not sure I'm satisfied with just friendship anymore...

Accepting that I'm bi is easy, but why does the man I'm falling for have to be Dayton?

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CHAPTER ONE

TAMERON

I missed silence.

Kind of a funny thing to say, probably, considering I had lost most of my hearing, but the truth, nonetheless. Most people would think going deaf meant more silence—and I couldn't blame them because I'd thought the same thing before I experienced it firsthand—but alas, the opposite was true.

My ears were never quiet.

Neither was my head, but that was a different problem altogether.

It had been a long, busy day, and the first thing I did when I hauled myself through the front door was take out my hearing aids and put them in their protective case.

Lesson number one: never put them anywhere else.

Ask me how I know. They were fucking expensive and the VA wasn't paying for another replacement.

I hated them as much as I loved them, and that was a dichotomy I hadn't quite figured out. They were amazing, but they also sucked donkey balls. Big, hairy donkey balls.

As always, the experience of having them out was almost overwhelming, like the

sudden silence after a super loud concert. Except once that first sensation passed, there was no expected silence, but a ringing.

Tinnitus, one of the many fun side effects of hearing loss. Fun being about as sarcastic as Dr. House, whose dark sense of humor I'd come to appreciate. I'd always thought him an asshole, but not anymore. I kinda understood where he was coming from now, minus the addiction to painkillers.

I sat on the lowest step of the stairs, waiting until the dizzying sensation passed. Pushing through it wasn't smart. I'd learned that the hard way. It usually took only a few minutes, so not too bad.

Once I was convinced I wasn't gonna keel over or, worse, throw up, I rose again and slowly did what I had to do.

Shoes off and in my cubby. Backpack on top of it.

Jacket on the coat rack. Nash wanted everything to be squared away, but I respected him for it.

Besides, order was necessary for all of us now that our lives had become so chaotic.

It was my turn to cook, so instead of going to my room—where I would be too tempted to endlessly scroll on my phone—I headed straight for the kitchen.

I'd thawed some chicken yesterday and let it marinate all day today in a mix of ketjap—this delicious sweet soy sauce I had discovered—fresh ginger, garlic, some spices, and, of course, a healthy amount of hot sauce so it would have a nice flavor.

All I needed to do now was make the chicken skewers and grill them, then serve with rice, green beans, and a satay sauce that was basically thinned peanut butter with soy

sauce and sambal, an Indonesian hot sauce.

I had just started the rice cooker when the warning light in the kitchen flashed to signal someone was entering through the front door.

Seconds later, Nash popped around the corner, still dressed in his EMT uniform.

He waved at me, waiting for me to make eye contact before saying, “How was your day?”

He was close enough that I could understand without my hearing aids, using a combination of what little sound I could pick up and some lip reading. “Good. I did two hours of ASL class, followed by an hour of practice with my group, then did a yoga class at the gym.”

“Busy day,” Nash said.

“I don’t have classes tomorrow.”

“Good. You need practice, but you also need rest.”

“Yes, Daddy,” I teased, which resulted in the expected eye roll.

“Do you need help with cooking?”

I’d had to train myself out of the habit of shaking my head when I wanted to say no. That could result in some unintended side effects...like a dizzy spell. “I’m good. Go shower.”

He gave me a thumbs-up and disappeared into the hallway again. Nash always wanted to shower after a shift, and I couldn’t blame him. The things he encountered

during his shifts were crazy, and I loved hearing his stories.

He'd only recently finished his training as an EMT—something we hadn't even known he was doing until he was halfway through the program—but he was doing well. No wonder, with his experience in combat and in leadership. The man was unflappable, even under the most chaotic circumstances.

I was happy he'd found his new calling, even if it came with an annoying new addition named Dayton. He and Nash had become best buddies, which was all fine, except I didn't like him. I didn't hate him or anything. The dude was way too easygoing for that. He just rubbed me the wrong way, was all.

Another flashing light announced Bean's arrival, who had brought his boyfriend, Jarek, with him. They waved at me before heading to Bean's room, no doubt to make out until dinner.

Those two were still in their honeymoon phase, and Jesus Christ, it was nauseating. Made me glad I couldn't hear half the cheesy shit they whispered to each other. I was happy for Bean, I really was, but that didn't mean it was always easy to see him that happy...while being single myself.

Then again, seeing him find love was also an encouragement. No offense, but if Bean, with his absolute disaster of a brain—the man could barely remember his own name—could score a boyfriend, there was hope for me, right?

Not that I wanted a boyfriend. As the only straight man, I'd become a minority in our house, much to my amazement.

Nash had been out as gay, but then Creek had met Heath and had suddenly discovered he was bisexual, followed by Bean coming out.

What the fuck was up with that? I mean, San Francisco was the unofficial Pride capital of the US and all that, but we were way off the average of straight versus queer in our house.

As usual when cooking, my mind wandered and I got lost in my own head, slowly able to let go of all the busyness of the day.

By the time dinner was ready, Creek and Heath had arrived as well, so we had a full house.

Reluctantly, I put my hearing aids back on.

I wouldn't be able to follow the conversation at all without them.

I put everything on the table, the chicken satay skewers last. "Oh, that looks amazing," Heath said, as always quick to say something positive.

"On a scale of one to my ass is on fire, how hot will this be going in and coming out?" Creek asked.

"About a four. I kept it decent tonight."

Bean mumbled something. "What was that?" I asked.

He had the decency to look a little guilty. "I said thank Jesus. No offense, but my ass still hurts from that curry you made last week."

"You're supposed to eat it, not stuff it in your ass," I said.

"Our gym burned down again," Nash said, changing the topic abruptly but rather effectively.

“What?” Creek asked. “The one on Howell Street?”

“Yeah. My station got the call this morning and spent hours getting it under control. It looks like an electrical fire that started in the break room. Probably a coffee maker or something.”

Oh, that explained all the sirens I’d heard that morning while taking my yoga class. They had been too loud even for me to ignore.

“Did anyone get hurt?” Bean asked.

Nash shook his head. “The building was up to code, so they had smoke detectors and sprinklers. Everyone got out safely. But the building is a total loss, which sucks because...”

I couldn’t make out the last part of his sentence because he turned his head away. “Because why?”

“Sorry. Because we really liked training there. It was close to our station and they offered us a great deal.”

I quickly chewed and swallowed. “Come to my gym. Well, it’s not mine, but the one I go to for my yoga classes. It’s only a couple of blocks away, so close enough, and it’s great. Very welcoming to all kinds of people.”

Nash scratched his chin. “That’s definitely an option. Do you think it’s big enough to accommodate our group?”

“I don’t see why not. They have a rather large cardio room, plus a massive room with all the machines and weight-training equipment. I mean, I never use them, but I always see some available.”

“Because you prefer yoga over weight training,” Creek said, his tone indicating his opinion.

“Listen, flamingo,” I fired back, “if you did a little more yoga, you wouldn’t fall on your ass so many times.”

Heath snorted, then hid his laugh behind his hand when Creek shot him a look. “You’re on his side now?” Creek asked, looking offended.

Heath shrugged. “He’s not wrong. You did fall on your ass last week.”

“Because I didn’t realize my prosthetic foot had gotten stuck.”

“Excuses, excuses,” I sing-songed. “Yoga is excellent for developing better balance, you know. It’s really helped my equilibrium.”

“Because you’re training with seniors. The average age in that class is, like, eighty or something,” Creek shot back.

Nash’s eyes narrowed. “Do I need to smash your heads together?”

“No, Top,” Creek and I answered at the same time, agreeing with a look to consider the matter settled.

“I’ll talk to Dayton, see what he thinks,” Nash said. I couldn’t keep the automatic reaction to hearing that name off my face, and it didn’t escape Nash’s attention. He let out a deep sigh. “You do realize that if we start training at your gym, you’re gonna run into him, right?”

“Who?” Bean asked, oblivious as usual.

“Dayton,” Jarek helpfully supplied, always willing to summarize or explain when Bean’s memory failed him. “He’s Nash’s firefighter friend.”

“Technically, he’s the battalion chief, but yeah. Him,” Nash said. “And for some reason, Tameron hates him.”

“I don’t hate him,” I protested.

Nash quirked an eyebrow.

“I don’t. I just...don’t like him, which is not the same.”

“It’s not?” Creek asked, looking confused.

“I hate broccoli, but I don’t like cauliflower,” Heath said. “The difference is that I refuse to eat the first, but I can tolerate the second if it’s hidden in a casserole and covered with loads of cheese.”

Hmm, that was a perfect analogy, actually.

You could make a great dish with riced cauliflower if you seasoned it well.

Super healthy and plenty filling. But on its own, cauliflower was not my favorite, so I understood the analogy.

“Exactly. Dayton is... He’s like cauliflower.

I wouldn’t choose to see him, but I’m fine as long as he doesn’t try to be my new BFF. ”

“Why, for the love of all that’s holy, would Dayton want to be your new BFF?” Nash

had clearly reached the point of exasperation. “The man has friends, including me, and you’re not exactly a shiny, happy personality.”

Nash’s words stung, though why, I didn’t know. “I’m not Creek.”

Creek snorted. “You’re not much better, dude.”

Really? Had I become as grumpy as he’d been before meeting Heath?

Not something I liked to think about too much.

Besides, I didn’t think Dayton liked me much either.

A few times when I’d said something about my hearing issues, he’d made a face, like he disapproved.

What the fuck was that about? It wasn’t like I’d chosen this or could do anything about it. “I have a lot going on, okay?”

Nash’s expression softened. “I know, and I understand that communicating is hard for you, but I really think you oughta give Dayton a chance. If only because he understands things about your situation better than any of us.”

As if I needed to be reminded. Dayton was a CODA—child of Deaf adults—which was why he was fluent in ASL.

That should make things easier for me since he was able to sign and interpret for me when I couldn’t follow a conversation.

But instead, it annoyed the fuck out of me.

He only did it because he felt sorry for me. Who the fuck wanted to be pitied?

I wanted to do it myself. I didn't need him or anyone else.

Well, I needed my brothers. Nash, Creek, and Bean—they, I needed.

Dayton, not so much.

But I would tolerate him. Like cauliflower.

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CHAPTER TWO

DAYTON

“Now, I want you all to take a deep breath in. Feel your muscles slowly starting to relax. Be aware of them. Let go of the tension in your eyelids, your mouth...now in your jaw.” I did my best to moderate my voice, but it was difficult with the noise outside.

The corner of my eye twitched and I tried to follow my own advice and breathe through it.

“Feel the tension leaving your neck, now your shoulders...”

BAM, BAM, BAM!

The bodies in the room collectively twitched, concentration and relaxation broken. I walked over to my iPod dock and hit the button to turn the music up a little louder, but I knew it was pointless.

“Hey! Fuck you, man! Fuck you! This is fucking bullshit! When I asked for...”

I did my best not to grimace, but when someone just outside the building was cussing someone else out, it was hard to get into a good headspace for shavasana.

“Can we stop?” I turned to see Charles—one of my longtime students—sitting up halfway. “Even with my hearing aids out, I can’t concentrate with all that racket.”

“Yeah,” Edith said. She rolled to a sitting position, which seemed to be the signal for the rest of the class.

I couldn’t blame any of them. We were stuck in the only place I could find with cheap enough weekly rent and an open timeslot closest to my previous class so most of my students could attend.

Unfortunately, the place came with a ton of construction work just a few feet from the doors.

I let out a sigh and turned the music off. “Alright. Just shake it all off before you drive home,” I told them.

This class was a low-impact hatha session for people who were elderly and disabled. I had a couple of advanced classes with a younger crowd, but they’d been willing to hit pause until we had more permanent accommodations.

The gym burning down hadn’t been on my Bingo card to start off my transfer to the new station up north.

And I was doing my best not to see it as a sign.

I wasn’t really a superstitious guy—at least, not more than any other firefighter I’d met, but I was having a hard time not taking this as a personal fuck-you from the universe.

Though what I’d done to piss the universe off that badly was beyond me.

I liked to think I was a chill and respectful kind of guy.

I didn’t buy into the whole hero-ego bullshit people in my job position often had

because of what we did for a living.

I had a healthy ego and a decent amount of self-esteem, and none of it was built off being a dick to others.

I had plenty of friends, a great relationship with my family, and I always braked for animals.

So I had zero idea why this year was kicking my ass so hard.

The move to the new station was a lateral move, but it had come with a small raise and the promise of less chaos now that I wasn't working in the city.

Marin County wasn't exactly some backwoods farmland kind of place, but there were definitely more kitten-up-a-tree rescues than gunshot wounds, which I appreciated.

I wasn't old, but I was starting to feel my age, and pardon the pun, I was starting to burn out.

And that was making me feel panicked. I didn't want to lose my sense of self and purpose before I hit my peak years.

"Hey, Dayton?"

I turned to find Sutton wheeling toward me.

He'd started the class a couple of months back after he was given the all-clear to resume working out after his accident.

He was a former firefighter from LA who'd been in a violent car accident when his firetruck was crossing an intersection and a semi hadn't been able to stop in time.

He was my first spinal cord injury student and it had taken me a long bout of research to find the right training for him. But after the initial struggle of finding an accessible routine, he was now one of my favorite students.

Of course I was also biased, being a battalion chief and all, but no one needed to know I played favorites like that.

I stuck out my fist and he knocked his knuckles against mine. “What’s up, man?”

“So, don’t take this personally?—”

I braced myself and let out a sharp breath. “Let me have it.”

“This just isn’t working.”

I pressed my hand to my chest. “Are you breaking up with me?”

His eyes lit up and he rolled them. “Claire would be devastated,” he said, referencing his wife, whom I loved, and not just because she baked me s’mores brownies twice a month. “But no, I’m not breaking up with you. I think the whole class will be okay if we hit pause until we find a better spot.”

There was a small part of me a little gutted about not doing my classes for a bit, but there was a bigger part wildly relieved because he was right.

It wasn’t working here. The warehouse itself was perfectly set up for what we needed.

It had a sturdy floor, plenty of mats, and high ceilings with massive fans to keep the place ventilated.

It was mostly used by an aerialist company that did cirque performances during street-festival season.

But it was near several industrial plants, and they were renovating the building next door, which meant it was loud all the time. And hearing workers screaming fuck you during shavasana wasn't exactly ideal for the end-of-class meditation.

"Please don't make that face. You know we love you," Sutton pleaded.

I dropped down to one of the acrobatic cushions and shook my head, letting my forearms rest over my knees.

"Nah, man. It's not you. This really does suck.

The station is in a damn tizzy because of this.

You know how the crew feels when their routine gets fucked.

"Apart from this class, half my people at the fire station had also gone to the gym where I taught.

Then the damn thing had burned down and we were all left a little lost.

Sutton's expression went sad for a beat when I mentioned the crew because even with accommodations, there was no way he could go back to work as a firefighter. Sutton was currently in training to work dispatch, but I could tell that for him, it was a compromise.

And not one he loved.

"Any leads on somewhere new?"

“Actually, yeah. One of the EMT rookies—I think you’ve met him. Nash?”

Sutton grinned. “That hulking Army dude?”

I couldn’t help my laugh. That was a pretty good way to describe Nash. He’d become something like a best friend over the last few months, and he came with a small group of veterans as his little family. I loved them, even if not all of them loved me back.

Tameron’s face flashed in my mind, and I felt a tiny tingle at the base of my spine.

I’d expected to bond with him more than the other guys, considering I came from a Deaf family and he was hard of hearing and learning ASL, but for some reason, that seemed to piss him off instead of creating a bridge toward friendship.

“Yeah. His buddy goes to a gym not too far from here, and he’s checking into whether they can accommodate us.”

“Will you make sure I can fit through the door?” Sutton asked, patting his wheels.

“I won’t set foot in a place where your wheels aren’t welcome,” I told him.

His face softened. “Well, I hope it works out. Sorry class sucked today.”

That was one way to put it. I pushed to my feet and clapped him on the shoulder before walking to the desk. Sutton made his way out as I gathered my things, and by the time I’d locked up and put the key in the drop box, the meager parking lot had cleared.

A small rush of loneliness hit me in the center of my chest, but I shoved it away and quickly got into my car.

I was determined not to let anything spoil my day off.

I didn't get a lot of them, but this transfer was supposed to mean more of those.

The last ten years had been filled with work, the commute to work, and the commute home.

The fatigue had begun to weigh so heavily on me that the most I'd had energy for was stealing a plate of leftovers my brother had thrown together and eating it in bed before passing out.

I wanted more than that kind of life. I wanted something for myself.

Something good. Something that had more purpose than working myself into an early grave.

I wanted to find joy in what I did again, and I knew a big part of that was slowing down and taking time to give myself not just what I needed but what I wanted.

The problem was I had no clue what that was supposed to be. And with the way things were going, I wasn't sure I would find it any time soon.

"...so we managed to get the bleeding slowed and then turned him over to the attending. And now I realize why all the EMTs are stressed out about Christmas tree figurine season." Nash's face on the phone screen was kind of pale, and I was doing my best to hold in a laugh.

I wish someone had thought to warn the poor bastard about how often people got creative with plug-shaped objects and buttocks.

It had definitely been a shock to me when I first started, but I knew the only way past

it was going through the trauma of watching someone limp and wince because they had a tree-shaped ornament stuck up their ass.

“You can laugh at me,” Nash said miserably. “Everyone else has been.”

“They’re only laughing because they’ve been there. Now we’re all jaded, and someday, you will be too.”

“Please remind me to tell my little baby queers in the house that just because something looks like a buttplug doesn’t mean it will function as one.”

At that, I lost it. I covered my face with a pillow as I held the phone away from me. I could hear him chuckling along, and that made me feel better. “Can I be a fly on the wall for that talk?” I asked once I could speak again.

His eyes crinkled in the corner. “I’ll set up a FaceTime. Creek will probably go quiet and turn seven different shades of red. Bean will ask questions. Tameron is going to lose his mind.”

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My heart skipped a beat at Tameron's name, and I knew it probably showed because, being raised by a Deaf family, I had no poker face at all. I'd been trained from birth to express myself in hands and body language first.

But Nash was kind enough not to mention it.

"Keep me posted," I told him.

He was still chuckling. "You know I will. But I have to get going. You wanna come by for dinner this week?"

"Yeah. Let me know what night's good." I felt vibrations under my bare feet and looked up to see Dax in the archway between the living room and the kitchen. I set my middle finger to my chest and flicked it upward. "What's up?"

'Nothing,' he signed. 'Is that your boyfriend?'

He meant Tameron because I'd obviously been talking about him too often and now my dickhead brother was convinced I had a crush. I flipped him the bird and he laughed loudly as I turned my attention back to Nash. "The sooner, the better," I told him.

Nash snorted. "Your brother? Tell him I said hi."

I looked back up at Dax. 'Nash says hi.'

Dax lit up, hurried around the back of the couch, and leaned over my shoulder. He

kept his signs slow and exaggerated, like he was talking to a toddler, which kind of worked, considering Nash had the working vocabulary of a deaf toddler. ‘How are you?’

‘Good,’ Nash signed back. His hands moved stiffly in a thick hearing accent. ‘How are you? Nice tie.’

Dax preened as he ran his hand over it. ‘Burberry,’ he signed very slowly.

Nash’s lips curved around the letters as Dax signed them, and then he whistled and shook his hand in front of his body. ‘Wow. Fancy.’

‘Just finished a huge job. Paid well,’ Dax told him, then straightened. ‘See you sometime soon?’

Nash gave him a thumbs-up and Dax looked satisfied before wandering out. When he was gone, Nash zeroed in on me. “What was he signing when I couldn’t see him?”

I flushed, but there was no way I was telling him Dax was mocking me about having a crush, which was absurd.

I didn’t have a crush on Tameron. I just—objectively—enjoyed the way he looked.

Eye candy hurt no one, dammit. But Dax seemed to think it was more, and he was going to give me endless shit about it.

Which, of course, was what baby brothers did.

And it was very probable he was right. Maybe I did have a crush. A tiny one.

“He was mocking me for being a single loser.”

“Aww, you’re not a loser, hun,” Nash said soothingly.

I rolled my eyes. “Thanks, Dad. Anyway, before you go, any word on the gym thing?”

“Oh shit! Yeah, that’s why I called in the first place. We got the go-ahead. Check your work email. They sent you a contract for the yoga classes. I’m not sure if those times and dates will work for you, but they have a separate soundproofed room on site that you can use.”

My whole body unwound, almost like he’d pushed a relax button on me. “Seriously? Fuck, I don’t care what times they have. As long as it’s wheelchair accessible, I will make it work.”

“Sweet. I’ll let the crew know we’re back in business. Talk soon?”

I nodded, and when the screen went black, I laid my head against the cushion and allowed myself to breathe fully for the first time in weeks.

We had a solution, and even if I had to ask my students to make some adjustments, I had a feeling they’d figure out how to make the times work if it meant no more warehouse.

Sitting straight, I swiped open my phone screen and navigated to my work email. And there it was, the email from the gym.

“Dear Mr. Adams,” I read aloud, “yada yada, yoga room available Monday to Thursday yada yada...” My eyes speed-read through and then came to a screeching halt. Would you be interested in filling in for the teacher we had who just quit? We had ten regular students two days a week.

Okay, that wasn't so bad. And since my hours were going to be reduced and this county promised to be less hellish than San Francisco, maybe I could squeeze in a little extra here. This job wasn't just a hobby. It felt as important as everything else I did.

I kept reading, and that was when I saw the student log. My eyes scanned the names, and my heart beat double-time when my gaze fixed on the last one. Tameron H .

There was a tiny chance it wasn't Nash's Tameron, but in all honesty, how often was I going to come across that name?

I didn't know if I was elated or terrified because the man seemed to be annoyed by every single thing I did, said, or signed.

But maybe this was the universe giving me a chance to turn things around. Maybe...

"Mm!"

I looked up at the sound of Dax's voice, and he walked over, dropping to the cushion beside my feet.

'What's wrong?' he asked.

I waved him off. 'Nothing. Nash found a gym so I don't have to keep working in the warehouse.'

Dax raised a brow and his face told me he didn't believe everything I was saying. 'And?'

'And they want me to take on a few more students.' There. Not a lie...just maybe not the entire truth.

He stared a few moments longer, then leaned back with a sigh, dropping it. 'Better than where you're at now, right?'

I snorted. 'True-biz. Anything is better than that place. Though maybe you should go. You'd be perfect for the circus.'

He stared at me for a beat, then lunged and attempted to smother me as I doubled over in laughter. Dax eventually had me pinned and shoved his wet finger into my ear. I yelped and shoved him off, and he sat back with a smug grin.

'Asshole,' I threw at him.

His grin widened. 'You're my favorite brother.'

'I'm your only brother.'

Dax shrugged, then grabbed the remote and turned the TV on. The moment settled, and my eyes went back to my phone screen. Tameron H . I wondered what his last name was and if there would ever be a chance—even a tiny one—that he and I could ever be friends.

CHAPTER THREE

TAMERON

When I'd offered for Nash's crew to check out my gym, I'd been prepared to run into Dayton from time to time.

What I hadn't counted on was him teaching my yoga class.

Talk about an unwelcome surprise. I'd been so upset when I'd gotten the email that my previous teacher had accepted another job and they were pleased to introduce the new teacher, yada yada, Dayton Adams.

Fuck me sideways.

Obviously, I'd skipped the first lesson he'd taught, opting to do an online class instead. That hadn't worked out as well as I'd hoped since the tempo had been too fast for me. I needed gentle yoga, considering my balance issues, and slow instructions.

I hadn't been able to make the second lesson he'd taught either. I'd had an ASL practice session with someone from my ASL class. He had limited availability, so I'd given up my yoga class for that session. It hadn't exactly been a hardship.

But now I had to bite the bullet...and I was pissy as fuck about it. To add insult to injury, it was Monday morning, which was a reason to be moody all in itself.

I'd arrived early because I had a score to settle with Dayton. When I walked into the classroom, he was already there, setting up. He wore a white singlet that accentuated his muscular build and a pair of loose shorts.

"You told Nash I didn't show up?"

He turned around. "And a good morning to you too, Tameron," he said, flashing me a smile while also signing 'Good morning.'

"You don't need to sign. I can hear you."

He shrugged. "I wasn't sure if you wore your hearing aids to class."

"How else would I hear the instructions?"

"Watch what everyone else is doing? It wouldn't matter to me."

Oh, so I could turn him off? There was an appealing thought...though it wouldn't even matter. It wasn't his voice that annoyed me. It was the whole package. "Why did you tell Nash?"

"Because I was concerned about you. Your records showed you rarely miss a class, so I wanted to make sure everything was okay."

Fuck, how was I supposed to argue with that? "You could've asked me directly."

"Sure, but I've been around you enough that I know Nash is the more effective way."

He wasn't wrong, which obviously annoyed me even more. "He was all on my ass about it this morning, so thanks a lot for that."

His mouth quivered like he was fighting not to laugh. “It clearly worked, didn’t it?”

I put my hands on my hips. “Don’t go behind my back. I can fight my own battles.”

His smile vanished, and he stepped closer to me. “You’re right. I’m sorry. I didn’t look at it that way, but you’re absolutely right. I took agency away from you, and I shouldn’t have.”

Christ on a bike, why did he have to go and be all nice and apologetic about it? Now I couldn’t even ream him out in my head anymore. “Yeah, whatever. Don’t do it again.”

He nodded solemnly. “I won’t. You have my word.”

Why did he always take everything so seriously?

He signed something, but when he saw I’d tuned in too late, he repeated it. ‘How are your ASL lessons going?’

I brought my hand to the middle of my chest, my thumb toward me, and tapped my thumb a few times against my chest. ‘Fine.’

‘What level are you now?’

‘Level four.’

Learning ASL was so much harder than I had imagined. My teacher was a bit of a dick, which didn’t help, but the nuances of the various signs were so goddamn hard to remember, not to mention the fact that it was a whole different language with its own rules and grammar.

Two other students—a lovely grandmother named Shelley, who was battling arthritis, and her grandson Misha, a shy twenty-three-year-old dude who’d been hurt in a car crash—were coming in, and I’d never been more relieved in my life to see them.

“Hey, Misha!” I waved at him.

His face lit up with surprise, probably because I’d never greeted him with that much exuberance. “Hi, T-t-tameron.”

Now that I’d set the tone, I needed to sell the act, or Dayton would realize what I was doing, so I walked over to Shelley and Misha. “How was your weekend?”

“G-good,” he said. “I went s-surfing.”

“He found an amazing new teacher,” Shelley said.

“One who has a lot of experience working with differently abled people. He’s missing a leg himself, though if not for the prosthesis, you’d never be able to tell by the way he surfs.

His balance is amazing. And he’s so freaking nice.

I saw a flyer he put out at a surf shop and immediately told Misha, ‘You should try this. He looks like a guy who could teach you.’ And I was right, wasn’t I?

” She said the last part with a loving look toward Misha, who nodded even as he rolled his eyes at me in clear embarrassment over his grandmother.

Shelley was like a faulty jukebox. If you threw in a quarter’s worth of questions, she’d give you at least ten minutes of conversation.

But she was so lovely that it was hard to mind her chatty nature...

or the fact that she used a phrase like differently abled people , not exactly an appropriate term, though one that a lot of older folks still had in their vocabulary.

Then what she said clicked. “Oh, you’re talking about Heath, right?”

“Yes,” Shelley said. “You know him?”

“He’s my roommate’s boyfriend. He’s amazing, and I can see why he’d be a great teacher for you, Misha.”

As we kept chatting, everyone else trickled in, and right on the dot, Dayton started his class.

He was annoyingly good at teaching, much to my chagrin.

Couldn’t the universe have at least given me the pleasure of seeing him fail miserably at something?

The man was good-looking, he was a damn firefighter, he was unfailingly kind and nice, and now he turned out to be a decent teacher too?

I needed him to have a flaw. Just one thing he wasn’t good at, something negative.

Anything to justify my dislike of him. Except I wasn’t gonna find it during this class.

Hell, he was so good that halfway through, I forgot my annoyance and was able to fully get into it.

It always felt so amazing to reach that yoga-flow state.

My thought that maybe it wasn't all so bad evaporated when I walked over to my car after the lesson and discovered I had a flat. "Ugh, seriously?"

I kicked the flat tire. Was the universe now mocking me for enjoying myself for thirty damn minutes?

I did have a spare, but no way would I be able to get that on myself. That involved a lot of bending over while doing heavy lifting, which would not end well if I attempted it. So now what?

"Need help?"

I spun around at Dayton's voice. Of course it had to be him. My pride battled with my common sense for a moment, but then I surrendered. I'd be a fool not to accept it. "Yeah, that'd be awesome."

"No problem at all. Do you have a spare?"

I clicked the keyfob to open the trunk and then lifted the floor compartment. "I do, but I don't have a jack."

"No worries. I have one in my truck. Let me grab it."

He was a regular fucking Boy Scout, wasn't he? But it was hard to be annoyed about that when it came in so handy. He jogged to a big red pickup truck—an appropriate color for a firefighter—then made his way back with the jack.

He knelt next to the flat. "Let's see if we can get this done."

Okay, I liked that he said "we" and not "I." At least he assumed I'd be helping or whatever.

I watched as he went to work, my eyes taking in his form.

Wait, did he have...? Oh man, he totally did.

His nipples were pierced. I hadn't noticed it before, but I did now that I could peek inside his singlet as I towered over him.

Both nipples had tiny little barbells. Not what I would've expected from him at all.

I also saw a tattoo on his back, but I couldn't make out what it was.

Within minutes, he'd managed to jack up the car—I was dutifully watching, feeling very useless—and was in the middle of taking off the flat tire when he suddenly stopped. He cocked his ear in the direction of a group of trees that lined the parking lot. “Are you able to hear that?”

I turned my good ear in that direction and focused. I heard...a high squeaking sound? Like a...like a mewl? “Is that a cat?”

He nodded, putting down the lug wrench. “I think so. A kitten, even. It's a little high-pitched for an adult cat.”

We walked over to the trees, looking up and following the sound. “There,” I said, pointing. “Oh my god, you were right. It is a kitten.”

A tiny gray kitten sat on a tree branch, its slender body shivering as it mewled with all its tiny heart.

Dayton stood close to me, and our heads were inches apart as we looked at the little kitten. “It's scared to come down,” Dayton said.

“Can we coax it out?”

“We can try, but usually, it doesn’t work.”

I quirked an eyebrow. “And you know this, how? Don’t tell me the old cliché about people calling the fire department to rescue cats from trees is true.”

He shot me a cocky grin. “Oh, it is, trust me. I’ve saved many a cat from a tree, and even a few dogs. Plus some kids, a furious wounded raccoon—that one was not fun—and an owl who’d injured his wing.”

I was still gonna try. I made chirpy sounds with my lips, holding out my hands to the kitten. “Come here, buddy... Jump into my arms. You can do it. I’ll catch you, I promise.”

Dayton joined me, clicking his tongue and making different sounds, but the little kitten didn’t move a muscle. It was well and truly stuck, the poor thing.

Finally, I gave up with a deep sigh. “Looks like you’re right, so how do we get it down?”

Dayton shrugged. “The old-fashioned way...with a ladder.”

“You have a ladder in your truck?”

“I do, actually. It’s an emergency ladder, so not an aluminum one, and it’s perfect for situations like this.”

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And off he went again to his truck, returning a minute later with the ladder. He showed off his experience as he expertly threw the rope over a low-hanging branch and then securely tied the ladder. “Can you stand on the bottom rung to keep it somewhat stabilized?” he asked.

“Sure. I mean, you’re doing all the hard work.”

That might have come out a little snappier than I had intended because he paused for a moment, looking puzzled. “Do you want to climb up yourself?”

“Hell no. My balance is shit after the accident. I’d probably fall off and break a leg or something.”

“Oh, okay. You sounded like...”

I sighed. “It didn’t come out right. I’m grateful you know how to do this, I swear.”

“Okay.”

I put my foot down on the lowest rung like he’d asked, and he stepped over me, holding on to both sides as he started climbing.

Now I’d never been into men, but his ass was, like, right in my face, so I had a really good view.

And it wasn’t bad. In fact, as asses went, it was pretty damn spectacular.

I might not like the man, but even I couldn't deny he was in excellent shape—especially considering his age.

“How old are you?” I asked, and he stopped climbing to look down in puzzlement.

“Forty-three, but why do you ask?”

Yeah, I hadn't thought that one through, had I? Kinda hard to explain that I'd been admiring his ass. “It's nothing. I realized you're, you know, pretty fit for your age and all.”

“Pretty fit for my age, huh? Well, I'll take that as a compliment.”

How else would he...? Oh. Of course. It could also be interpreted as a little dig at his age. “I didn't mean it like that, I swear.”

“Okay, just checking.”

I deserved that one. He had no reason to assume I was being nice to him.

He refocused and started climbing again, and I studied him as he did. He was undeniably strong, with thick thighs and arms and a broad chest. Even Nash wasn't in such excellent shape, and that was saying something because that man was religious about getting his workouts in.

Dayton had reached the branch and pulled himself up with ease, holding on to the tree trunk as he did. He climbed one branch up, then held out his hands to the kitten. “Come here, you little troublemaker.”

Did he really think that would work? That cat was gonna need a little more convincing, right? But without a second of hesitation, the kitten jumped into Dayton's

hands. He caught him with ease, cradling him against his chest. “There ya go, sweetheart. Now, hold on, okay? I gotta get us back down.”

I steadied the ladder for him as he climbed down, holding on to the kitten with one hand. When he was back on solid ground, I breathed out with relief. “Well done.”

“Two compliments in one day? Be careful, Tameron, or I may start to think you like me.”

“I don’t... That’s not what I... I was being nice,” I spluttered. “I’m not into men.”

“And I was kidding,” he said as he shook his head. “Jesus, dude, don’t take everything so personally, okay?”

Fuck. He was right. I’d overreacted to what had clearly been a joke. “Sorry. I’m...” What excuse could I possibly use for this? Nothing came to mind. “Sorry,” I repeated.

“No harm done. Take a look at this cutie,” Dayton said, and to my embarrassment, it took me a second to realize he was referring to the kitten, not himself.

I immediately focused my attention on the kitten, who looked exhausted as it nestled against Dayton’s chest. He was a beautiful gray, though a little skinny for my taste. “How old do you think he is?”

Dayton pressed his lips together. “I wanna say ten weeks? He could be older but malnourished.”

I couldn’t resist and petted the kitten’s little head. “He’s adorable. What are you gonna do with him?”

Dayton sighed. “Take him to the vet, probably, and have him checked. I don’t see any evidence of a microchip, but the vet will be able to tell. And if no one claims him, which I suspect, I’ll drop him off at the shelter.”

I scratched the little thing behind its ears, and it started purring. Which made me smile. “He’s bound to get adopted. He’s so cute and sweet.”

“We’ll see. Anyway, can you hold him while I finish changing your tire?” He held out the kitten, and I took it without hesitation. The little thing yawned, then closed his eyes and promptly fell asleep.

Dayton smiled at me as we made our way back to my car, Dayton carrying the rope ladder. “He likes you. Maybe you should take him home.”

“I can’t. Nash has made it clear we can’t have any pets.”

“Did he now? Maybe I could persuade him.” Dayton winked at me, then knelt next to my car again, putting the ladder on the ground for now.

Persuade him? What did that mean? It sounded like he was insinuating something, implying he had an influence on Nash that I didn’t. Oh, wait. “Are you and Nash...together?”

Dayton snorted. “Queer men can be friends without fucking each other, you know.”

“I’m aware, but the way you said you could persuade him made me think that... Never mind.”

Dayton was quiet for a while as he kept working. “I wish you’d believe me when I say I want to be friends with you, Tameron. You seem to be determined to always assume the worst of me.”

My cheeks grew fiery hot. “I don’t hate you.”

“I didn’t say you did.”

“You implied it.”

“No, Tameron, I didn’t.” I had to give him credit for consistently looking up at me when he spoke, even if it meant halting his work for a moment. “But it’s a perfect example of what I mean. Why do you always think I’m criticizing you?”

Because he was? But that argument wouldn’t go over well. I cradled the kitten a little closer, grateful I had something to hold on to. “Why would you want to be friends with me?”

I mean, I could’ve asked why he wanted to befriend a guy who clearly disliked him, but that seemed a little too rude, even for me. Besides, I already knew the answer. Pity. He felt sorry for me. The man had some kind of hero-complex, being a firefighter and all, and he saw me as a charity case.

Again, he took his time answering, putting on the spare first and securing all the bolts.

Then he finally looked up at me. “Because color me crazy, but you look like you could use a friend...and if there’s one thing I know how to do well, it’s being a friend.

In fact, I kinda specialize in it. So maybe you can give it a chance? Give me a chance?”

I had absolutely no comeback to that.

CHAPTER FOUR

DAYTON

There were few worse sounds in the world than a pissed-off kitten.

Except maybe a pissed-off tomcat, but I'd only had the misfortune of running into those a couple of times during my career.

As a rookie, I'd worked in a small suburb, so the fire-to-cat-in-tree ratio favored stuck felines, which was nice, but it hadn't prepared me for what it would be like when I was transferred to the city.

This was a nice change, if I were being honest. Not that I enjoyed being stuck in a vet's office, but the doctor was one of my brother's best friends, and I'd known him since he was knee-high and smart-mouthed.

"You were right," Teo said aloud, setting the hissing, spitting, angry kitten back in front of the squeezezy treat packet.

She began to make hangry noises as she lapped at the goop oozing from where Teo had cut it open.

"She's about ten to twelve weeks, a little malnourished, but she's not in any real danger."

I smiled with relief. I couldn't help but get invested in the lives of everyone I rescued,

furry or not. ‘Great,’ I signed.

Teo smiled as he swept his fingers back through his hair.

I could see the gently pulsing lights of his cochlear implant processors nestled in his black curls.

They were sleeker than the ones he’d worn the first time Dax dragged him through our front door, and the confident look on his face was also completely different from the shit-scared kid he’d been, clinging to my brother’s hand.

Teo came from a hearing family who had gotten him implanted as a baby, but after he failed to keep up in mainstream school, they’d let him attend the Deaf residential school my siblings attended.

He’d been given a lot of shit there—a few generationally Deaf kids making him feel like an outsider because he wore CIs.

He’d assumed our family would be the same, but my parents quickly proved to him that people like those kids were the exception, not the rule in the Deaf community, and he’d been a fixture in the game room next to Dax until the day I moved out for college.

‘You okay?’ Teo asked.

I waved him off. ‘Fine. It’s been a long day.’

‘I thought transferring back here was supposed to help your stress.’

I couldn’t help a small laugh. ‘I’m not talking about work.’

No, I was talking about Tameron, as much as I didn't want to be talking about him. It was obvious he didn't like me, and I could not figure out why or what I'd done.

The conversation with him had gone well—better than I'd expected, in fact.

And it was messing with my head, considering he couldn't stand me.

He'd reacted so intensely when I joked about him liking me, which had thrown me off a little.

Most people who lived in a house as queer as the one he was in didn't take it as an insult.

So maybe that's where I'd crossed the line months ago?

I'd had a small fixation on him since the day I laid eyes on him, though Nash had told me Tameron was the straight guy in the house, so I'd quickly put him in the unavailable column in my mind. But maybe that line had blurred one too many times, and I'd made him uncomfortable.

Shit.

But he also hadn't reacted too poorly when I told him he looked like he needed a friend. He seemed more sad than anything, which broke my heart.

I glanced up when I saw a hand waving in my periphery. 'Sorry,' I told Teo, taking the kitten he was offering back to me.

He gave me a sympathetic look and leaned against the exam table. 'What do you want to do?'

‘I don’t know,’ I admitted. ‘It makes sense to try and be his friend, but?—’

‘I meant with the kitten,’ Teo signed pointedly, then he tapped the side of his throat with his middle finger, a slang sign for his absolute confusion.

My cheeks flushed hotly and I closed my eyes with a heavy sigh. ‘Sorry,’ I signed again.

His shoulders rose and fell with his breath, and then he came over and sat next to me. ‘Tell me?’

I waved him off. ‘It’s not important.’

He pulled a face, but I could tell he wasn’t going to push it. He reached over with one hand and scratched the kitten between the ears. She immediately yawned and started to purr as she curled against my stomach. She was a warm, soothing weight, and I couldn’t help but curl my palms around her.

Teo grinned, and I knew in that moment I was screwed. ‘We have supplies for sale in the lobby.’

I groaned, my head falling back on my shoulders. ‘Why are you encouraging me?’

‘Because you’ve been alone for a long time and it’s not good for you. Besides, cats are a great pet for someone who works as much as you do. She’ll be self-sufficient. And it’ll piss off Dax.’

He wasn’t wrong about any of those things.

I just wasn’t sure it was a good idea to get a cat—although of all the animals to have with my schedule, a cat was the best option.

An auto feeder and a running water fountain would take care of her during my twenty-four-hour shifts while Dax was at work, and I would give her plenty of cuddles when I got home.

And if I trained her early enough, maybe I could put her on a leash and bring her to work with me. My team would love her.

‘What will you call her?’

I stared down and bit my lip. ‘I’ll wait and see. Dax can help once he gets over himself and falls in love with her.’

‘I’m going to text him as soon as you leave,’ Teo told me—not quite a threat. I knew Dax wouldn’t be thrilled, but I didn’t think there was a chance he wouldn’t fall head over heels for the adorable kitten’s face.

We finished, and Teo wrote me a script for some special food to help her gain weight and some supplements to add to her meals. He and the tech gave her the first round of shots, and then he did a quick check for fleas—and luckily, her fur was fairly clean.

She was content now after being pissed off for so long, which told me she probably wasn’t feral—just abandoned. The last thing I needed was more responsibility, but when I looked at her little face and the tufts of hair on her cheeks, I knew this was it.

The feeling was familiar. I just didn’t understand why.

She was loud on the ride home, but she yowled herself to sleep, and by the time I pulled into the driveway, she was snoozing on the little blanket inside the crate.

Dax’s car was gone, which meant I could get her set up and familiar with the place without him and I having a little argument about it, though the moment I walked

through the front door, I could feel my phone buzzing several times in a row.

Not cute. Kitten? You me no time!

Why you think good idea?

Hate you.

I set the crate down and opened the door. The kitten blinked at me sleepily, and I took three photos of her, sending them all to my brother in quick succession.

Look how cute she is. How do you say no to that face?

Easy! No!

You too soft.

You clean litter box! My room, close door.

Will do. I'm going to get one of those fancy robot litter things anyway. You're going to love her.

I ignored my brother's indignation as the kitten began to explore. When I was sure she wouldn't find some small, unknown hole in the wall somewhere and get lost forever, I quickly put my things down and headed for the shower.

Even the gentle classes I taught always had me working up a sweat, and I could smell the edge of BO in my pits. I didn't stay under the spray long, just enough to wash up and feel a little more human.

"MEW!"

I peeled back the shower curtain and saw the kitten standing in the doorway.

“MEW!”

“So, you’re going to be a clinger, huh?”

“MEEEEW!”

“And a loud one. Thank god Dax can’t hear you, or he really would murder me.

You’ll have to work on your non-verbal skills though,” I warned her as I stepped out and began to towel off.

She immediately began to chase the corner of the towel and got me in the back of the heel with her tiny claws, nearly taking me down.

“Fucking hell! I should name you Knives.”

Which was actually a super cute name. I swept her into my arms, and she dug her claws straight into my pec.

“Yeah. Knives.” She dug her claws deeper, purring loudly.

Grabbing my phone off the counter, I quickly took a couple of selfies, and on a wild whim, I opened my text thread with Nash and sent the photo.

Show this to Tameron and tell him I have a new roommate.

Nash sent back a laughing emoji, which made me grin, and I walked back into my bedroom, tossing my phone on the bed.

Knives all but leaped after it, and I let her go buck wild on the comforter as I slipped into sweats.

I wasn't on call, which meant I could cook a nice dinner, put my feet up on the coffee table, and get lost in some reality baking shows.

Knives followed me into the kitchen and began to meow loudly, so I poured her a little dish of food before rummaging through my own fridge.

With both my and Dax's schedules, it was in a sorry state.

There were two dozen eggs because Dax was in his protein era—as he called it.

In the back was a box of pre-washed baby spinach, a container with leftover something I was too afraid to open.

There was half a container of rice milk in the door and several mutilated chunks of cheese in various bags in the drawer.

The freezer wasn't much better, but I realized I had a few frozen meals Nash had delivered from Bean's kitchen experiments. All of them had turned out amazing, so I grabbed one and popped the lid, throwing it in the microwave.

“MEW!”

I turned to find Knives trying and failing to leap onto the counter.

I reached down with open palms and she hurried into my hands, purring the second I lifted her.

Cradling her to my chest, I buried my nose in her soft fur, but she wasn't having that.

She scrambled with her wicked claws and didn't stop until she was nestled in the crook of my neck.

“So you think you're a parrot?” I asked her.

She purred in return.

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Patting my pockets for my phone, I realized I'd left it in the bedroom. Knives didn't budge as I walked back across the house, and when I grabbed it off the bed, I realized I had a text from an unknown number.

I thought you said you and Nash weren't together.

My heart skipped several beats. The words were accusatory and rude, but somehow, I couldn't help my smile as I stared at them. I added him to my contacts as Mr. Pissy, which made me laugh at my own joke, then replied.

We're not together. And how did you get my number?

Nash gave it to me. And if you're not together, why are you sending nipple pics to him? Who does that to their friends?

Are you serious?

Am I wrong?

The photo was for you. I thought you'd be happy to know I kept Knives.

Who the hell is Knives?

God, this man was exasperating. It was almost like his entire life's purpose was to take every innocuous thing I did and turn it into a damn argument.

But I wasn't going to let him win. I knew damn well I couldn't fix people just by

being kind, but being kind had also never steered me wrong.

He wanted a fight, but he wasn't going to get one.

There was a good, kind, deserving man underneath all his anger, and I would be damned if I wasn't patient enough to stand by until he learned I wasn't out to get him.

Turning away from my bed, I held up my camera and grinned as I took a photo. Knives was half asleep, her eyes crossed, her tongue blepped out. I hesitated, but only for a second, then hit send.

Shoving the phone into my pocket, I returned to the kitchen and forced myself to ignore the immediate buzzing reply.

I plated the food—a stack of sauced tamales—and headed for the living room.

Knives shifted a little as I sat, but it didn't take long for her breathing to even out in her kitten version of a deep sleep.

I made myself take several bites before I finally grabbed my phone and looked at Mr. Pissyy on the screen before feeling bad and changing his name in my contacts. I braced myself for more unkindness when I finally opened his message, but I was pleasantly surprised.

She's really cute. What did the vet say?

She's not very old, but old enough to be without her mom. Slight malnutrition, but I got her some special food and some nutrition powder to mix in. She's very clingy.

Why Knives?

I twisted my body as best I could without waking the kitten, took a couple of shots of my shredded Achilles tendon, and sent the photo.

Love hurts. You can come see her any time, by the way. You helped rescue her. She might have to live with me, but she's half yours if you want her.

I waited a beat, but Tameron didn't respond.

Maybe that was too much. Maybe he was just making polite conversation and I'd read too much into it again.

Or maybe it wasn't that deep. I set my phone down and finished my food as I watched adorable bakers in the English countryside and eventually dozed off.

I woke with a horrible crick in my neck and an annoyed brother hovering over me. Dax had his bitch-face on even as he was cradling and petting Knives so thoroughly that she looked like she'd ascended into another plane of existence.

'What's up?'

Dax just gave me a dark stare, shaking his head. He had grease stains up and down his arms, though his hands were clean—from Fast Orange, judging by the citrusy scent lingering under the motor oil that clung to his clothes. He stepped back as I stretched and climbed to my feet.

'You love her already,' I accused.

He just glared as he held her close to his chest. 'I'm not doing a litter box.'

Rolling my eyes, I walked past him to the kitchen, and I could hear him following me with heavy steps. He made an annoyed noise, but I ignored him until I'd poured a

glass of water from the fridge.

‘It’s not like I brought home some hyperactive dog with separation issues,’ I told him, though it was possible Dax wouldn’t have minded that. We’d grown up dog-people. My dad had been approved for a hearing-alert dog when Dax and Dahlia were toddlers, and he’d always had one.

His most recent was Rizz—my niece named him—and he was a fat-butt, long-haired corgi obsessed with stealing bananas from my mom’s fruit basket and hiding them under his dog bed.

Dax sighed loudly and let Knives crawl onto his shoulder. ‘Has she been like this all day?’

I nodded and jerked my head toward the living room. I’d been on my feet all week. I was taking advantage and making sure I left an ass-shaped dent on the cushion before I went back to work.

Dax settled in his spot, kicking his feet up on the table as Knives got even more comfortable in his neck. ‘Where did you find her? And what do you call her?’

‘Knives,’ I fingerspelled. ‘And we rescued her from a tree.’

‘Knife.’ Dax vocalized with the sign and used pointer fingers instead of H-hands.

‘Yes.’ I nodded my fist.

He brandished his forearm, and next to a smear of grease, I saw very familiar scratch marks.

‘Love scratch,’ I told him.

He rolled his eyes but smiled as he reached up to pet her.

We sat in comfortable silence after that, and it was easy to remember why my brother was also my best friend.

That wasn't always true about us though.

He and Dahlia were eleven years younger than me, and the moment they'd passed their Deaf tests at the hospital, I'd been terrified my parents were going to love them more than me since I'd become the only hearing one in the family.

That hadn't been the case, but it did lead to some resentful, anxious teenage years that took a long while to overcome. I was secure in my family now—secure with them and loved unconditionally—but there were tiny scars created by my own fears that still ached from time to time.

Maybe that was why I was the way I was. Crushing on someone like Tameron, knowing I'd never have a shot.

I was fully content to be his friend because it made it easy to not be rejected.

But I wasn't a bitter man. Not really. I wanted to see people happy.

I wanted to help them avoid feeling that dark, sinking sensation in their gut, like nothing was ever going to be okay.

I had no idea if Tameron would ever give me the benefit of the doubt, but I wasn't going to lose hope. The little family Nash had put together was great, and even being on the fringes of that felt nice.

"Ayy," Dax said loudly. I turned my attention back to him. "I'm going to bed. I'm

exhausted and have to open the shop tomorrow.’ He stood and carefully eased Knives into my arms. ‘I like her.’

I smiled at him and held her close as I forced myself up. It was too early for bed for me, but the only thing I wanted right then was to curl up under my comforter, do a little kitten-supply shopping on my laptop, and maybe throw on an audiobook with a narrator that would put me to sleep.

I still had no word from Tameron, but after settling Knives under the covers with me, I took one more photo of the two of us and sent it, then added a little message at the end.

Goodnight, friend. Talk soon.

An hour and a half later, just as I started to feel sleep tugging at my edges, my phone buzzed. I glanced down at the screen, a smile crossing my face when I saw the name.

Goodnight. Kiss Knives for me, and see you at yoga next week.

CHAPTER FIVE

TAMERON

Knives.

He'd named the damn kitten Knives. Who named a cat that? Dayton Adams, that was who.

Okay, the little thing was absolutely adorable, and while I had no clue why Dayton sent me pics multiple times a day, I loved watching Knives come out of her shell. She'd attached herself to Dayton like an octopus, it seemed, because every single picture he sent me showed parts of him as well.

Half his face when she'd found a spot on his shoulder.

His thick thighs when she'd found a spot on his lap.

His biceps, when she'd curled up on his arm and had fallen asleep—and that man's biceps were a work of art, especially for his age.

I'd always been in excellent physical shape, but even I couldn't match his fitness level.

Now granted, working out wasn't as easy as it used to be.

Before, I would've been able to do a five-mile run in full battle rattle, but those days

were gone.

Now, everything I did for exercise was low-impact.

I could still do weights training—and I did, though usually with machines and not free weights, for safety reasons—but cardio was a challenge.

Kinda dangerous to be running on a treadmill and get a sudden dizzy spell.

Which is where the yoga came in...and Dayton.

As much as it pained me to admit it, he was an excellent teacher.

His class had a gentle flow, making it easy to follow.

Plus, I had no trouble understanding him and following his instructions, which hadn't always been the case.

My first yoga teacher had taught in a soft, sweet voice, which might've been great for relaxing but not so much for my ability to understand her.

I took my time in shavasana as the class ended, then slowly returned to the real world. My body felt great as I rolled up my yoga mat, fluid and relaxed. That should tide me over till the next class, three days from now.

Dayton made eye contact with me. Oh crap.

Was he going to talk to me? Conversations with him always felt so awkward.

I'd never had any issues with my social skills, and I had a reputation for being funny and witty, but with him, it was like my brain switched to different software.

Old, slow software that made for stilted conversations and weird reactions.

I looked away as I hurried out of the room into the locker rooms, where I quickly grabbed my personal belongings from my locker and headed out. At least after a yoga class, I didn't have to shower or be forced to change due to being sweaty or smelly.

In the lobby, I checked my phone out of habit. Oh, a message from Simon, my ASL teacher. I stopped and opened the message, my face falling as I read it. He'd failed me? He'd fucking failed me after I worked so hard on that assignment? He was such a dick.

"What's with the face?"

I wasn't even surprised when Dayton stepped up next to me. Instead of brushing him off—which I would have under normal circumstances—I showed him my phone. He read the message, then frowned. "You failed an ASL exam?"

"Yeah, and I worked really hard on it."

"What was the assignment?"

"We had to do a five-minute talk about the importance of language to us, how we viewed language."

His frown deepened. "That sounds rather abstract."

"It was, so I wrote the whole thing out first and had Nash check it. I mean, he's the only one out of all of us who has a college degree. He suggested some changes, which I made, and then I translated it into ASL and practiced for hours to get it right. I really thought I nailed it."

His expression softened. “I’m sorry. That must be so frustrating.”

I dragged a hand through my hair, realizing, to my dismay, that it was a bit shaky. Apparently, I was even more emotional than I’d realized. “I don’t understand what I did wrong.”

“Do you want me to take a look at it?”

The words fell out of my mouth before I could even debate the wisdom of this. “Yeah, please.”

“Let’s sit in my truck to watch it. That way, we have some privacy and can have a quiet conversation.”

I happily agreed, and two minutes later, we’d installed ourselves in his truck and I’d pulled up the video for him. He watched it intently, nodding at certain times, smiling at some of it, and clearly following along.

“Well?” I asked when he’d finished it. “Was it that bad? Did I make some big mistakes I didn’t notice?”

He met my eyes. “Not at all. I spotted some small things, but nothing that warrants a failing grade.”

“Small things like what?”

“Your non-manual markers—your facial expressions—need some work. At some point, you say you were surprised by how different ASL is from spoken language, but your face didn’t show that surprise.”

“Fair enough. I know I need to improve that aspect. It’s hard for me because it feels

so over the top, almost like making fun of something.”

He chuckled. “I guess it does if you’re not used to it, but it’s a crucial element in communicating.”

“But other than that?” I pressed.

“Nothing big. A few small mistakes, but nothing that made me lose track.”

“So why did he fail me?” I knew that had come out way too emotional, including a very obvious crack in my voice, but I couldn’t hide how upset I was.

Dayton put his hand on my knee for a moment, sending a jolt of warmth through me. “He shouldn’t have, and I’m sorry.”

I appreciated his comfort more than I had expected.

Out of anyone in my life, he was the one person able to judge whether I’d done a good job.

Nash had read the essay, but he wouldn’t have been able to check my test because his ASL was nowhere near my level.

But Dayton was fluent. “Thank you. That means a lot...”

Then I cocked my head. I’d been watching him, and something in his face gave me pause. “But you have an idea why he failed me.”

Dayton sighed. “One of the biggest downfalls of growing up speaking ASL is that I have no poker face. My face is an open book that shows everything I’m feeling.”

That made me chuckle.

“No, I’m serious. In fact, I can’t even play actual poker. Everyone can immediately see it on my face when I have a great hand.”

I’d never thought of it like that, but I could see how that could happen. As he’d said, facial expressions were a crucial part of ASL, so he’d grown up using his face to communicate. “That’s funny...but also annoying, I think.”

He shrugged. “Every now and then, but it’s usually not a big deal. But that is why you saw something on my face.”

I grew serious again. “Because you have an inkling why he failed me. Is it because he doesn’t like me? I don’t think he does, but I didn’t expect him to fail me for that.”

Dayton hesitated, then said, “If I understand your talk correctly, you said that ASL is much harder to learn than you had expected because it’s so much more than learning signs.

And that while you appreciate the backup ASL gives you and want to keep getting better at it in case your hearing deteriorates, you prefer spoken English over ASL. ”

That was a pretty good summary, actually, but my stomach sank as what Dayton said registered with me. “He failed me because I gave my honest opinion?”

Dayton slowly nodded. “That would be my guess.”

“B-but it’s the truth! At least for me it is. How can he punish me for being honest about how I feel?”

Dayton’s face showed nothing but empathy and understanding. “Can I try to

explain?”

I nodded.

“ASL has a very different meaning to hearing people than Deaf folks. Even for those who are partially deaf, ASL has a different function since they can often get by with spoken English. For Deaf people, ASL is their only option. Lipreading only gets you so far, as you’ve undoubtedly discovered, and when you’ve been Deaf from birth, your spoken words are never gonna sound the same as hearing people, even with speech therapy.

You’ll always be different and feel different...

but not with ASL. ASL is how they can communicate perfectly without feeling different, resulting in a strong emotional attachment to it...

just like immigrants have to their native language, for example.

I think your teacher felt offended by your opinion of ASL because it came across as judgmental.

Maybe even elitist, since he could’ve interpreted it as spoken English being superior.”

I hung my head, avoiding his eyes. Fuck. I hadn’t intended to make it sound that way, but now that Dayton explained it, I could see how it could come across that way. “I was trying to be honest and to verbalize my feelings about language, like the assignment said.”

Another gentle pat on my knee. “I know you were, and I don’t think you were offensive or elitist...

but I can also see why he'd feel differently.

For a long time, hearing people forced the Deaf community to assimilate into the hearing world and use oral language only, so there's also a cultural and emotional attachment to ASL.

It matters for more reasons than being a mere communication tool. Does that make sense?"

It did, but why had my teacher never given me that context?

If I'd known, I wouldn't have worded it like that.

Or I would've at least been more sensitive to the issue.

Now I felt like a total asshole. "He never told me any of this. I know I still have a lot to learn, but this would've been really helpful to know. "

"I'm sorry he didn't, and I agree it would've been good if he'd talked more about that aspect. Still, he shouldn't have failed you for that. Even if you'd told him ASL sucked, you still should've been graded on your performance, not on your opinion."

"Fat lotta good that does me now," I muttered. "I'm gonna have to retake the test. And if I wanna pass, I guess I'll have to change it into a whole damn ode to ASL. Which sucks because it is really goddamn hard to learn, and I should be able to say so without getting punished for it."

A peek at Dayton told me he was fighting to hold in his laughter. "It's okay," I told him, sighing. "You can laugh at me. I'm being dramatic."

"You should bring some of that dramatic flair into your facial expressions," he teased

me, and I had to give him points for being witty there. Not that I would admit it.

“Har har.”

“I don’t think you have to change it into an ode. If you would acknowledge the vital importance of ASL to the Deaf community, that would go a long way toward appeasing him. Just show him you understand that aspect. And I’m happy to practice with you... If you want.”

My head shot up. “What?”

“I can practice ASL with you...if you want. Or help you with that assignment. If you need help, that is. I’m not saying you do, but if you felt you did, I could watch it for you and give feedback?”

Was he rambling? Why on earth would Dayton be rambling? He almost sounded like he was...nervous. But why would he be?

Oh wait. I’d taken his head off a few times before, so he was probably mentally bracing himself for me being an asshole again. Not gonna lie. That gave me a solid rush of guilt. “That’s very nice of you to offer.”

Pure surprise flashed over his face, which only reinforced the guilt. Had he done it on purpose? Nah, that wasn’t like him. Expressive face, that was all.

Then his face fell. “That sounds like a polite introduction to saying no.”

It had been, but how had he known? Was I really that predictable? That grated on me, especially after he’d already made me feel guilty. So obviously, I couldn’t give him the satisfaction of being right. “I was gonna accept, actually. Unless you’re withdrawing your offer.”

“Accept? For real?”

“Jesus, you don’t need to make it sound like it’s a miracle.”

“Well, no offense, but it kinda is. I thought for sure you were gonna say no.”

“So maybe you don’t know me as well as you think you do.” I couldn’t help sounding a little smug.

“Maybe.” He didn’t sound convinced. “But I’m happy to help, so let me know when you want to get together.”

Get together? Oh, to practice. “I will.”

He pulled his phone out of his pocket. “I have some new pictures of Knives for you.”

I leaned in as he unlocked his phone and opened the Photo app. The first thing I saw was a shirtless picture of him posing in front of a mirror.

Oh, that was a really nice shot. The soft lighting perfectly accentuated his build rather than creating harsh lines and shadows. I could easily see why people would find him attractive, even if I wasn’t into men.

“Taking new pics for Grindr, I see?”

“And what if I was?”

I pointed at the picture. “If you turn a little more to the right, your angle would be better for showing off your arms and shoulders without looking like the Hulk.”

When he didn’t respond, I looked at him, and he was blinking. “Sorry, I needed a

moment to process. You're giving me tips for pictures now?"

"Yeah, why not?"

"Because...because I thought you were about to mock me for being on Grindr."

I had no idea what he was talking about. "Why the fuck would I do that? You're bi, right? Nash told us you were out as bi."

He nodded.

"So it makes sense you'd be looking for both men and women."

"Yeah, but Grindr is mostly for hookups. Not for relationships."

I let out a snorting laugh. "And you thought I'd have a problem with that? Do I look like the no-sex-before-marriage type? Dude, have all the sex you want. You're single, so what's the big deal?"

He opened his mouth, then closed it again. "I wasn't expecting that from you."

"Why, because I come across as some judgmental dick?" Anger filled me. "I guess I failed your test too, huh?"

Before he could respond, I'd opened the door and was out of his truck, slamming it shut. Fucking asshole. See, that was why I didn't like him. I always felt like he was judging me...and apparently, I'd been right.

I didn't need his help. He could go suck a dick for all I cared.

CHAPTER SIX

DAYTON

“Yo, Chief, you got a body back there?”

I spun around to find Anthony staring at me with his brow raised.

He was one of the few crew members willing to be so casual with me, only because we’d worked together in the city.

He’d moved to the East Coast a few years ago but had come back this way to help his sister after she had kids and her husband was deployed.

It was nice to see a familiar face. It was nice that someone wasn’t treating me like they weren’t sure if I was a bomb waiting to go off. I knew it would take time before the crew knew me well enough to relax, but it was the one thing I hated most about starting with a new team.

Glancing into the SUV, I rolled my eyes and turned back to Tony. “Laundry. Heading over to my parents’ place.”

“Wait. You still take that shit to your mom?”

I flushed. I was a grown adult who had a very nice washer and dryer in my house, but yeah, I still took my laundry to my parents’.

It was at my mom's insistence, of course.

She had always hyper-fixated on making sure all her kids got equal treatment.

She'd been doing more for Dahlia since she was the only one with kids, so now she was trying to make up for it with Dax and me by cooking us meals twice a month and doing our laundry.

As much as I knew how it looked, I didn't turn her down.

My schedule was better, but it was still chaos compared to someone with a nine-to-five, and Dax was the same.

He owned his mechanic shop and was still getting on his feet, so he was getting by on a skeleton crew until he was in the black.

And it was harder for him because he was Deaf, and the moment people realized that, they usually left to find someone else—who were often more expensive and less skilled than Dax.

But he wasn't the kind of guy who ever gave up, so letting our mom baby us a little bit was something we both indulged in.

"She also made me cookies this week," I told him with a sniff.

"Oh fuck, I miss Mama Adams's cookies," Tony groaned. "Save me some?"

"If you're a good boy," I said with a wink.

He burst into laughter. "It's a good thing I'm married, Chief, or I'd be climbing your sweet biceps like the tree you pulled your cat out of."

“Dude,” came another voice. We both spun to see Orrin, the newest rookie on the team, staring at us with wide eyes.

He looked younger than he was—twenty-five, but he could easily pass for a teenager if he didn’t shave.

He had a mop of dark hair and icy gray-blue eyes. “Is that...I mean...is that a joke?”

Tony shrugged. “Mostly. I had a huge crush on Dayton when we first met, but I got over it when I realized he got bad farts after eating burritos, and that’s his favorite food.”

Orrin’s cheeks flushed. “Oh.”

“Does the fact that we’re both bisexual offend you?”

” I asked. I kept my tone careful. I wasn’t here to intimidate any of my crew, but I wouldn’t stand for any of that toxic bullshit in my station.

Most people assumed it never happened in the Bay Area, but I’d come across it too many times in my career.

I preferred to educate than get nasty back, but I also wasn’t going to take any shit.

“No,” Orrin said in a rush. “N-no. No, I just didn’t...I mean.” He took a fortifying breath. “Sorry. I didn’t know that could be okay.”

Tony gave me a pointed look and walked off as I stepped close to Orrin. There was a beat of silence, and I could feel the tension coming off him in waves. I knew what he wanted to say, but I wouldn’t push him.

“This is a good place to be, Orrin. No matter how you feel or who you are. You know that, right?”

Orrin swallowed heavily. He’d been here for a few months before Captain Grant retired, so he pre-dated me at the station, and I was starting to wonder if maybe things had been rough before I showed up.

“My dad told me not to apply for this job,” he finally said quietly. “He said it was...that it was no place for a guy like me.”

“That doesn’t sound very kind,” I said.

“He’s not a bad guy,” Orrin said very quickly. “He just worries. He also grew up in rural Arkansas, so...” He trailed off with a laugh. “I was born and raised here, but I got beat up a lot in school.”

I was a little surprised. Orrin wasn’t a tall guy, but he was bulky as hell. I’d seen him deadlifting at the gym more than I would ever attempt, and he barely broke a sweat. “You got beat up?”

He snorted. “Trash-canned every day between third and fourth periods. But my junior year, my PE teacher realized I was strong, so he had the office change my schedule to weight lifting, and I got good at it. Really good. They stopped trying to push me around after that.”

I couldn’t help a small laugh, clapping my hand on his shoulder.

“You’re amazing. And for what it’s worth, you never have to tell anyone here anything personal.

But if people are giving you shit, I want to know about it.

That is not how I'm going to run this place.

This will be somewhere I can bring my partner, no matter their gender. ”

Orrin looked at me, opened his mouth, then shut it. He wasn't ready, and that was okay. But at least he knew now he didn't have to stay silent.

“Listen, I gotta run, but I'll see you Friday.”

He nodded and walked back toward the truck as I climbed into the SUV and headed down the road. The radio went off a few times, but I ignored it since I was officially off shift and only on call if it required a supervisor and the two officers below me were busy.

It sounded cliché, but I wasn't like most battalion chiefs. A lot of them truly did earn their reputation of being the smarmy assholes who answered every call and sped through lights to show up where they weren't needed or wanted, so long as it wouldn't be actual work.

I hadn't aged into this job after spending years breaking my back and was now looking for something cushy.

I'd applied for it because I felt at home in the role.

I'd always been a natural leader and wanted to help my team grow in all the ways they needed to.

And I wanted to support them in all the ways they wanted to be supported.

It helped on long, lonely days when I wanted someone to care for.

Someone to need me. Maybe someone who wanted to care for me right back when things got rough.

I wasn't actively looking or anything. It never worked out for me when I did, but I was hoping that maybe the universe would surprise me one day with the one person it decided was absolutely perfect for who I was.

I was in a better mood by the time I pulled into my parents' driveway.

They lived in a nice little ranch-style home to accommodate my mom's bad hips.

It was a rare floor plan for the area, and it had a very seventies vibe that reminded me of my childhood visiting my grandparents.

Dahlia kept calling it the Brady Bunch house until my mom got her feelings hurt, and after that, she only used it in the siblings group chat.

The driveway was surprisingly empty, so I pulled alongside my dad's Vespa and grabbed my laundry bag from the back.

I punched in the door code before hitting the doorbell three times in quick succession to let whoever was inside know it was me.

We each had our own flashing lights code, though Dax was the asshole who always forgot, and I swear he was going to be the reason for their heart attacks one of these days.

Heading to the right, I dropped my bag on the washer, then made my way through the house.

It was quiet and still, so I slipped through the kitchen and found the back door

cracked open.

Unsurprisingly, I could see my dad a few yards down the grass with his ass in the air, fixing something near his chicken coop fence.

That was his newest hobby—chickens. He'd seen some Instagram reel with these adorable chickens with feathery poofs on their heads and immediately bought a dozen eggs to hatch.

Only three did the first year, but now he had nine—no roosters, which Mom insisted.

She didn't want to be run out of the neighborhood by the angry hearing people who were woken up by crowing at the ass crack of dawn.

And Dad was fine with what he got. His girls, he called them. They each had little collars with bows, and he was always taking photos and signing to them like they were his other grandkids.

I was halfway to him when Rizz came hurtling around from the bushes. He barked twice at me, then ran to Dad and nudged his arm. Dad turned his head, and his face broke out into a huge smile as he climbed to his feet and brushed the dirt off his jeans.

“Hey!” he said loudly, opening his arms for me.

I was several inches taller than him, but he always made me feel small and safe when he hugged me. ‘Do-do?’ I signed, staring at the hole he was digging.

He scoffed. ‘Nothing. Just reinforcing the fence. Dolly keeps getting out, and Betty and Rita are encouraging her.’

I rolled my eyes, laughing. ‘Want some help?’

He looked me up and down, then waved me off. ‘Go. Sit. You look tired.’

‘Thanks,’ I signed with a heavy eye roll.

He gave my cheek a sharp pat before shoving me toward one of his sun loungers. There was a big glass of iced tea in the cupholder, and I took a sip, grimacing at the sweetness. I had no idea who’d turned my parents on to sweet tea, but I wanted to maim them for it. The shit was disgusting.

‘Give me five minutes,’ Dad said, then turned his back to me, dropping onto the grass.

When Rizz realized he was back off duty, he trotted up and jumped onto the lounge, immediately sniffing me all over.

He’d been a little more curious now that I had Knives, and I was debating when I should bring her over to introduce them.

I didn’t think she’d be thrilled about an overly enthusiastic corgi, but I wanted her to eventually be desensitized to strangers.

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I gave Rizz a scratch between his ears before pulling back. ‘Ball?’ I signed. He knew a few verbal commands but wasn’t great at following them.

He flew off the lounge and dove back into the bushes.

I waited, but when he didn’t return, I figured he’d gotten distracted by something and leaned back, kicking my feet up.

Dad took a lot longer than five minutes, but when he was done, he walked over and snagged his iced tea before plopping down beside me.

‘You have to stop drinking that garbage,’ I told him.

He gave me a shit-eating grin before taking a long drink. ‘Why are you here?’

‘Laundry.’

He burst into laughter. ‘Spoiled.’

‘She needs this,’ I insisted. ‘If I don’t let her do laundry, she’s going to come over and try to clean my kitchen, and she always rearranges.’

Dad snorted again, then set his cup down and signed.

‘Vee-vee!’ He pointed at the coop. Right at the edge of the fence, I could see his brown chicken with the biggest poof on her head digging at the ground with her feet.

After a second of fruitless effort, she clucked loudly and stormed off.

‘Victory!’ My dad waved his hands in an ASL applause.

‘You think it’ll hold?’

‘Maybe. At least we don’t have foxes here,’ he said. He kicked his feet up on the lounge and turned his body toward me. ‘How’s work?’

I shrugged. ‘Nothing new. The crew is taking a while to warm up to me. One guy almost came out to me, I think. He’s really nervous. He caught me and Tony flirting?—’

His eyes widened and he dropped his legs over the side of the chair. ‘Flirting? Interesting.’

I shook my head. ‘Not real flirting. He’s in a relationship. But Orrin,’ I fingerspelled his name carefully since it was a little on the unusual side, ‘thought we were making a joke out of it.’

Dad’s face fell. ‘You told him about you?’

‘I did. I told him that’s not how I’m going to run the station and that everyone will always feel welcome there. I think it helped, but he had a hard time growing up.’

‘Like you.’

A little like me. I’d had a brief stint as a theater kid, played cello for a few years, and even tried my hand at choir, but I was a low baritone who couldn’t hold a note for more than ten seconds, so it didn’t work out.

I'd been trying to find myself in high school, and if it hadn't been for the fact that I hit my growth spurt during my sophomore year, it might have been a lot worse.

'I just want my firefighters to feel good.'

'They will. Be patient,' he reminded me.

Sighing, I leaned back against the lounge and stared up at the sky. I could smell the ocean on the breeze and wished I was a little closer to the water. I could really do with a beach day soon.

"Ay," Dad said aloud. I looked over at him as he waved his hand. 'You seem upset.'

'Not upset,' I promised, and it wasn't a lie. I wasn't upset. But every time it got quiet, I thought about Tameron and the way he seemed to flip like a loose light switch. I'd swear we were making progress, and then suddenly, he'd accused me, once again, of something I hadn't done.

I couldn't understand why he was so eager to assume everyone was out to get him.

Or maybe it was just me. His ASL teacher had absolutely graded his assignment unfairly, although part of me wondered if maybe he didn't fully understand what his professor was looking for.

If it was what Tameron said, it was too ambiguous.

But I also understood why his teacher got upset, especially if this Simon guy was Deaf.

'Talk to me,' Dad insisted.

I almost brushed him off, but then I realized the one person who might be able to understand better was my dad. I swung my legs down and leaned over my thighs. 'Did you ever feel like you didn't belong?'

'Existentially?' he fingerspelled.

I laughed. 'No. In the Deaf community.'

His brows flew up. 'Are you feeling insecure?—'

'Not me.' Not anymore. I was happy with my hearing ears and my Deaf heart, and I'd stopped giving a shit where other people thought I belonged. 'I met someone recently who went deaf from an accident. Army,' I clarified.

Dad winced. 'Recent?'

'A couple of years,' I said. If he was level four with ASL, it had to be at least two, if not longer.

But I had a feeling his hearing loss was more progressive than all at once.

I didn't know many veterans, but my dad had taught them for years when he was doing community center classes, and he'd talked about their struggles from time to time. 'Do you know anyone named Simon?'

His brow furrowed, and then he shook his head. 'You know me. Hermit.'

I rolled my eyes. He was one of the most social guys I knew. But I didn't call him on it. 'That's his ASL teacher. He gave him an assignment to talk about language and failed him when he said he preferred spoken English.'

Dad made a noise of understanding. 'That-that.'

"Would you have done the same thing?"

He shook his head. 'Of course not. I wouldn't even have that as an assignment. If he's trying to teach Deaf culture's relationship to ASL, that's not a good way to do it.'

I felt a bit vindicated in what I'd said to Tameron.

'He's struggling because it's hard for him.

He's still recovering from his injury, and I don't know if it's more than hearing loss.

He's struggling to learn the language because he doesn't have any Deaf friends.

His roommates are learning with him, but it's not the same. '

Dad nodded. 'He needs immersion.'

'He doesn't want immersion. I think he wants to know he can communicate, but he doesn't want a new identity. Did you ever feel that way?' My dad was born profoundly deaf, but he hadn't been given the chance to identify himself as a Deaf man until he was in college and met my mom.

Dad smiled. 'Yes. But I've always been profoundly deaf,' he reminded me. 'I never fit into the hearing world. When I went voice-off, it was a relief, not a chore. Tell him it's okay if he doesn't give up what he knows. He doesn't need to sacrifice more than he already has.'

I bit my lip. 'If I invited him over, would you tell him?'

Dad laughed. ‘Always. You know me. I always want more children.’

I grinned and felt a warmth course through me at the thought of Tameron being welcome here.

It was a ridiculous thought, of course. The man was bound and determined to hate my guts.

But maybe, if I was patient enough, I could soften him.

I could show him he could have the best of both worlds and not give up any part of who he was.

I’d just finished pouring a bowl of food for Knives when my phone buzzed three times in a row. I took my time putting the bag away and making sure she was content before grabbing it off the counter. I sat and got comfortable, and then I swiped open the screen.

Sorry for being a dick.

Nash is making me apologize.

But I am sorry. I was having a bad day.

I could tell. Water under the bridge.

Would I be a bigger asshole if I asked for ASL help?

I dropped my phone, laughing a little because I’d made a mental note to remind him I was still more than willing to help him with his assignment. I took a beat, then answered him.

When are you free?

Would you hate me if I said tonight? Uhh...because it's due the day after tomorrow.

LMAO! Come over. I'll ping you my address. Are you hungry? I have some stuff Nash brought me that your buddy Bean cooked.

I ate.

But thanks. See you in a bit.

I sent Tameron the location pin to my place, then stared at his name, wondering how often he had to remind himself not to be a total asshole when he was asking for favors.

I couldn't really relate. I had plenty of bad moods, but I'd never been that guy.

I suppose that was my privilege though. I'd never been in the position he had been.

I'd seen people die, of course. I'd failed in rescue attempts.

I'd heard the devastating silence when the screams stopped.

Hell, I'd even pulled three babies out of the Safe Haven box and held them in the cold, sterile ER until a social worker came to take them. My life wasn't all sunshine and roses. But I would never be able to relate to what Tameron had seen, and maybe that was okay.

He had his guys to commiserate with. But maybe he could use a friend who was different, and I wouldn't mind at all if that's the person I ended up being to him.

Even if, deep down, I wanted a little more.

CHAPTER SEVEN

TAMERON

“You’re not Dayton,” I said to the guy who opened the door in what had to be the stupidest comment ever. Was he Dayton’s roommate? I vaguely recalled Nash mentioning a roommate.

‘Are you Tameron?’ he signed.

Oh, he was Deaf? ‘Yes.’

‘Come in.’ He signed something I couldn’t follow, then ‘Will be right back.’

I repeated the unknown sign. ‘Is that Dayton’s sign name?’

The man grinned as he stepped aside and let me pass him, then closed the door behind me. ‘Yes. I’m Dax.’ He fingerspelled his name. ‘I’m Dayton’s brother.’

Ah, that made sense. ‘Nice to meet you. You said Dayton would be back?’

‘He’s helping a neighbor move a washing machine.’

That sounded like him, all right. Rescuing kittens out of trees, running into burning buildings, helping people move heavy furniture—all in a day’s work for him. And on top of that, he was fluent in ASL as well. Was there anything the man couldn’t do?

‘What do you do?’ I asked him. We had just finished a unit on professions, so this was great practice. And Dax was nice about it, signing slowly and clearly so I had no issues following him.

‘Car mechanic. I own my own garage.’

My eyes widened. ‘True-Biz? I love tinkering with cars.’

‘You were Army?’

‘Yes. I worked with munitions. Ordnance specialist.’ I fingerspelled the last part because it wasn’t a common profession.

‘And now?’

That was the million-dollar question, wasn’t it?

I’d tried some odd jobs, but it wasn’t easy when you had as many limitations as I did.

Between the dizziness, the hearing issues, the frequent medical appointments, and everything else, I was highly unreliable for any employer.

I couldn’t blame anyone for not hiring me, but it left me adrift.

Also, if Bean, with his shitty memory, could find a job, why couldn’t I?

The difference was that he’d made his hobby—cooking—into his job.

I didn’t have hobbies. My recovery was all I had time for, especially emotionally, and when I wasn’t studying or taking some kind of class, I was watching TV and pretending I was fine, everything was fine. I’d become really good at that.

But that was way more than Dax wanted to know, so instead, I shrugged. ‘I take classes and focus on getting better. Still figuring out the rest.’

‘If you want to tinker with cars, you’re always welcome.’

Really? He’d offer me just like that? The man didn’t even know me, and I couldn’t imagine Dayton singing my praises to his brother. I’m sure when he told him I was coming, the words ‘dick’ and ‘asshole’ had been used. ‘Thank you. That’s very nice of you to offer.’

He shrugged. ‘No big deal. It’s hard to figure out what you want to do.’

‘You didn’t always want to be a mechanic?’

He wagged his hand. ‘I didn’t know if it was possible. I worked for a boss for a bit, but that didn’t go well. None of my coworkers signed, so communication was challenging.’

I didn’t spot hearing aids, but that didn’t mean he didn’t have them. ‘You have no residual hearing?’

‘A little, but mostly low tones. The problem was that they always had music on when we were working, which meant I couldn’t hear anything else. So I would take my hearing aids out, but then I couldn’t hear them when they called me, so they got annoyed.’

That was exactly what I feared about working anywhere. I had more residual hearing than Dax did, but for how long? The doctors had made clear that my hearing would only deteriorate over time—one of the reasons I’d gotten serious about learning ASL.

‘You own your own shop now?’

‘I do. I communicate with clients through text or email and put my hearing aids in when needed. But I have a lot of customers from the Deaf community who are all too happy to be able to communicate with their mechanic more easily.’

That was the alternative to a job in the hearing world.

I could explore options within the Deaf community.

But was my ASL good enough for that yet?

I knew Dax was slowing down for me, and so did Dayton.

Both could sign much faster than they did with me—and so would others.

I’d have to really step up my game to be able to communicate.

But even then, was that where I fit in? I wasn’t part of the Deaf community and didn’t consider myself deaf.

Not yet. I was hard of hearing, and with my aids, I could function relatively well.

But again, that was now. God only knew where I’d be five years from now.

‘I’m glad you found your place,’ I finally said when Dax looked at me funny.

I had a habit of getting lost in my own head in the middle of a conversation. And that was something I couldn’t blame on my hearing loss, though it had certainly not helped.

‘You will find yours too,’ Dax said, and it took me a moment to realize he meant I’d be finding my place, where I fit in.

The appropriate reaction probably would've been a thank you or affirming that I had no doubt I would, but I couldn't get those words out, not when they would've been a lie. 'I hope so. It's hard.'

Okay, being honest was one thing, but opening up to a total stranger? One who happened to be related to the one man I already clashed with all the time? That was a recipe for disaster.

But Dax put a warm hand on my shoulder. 'You have a support system to help you. Dayton will be there for you if you ask him.'

Dayton? He would, but out of a sense of obligation, not because he genuinely wanted to. The man had offered me friendship out of some misplaced sense of pity, probably. Hadn't he told me I looked like I could use a friend?

Duty. That was the word I was looking for. Dayton was all about duty and doing the right thing. Rescuing and saving people. And that was what I was to him—another guy to save. No thanks.

'I have friends who are there for me,' I told Dax. I fingerspelled Nash's name. 'He owns the house we live in, and he's great.'

'He is. I've met him.'

Right. Of course he had. Dayton and Nash were friends. I still wasn't used to Nash having this whole life outside our group. Not that I was upset about it or jealous or anything, but it was weird. 'Then you know I have all the support I need.'

He studied me for a moment, his eyes narrowing, but then he pulled up one shoulder. 'It never hurts to have more friends.'

It did if they weren't real friends but only helped out of a sense of duty, but I was spared an answer when I heard a key in the door and Dayton stepped inside. "Sorry, I was helping a neighbor move a heavy washing machine."

He spoke and signed simultaneously, but if I truly wanted to practice, I needed to learn to rely on ASL only. Besides, it felt somehow rude toward Dax. 'Dax told me.'

'He's gonna come to my shop and tinker with cars with me,' Dax said.

Dayton's face lit up with surprise. He hadn't been kidding when he said he had the worst poker face ever. 'You like cars?'

'My father has a 1955 Chevy 3100 pickup truck that he has fully restored himself. He started on it when I was ten, and I helped him. We spent whole Saturdays on it, and I loved it. We finally finished when I went to Basic Combat Training, and he bought a 1964 Mustang convertible that he's still working on. '

The memories of my dad and me talking and shooting the shit while painstakingly fixing that car were the best childhood stories I had.

Even now, they brought a smile to my face.

How I wish I could get that time back. My parents loved me, but they had no clue how to support me in this, how to handle my hearing loss.

'Those are some classic cars,' Dayton said. 'That must've been great to share that with your dad.'

I nodded.

'Ready for some practice?' Dayton asked.

Right. I wasn't here to make friends—though Dayton had offered that, which still baffled me. It had to be a pity offer, right? 'Yes.'

'I'll leave you guys to it. Nice meeting you,' Dax said.

'You too.'

I followed Dayton into the living room, where, with a loud meow, Knives immediately came running toward us.

I was on my knees before I realized it, and she didn't even hesitate before coming straight to me.

Her fur was soft as she rubbed herself against my hand, purring.

I could feel the vibrations through my hand and grinned.

She was a happy little thing, wasn't she? "Aren't you the cutest?"

She peered up at me with those big eyes and my insides melted. I picked her up and held her close to my chest, where she happily continued purring.

"Do you like it here with Daddy Dayton?"

A choked sound behind me made me turn around. Dayton was coughing, turning red.

I frowned. "Are you okay?"

He held up a hand as he coughed some more, then seemed to catch his breath. "Yeah," he croaked. "The Daddy comment caught me off guard."

Oh. Oh. “I didn’t mean that kind of Daddy. I meant like a pet-daddy, a cat-daddy.”

“Now he tells me.”

“We call Nash Daddy all the time.”

Dayton seemed to have recovered. “Sure, but he is a bit of a Daddy to you all, isn’t he?”

“You’re saying you’re not the same type? You rescue kittens from trees, encourage people to exercise, help folks with their homework... Sounds like a Daddy to me.”

“I can’t tell if you’re joking or not,” he said after studying me for a few beats. “And that’s a little worrisome.”

I chuckled. “I promise I’m not suggesting you become a Daddy to anyone other than Knives. I’m just saying you shouldn’t point fingers at Nash when you’re very much like him.”

“We’re not that similar,” he protested, and his voice held a bit of a sharp edge that I couldn’t place.

Why didn’t he like being compared to Nash?

They were friends, and Dayton knew how much Nash meant to me, so why wouldn’t he take it as a compliment?

Hell, if I could figure that man out. Every time I thought things were improving, we took two steps back again.

So I sighed. “Whatever. It’s not important.”

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Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 6:49 am

His shoulders dropped and he looked away. “You’re right. Want to do your new presentation for me?”

I stood a little straighter. “You don’t want to read it first? I printed it so you could look and tell me what you think.”

“Nah, do the presentation. It’s good practice for you, and it’ll help me give appropriate feedback because I’ll see it the same way your teacher will.”

“Right, right.” He had a point, but now I was suddenly nervous.

And Knives, who’d been my emotional support kitten while talking to Dayton, now wriggled in my arms, as if she knew it was time for her to go.

As soon as I put her down, she walked right over to Dayton.

Two seconds later, she lay curled around his neck, her head resting on his shoulder. Traitor.

I unfolded the printout—no way would I be able to do it without that—and wiped my non-sweaty hands on my pants, awkwardly standing as Dayton sat on the couch, leaning back expectantly.

Damn, I hadn’t been this nervous since my sixth-grade oral presentation on pickup trucks.

I took a deep breath, cleared my throat, and took another breath.

Jesus, I felt like a man about to be executed.

I'd had military ops I'd been less nervous about than this.

To his credit, Dayton waited patiently, not once giving even the smallest sign of impatience. And somehow, his calm transferred to me and I was able to start. After the first paragraph, those strange nerves finally drifted away, and I got into it, signing with fluidity and ease.

After what Dayton had told me, I'd researched the history of ASL, and he'd been right about it being a source of cultural pride.

It had been Alexander Graham Bell—yes, the guy who invented the telephone—who had strongly favored oralism over sign language despite having a deaf mother and, later on, a deaf wife.

Hell, the dude had even suggested Deaf people should not be allowed to marry other Deaf people so as not to propagate deafness. That was a seriously fucked-up opinion right there, and he'd even tried to support it with some pseudo-science that had been quickly debunked.

Anyway, I'd put some of that research into my talk and spent some time discussing how important ASL was to the Deaf community before stating that oral language was still my preference. Hopefully, that would be enough to appease my teacher.

When I was done, the nerves came back in full force. What if Dayton hated it? But he didn't leave me in suspense for long. "That was really, really good."

The tension immediately seeped from my shoulders. "Yeah?"

"You offered a much more nuanced view of ASL and what it means both socially and

culturally. And it would be hard for your teacher to fail you on this one.”

Pure joy exploded inside me. “Thank you. Man, that’s a relief. Any feedback on the signing? I know I still need to work on my non-manual markers, but other than that?”

He shook his head. “Other than that, I didn’t spot any mistakes. It’s clear you’ve practiced hard.”

I shuffled my feet. “I didn’t want to fail again.”

“You shouldn’t.” The warm hand on my shoulder did strange things to my stomach. “You’ll be fine.”

Dayton was right. This time, my teacher didn’t fail me. In fact, I passed the test with a ninety-two percent score, which made me stupidly happy. The results came in as I was waiting for the water to boil so I could put the pasta in.

The red sauce had already been simmering for a good hour—the recipe courtesy of one of Nash’s coworkers, whose grandmother had brought it with her from Sicily or some shit.

It could’ve been straight from some mob family or have been paid for in blood.

I didn’t care. I’d made it once before, and it tasted divine.

I screenshot the result and texted it to Dayton.

I passed!

I knew you would. Congrats! That’s an amazing score.

Thanks for your help.

You did all the work. I just sat there and listened.

Thanks for listening then.

My pleasure

Seconds later, my phone buzzed again. Dayton had sent me three pictures of Knives, all curled up on his lap. Had she gotten bigger, or was that my imagination? She still looked tiny on his thigh, but not as small as before, maybe?

Did she grow? She looks bigger.

I'm not sure. I'd have to weigh her.

I think she has.

Since three days ago, when you saw her last?

I rolled my eyes.

"What are you annoyed about?" Nash asked, walking into the kitchen.

I turned my phone around. "Doesn't she look bigger to you?"

Nash leaned in. "Nah, she's still tiny."

"That's because his thigh is so thick. I'm telling you she's grown."

"I take it Dayton didn't agree with you?"

“He never does,” I grumbled. “He’s, like, the least agreeable person on the planet.”

Nash quirked an eyebrow. “Not with me, he’s not. Sounds like a you-problem.”

“Fuck you.”

Nash grinned. “Fuck you too.”

I dumped the pasta into the water as Creek entered the kitchen. “Is dinner ready yet?”

I gestured at the pasta I’d just put in. “If you prefer your pasta very al dente, sure. You may break a few teeth while eating it, but who cares, right?”

He flipped me the bird.

“What’s the rush?” Nash asked. “You know we eat at six-thirty, and Tameron is running right on time.”

Creek sat at the table, dragging a hand through his hair. “Forest wants to call after dinner. Says he has some news he wants to share.”

Forest was Creek’s little brother. Well, he wasn’t so little anymore as he was a grown-ass man, only a few years younger than Creek, but that didn’t matter. Younger brother meant little brother, even if they were adults.

I’d met Forest the year before when he’d spent a few days with Creek, and he was an utter delight—unlike his brother.

They were legit polar opposites, Forest’s sunshiny demeanor to Creek’s eternal grumpiness.

Funny how two brothers could be so different, but then again, my sister Kasha and I were nothing alike either.

Nash stood a little straighter. “Good news? Or bad news?”

“He didn’t specify.”

“But you think it’s good news?” Nash pressed, and Creek and I exchanged a look.

“I don’t know, but I will let you know as soon as I’ve talked to him...if I have his permission.”

My phone dinged again, and when I checked the text Dayton had sent, I almost dropped it in the boiling water.

You were right! She has grown.

It wasn’t that message that had me flummoxed.

It was the accompanying picture. Dayton had taken it while aiming the camera down at the scale he’d put Knives on in a shoebox, but he’d caught a good portion of himself as well...

and he wasn’t wearing a shirt. I had a prime view of his absolutely ripped six-pack and a noticeable bulge in the tight shorts he wore.

Dayum. The man really was built, and not even for “his age.” I let out a deep sigh. Some people really had everything going for them, didn’t they?

I told you so.

Nice shot.

Isn't she adorable in that shoebox?

Sure, we'd go with adorable. Because the kitten was the reason I'd almost dropped my phone into a pot of boiling pasta.

What the fuck was wrong with me?

CHAPTER EIGHT

DAYTON

“I want you to imagine there’s a string from the ceiling to the base of your spine. It’s traveling from there, all the way up your neck, the back of your head, finally exiting at the tip of your nose. It’s pulling tight, keeping your body in a straight line.”

Most of my students were seated in chairs, but a few were on their feet, using them for assistance. And two people—one of which being Tameron—were beside the chair but using yoga blocks to balance themselves.

It was progress. Or he was just having a good day. He hadn’t said and it wasn’t my place to ask. He’d been taking my class long enough to know that if he wanted me to know something about how he was doing that day, it was his job to tell me.

But he was doing great. Mostly.

I walked behind him and wrapped my arm around his front, sliding my hand from his torso to his stomach. His abs jumped. Hard. “Just a bit deeper,” I said, urging him to turn his body farther into the pose so his spine was straight and his hips were aligned with the hand pointing up at the ceiling.

“Th-thanks,” he stammered.

I snatched my hands back quickly. Yes, I was indulging in being allowed to touch him, but I was doing my best not to make it dirty. I respected the practice and

Tameron as a person. He was straight, so any small indulgences were for me alone, and they'd fade as soon as I met someone else.

The only problem was I'd been wallowing in my one-sided crush and hadn't been looking.

That would change tonight. I'd finally decided it was time to go out for my bi-annual get fucked by a hot stranger in a questionable restroom tradition.

It wasn't the best way to get my rocks off, but it was the quickest. And it tended to take the edge off my loneliness. If only for a little while.

Dax and Dahlia had been up my ass at the last family dinner about meeting someone. Dax had even snuck into my phone and downloaded some dating app for queer people—kind of like Grindr, but it catered to the whole queer population.

And after my argument with him about boundaries—one I knew he planned to fully ignore—I actually let myself do a little perusing. The first few profiles I'd seen were ones I would've swiped right on a couple of years back when I'd given online dating a try.

Profiles of men and women looking for a quick, no-strings good time.

Which was all fine and dandy, but I was getting a little tired of being alone.

I could easily live like this forever. It was a comfortable life.

I'd settled into my bachelorhood nicely and was a little less lonely now that I had Knives with me.

Not to mention Dax didn't seem to be on the prowl after his last relationship ended,

so it wasn't like I was going to lose my roommate—or gain another one—anytime soon.

But there were a few who seemed more my type. People looking to settle down. People tired of trying to navigate the world of relationships without having someone draw them a map.

I'd checked the profile Dax had created for me, and it wasn't...the worst. He'd leaned a little heavy on the fact that I was a firefighter—which always fascinated people until they found out that being a first responder wasn't the glamorous job they showed on TV.

Once upon a time, my job had been a lot more rushing into burning buildings, lifting heavy objects, and administering life-saving emergency care until the ambulance showed up.

But now, it was paperwork, schedules, and administration.

It was mitigating arguments between my team when they got into petty fights about who took whose leftovers from the fridge and who stole the good pillows from the supply closet like they were a bunch of kindergarteners.

It was organizing charity events and dealing with neighborhood complaints about how loud the trucks were.

And yeah, there was still the opportunity to save kittens and do shirtless car washes and calendars once or twice a year when the need called for it.

But it was hard to deal with the disappointment on people's faces, which is why I always waited to say what I did. And it was why I knew someone would accuse me of catfishing when I turned up as the opposite of what they expected.

So I'd said screw it and let the app sit on my phone without sending or responding to any of the messages.

Instead, I'd gotten out the iron Dahlia had given Dax and me for a housewarming gift and pressed my sexiest button-up for the club, then left it on the bed so I go to the gym before heading out to get my dick wet.

Or something close to that.

Just one orgasm was all I needed.

"Uh. You okay?"

I snapped back to reality, almost forgetting I was in the middle of class, standing half a foot away from Tameron, who had dropped out of the pose.

I swallowed heavily. "Sorry. That's great, everyone.

Carefully come back up to center, stretch your arms to the sky, then let your hands rest in prayer over your heart. "

I watched Tameron move fluidly out of the pose. He wobbled a bit but took the initiative and sat in the chair as his palms pressed together and hovered just above his heart center.

'Good,' I signed to him with some caution. I'd used signs a few times in class before, and Tameron had always gotten irritated when I did. I knew he didn't like to be othered, but I also knew that in a room like this, it was easier for him to understand.

The music was low, but the room didn't have the best acoustics.

‘Thanks,’ he signed back, surprising me.

I grinned as I headed back to the front of the room. “Let’s pause for water,” I signed the word water quickly. “Then we can begin our cool-down.”

Everyone looked relieved, and I tried not to take it personally as they all reached for their water bottles and the room filled with chatter.

I did my best to not be obvious when I watched Tameron as he stretched, then took a few long drinks from his metal bottle with the firefighter logo on the side.

Nash had obviously given it to him, but it sent a little thrill up my spine to see it.

A strange sort of possession that I had no right to feel. But I let myself anyway. It wasn’t going to go anywhere. He was straight, and my crush most definitely had a dead end.

“How’s Knives?”

My head whipped around to find Tameron a few feet away from me. I was getting dressed after rinsing off, my shirt halfway over my arms. “She’s wonderful, as usual. She has a new favorite sleeping spot.”

Tugging my shirt over my head, I let it drop halfway down my abs before reaching for my phone.

I felt like one of those ridiculous new dads always whipping out their phones to show baby photos.

But I couldn’t help it. She was adorable.

Swiping through my gallery, I found the one I'd planned to send him later that evening.

Knives had discovered she was exactly big enough to curl up on the end of the banister. It was a large square block of wood, and it wouldn't be able to hold her for long, though I had a feeling she'd figure out a way to make it work.

Holding the phone out, I watched Tameron fight the urge to coo. He looked up with big Bambi eyes. "Okay. That's too cute. If your station does a firefighters and kittens calendar next year, you'll probably quadruple your budget."

I laughed, pulling the phone back to look at her squishy little face. "I think you might be right. I may run that up the flagpole and see if I can get approval."

Tameron looked pleased with himself as he headed to his locker. Only then did I realize he was in nothing more than a towel, and my face flushed as I turned away to give him privacy. I swore I could feel him peeking over at me a few times, but I tried to keep it casual as I packed my bag.

"So," Tameron said. I glanced over to see him fully dressed and readjusting his hearing aids. He had bone-conductor ones that attached behind his ear with a magnet. "Big plans for tonight?"

I let out a soft laugh. Leave it to him to ask me that today of all days.

It wasn't like I was ashamed of my plans, but I tried to be comfortable in public spaces like the gym.

Though Tameron did live in a house full of men who were not straight, so he was probably the safest heterosexual guy to hang around with.

“What?” Tameron pressed.

I took a breath, then lifted my hands to sign instead. ‘I’m going out to a club.’ I signed slowly, spelling club so he’d get it.

‘Club,’ he repeated on his fingers. It took him a second, and then his brows flew up. “Oh. Oh. Like a—” He gave the sign for dancing.

‘Yeah.’ I nodded my fist, then finally reached down and tugged on the hem of my shirt so it covered my stomach. Tameron jumped, and I worried suddenly that showing off my skin had made him uncomfortable. “It’s been a while,” I told him as I walked closer to the bench and sat next to my bag.

“So...a hookup kind of thing?”

“Yeah. Sorry if that’s TMI.”

“If it’s what?”

‘TMI,’ I fingerspelled.

At that, he rolled his eyes. “Do you know the house I live in? Nothing is sacred. Not shitting schedules, not showering schedules, and these days, not even fucking schedules. Plus, I lived in the barracks.”

I didn’t know much about the military. My family was generationally Deaf, so even during times of war, they were left behind.

Not that they minded. The Deaf community thrived during World War II.

They were some of the only able-bodied men who’d stayed back and their

employment had skyrocketed... until the war ended.

And then it was back to second-class citizens again for far too many years.

But since the military had never been an option for us, I never thought twice about it. “Was that for boot camp?” I asked him.

He shrugged. “Yeah, then deployment. Trust me when I say there is no privacy, and the nights get long and lonely. I wouldn’t have minded being more deaf back then.”

I couldn’t help my laugh. It was the look on his face and the dry way he spoke. I knew nothing would ever happen between us, but I liked Tameron as a friend too. A lot. And I was feeling better now that he wasn’t so furious with me all the time.

His lips twitched into a little pleased half-grin. “So, do you have a date?”

I snorted and shook my head. “I am still tragically single. I was going to hook up. It’s not as easy these days with all the apps, but yeah. All on my lonesome—for part of the night, anyway.”

I reached for my shoes and began to tie them.

Tameron looked thoughtful as he watched. “If you want some company, I’ve been told I’m a pretty good wingman. Of course I haven’t tried since”—he tapped the back of his left ear—“but no one can hear for shit in clubs anyway, right?”

My face fell. “Oh. That’s a really sweet offer, but?—”

“Never mind,” he said in a sudden rush. “Bad idea. Forget it.” He turned away to face the lockers, so fixing this sudden problem was more complicated.

I stood, gently tapping his arm until he turned his face toward me. “I would love it if you came with me, but I’m not going to a regular club.”

His brows lifted and his cheeks pinked. “Is it like...a kink club, or?—”

“No!” Not that I hated those either, but it wasn’t my lifestyle, so I’d only ever gone with partners who were into it. And honestly, tonight, I just wanted a nice blowjob or a firm, strong hand on my dick. “No, I, uh...I was kind of in the mood to hook up with a man.”

“Okay,” he said slowly, tone confused.

“So the club’s going to be queer.”

He blinked, then rolled his eyes. “Dude. You think I care? I can wingman at a gay club.”

I was a little startled. “But once I find someone, there’s not exactly going to be a lot of prospects for you.”

He scoffed and turned to sit back on the bench to put his own shoes on. “Yeah, I haven’t really been in the mood for that, so it wasn’t on my mind. But it’s totally fine if you don’t want company. I mean, I doubt you need the help.” He gestured at my stomach and my insides went all hot.

I swallowed heavily. “You’d be surprised these days. And I’d love it if you came with me.”

Tameron brightened for a second, then his face fell. “Is this a pity invite?”

I sat beside him and lifted a brow. ‘Square-brain-you,’ I signed.

I wasn't sure he understood the exact sign, but he definitely got the context because his face reddened and he looked like he was on the edge of picking a fight with me.

“You have to stop assuming everyone only wants you around for pity. I like you, Tameron. I enjoy your company, and I'd love a second set of eyes to make sure I don't walk off with a total dud. ”

He bit his lip, glanced down, then looked up at me with his big, lovely eyes. “What does this mean?” He repeated the sign, and I laughed before standing and winking.

“Ask your teacher. Then use it on me when I deserve it. Text you later?”

Tameron's face looked like he couldn't decide how to feel before his shoulders sagged. But though his mouth wasn't set in a smile, it was far more relaxed than it usually was with me. And that was definitely progress. “Sounds good. See you soon.”

I felt a thousand times lighter as I turned and left the gym.

CHAPTER NINE

TAMERON

What in the name of Jesus, Mary, Joseph, and all his carpenter friends had come over me, offering to be Dayton's wingman? It must've been temporary insanity. What else could explain why I had made that impulsive decision?

Sure, after he'd helped me with my ASL assignment, I'd come to the conclusion that maybe he wasn't so bad after all.

That maybe I'd been wrong about him and his motives and that he truly wanted to be friends with me.

Though why he'd made such an effort with a prickly cactus like me was a mystery, but that was his problem.

He'd plain worn me down with kindness, and while that was incredibly annoying to admit, it had been effective.

Meeting his brother hadn't hurt either. Dax had been so nice and supportive with his offer that I could come to the shop anytime and tinker with cars.

I had to admit it was tempting. The lack of direction and purpose in my life was starting to bother me.

This could be a good distraction, and since Dax was Deaf, it would also be excellent

practice for me.

Hmm, maybe I should ask Nash what he thought. As much as I liked riding his ass about kinda being the Daddy for all of us, the truth was that I valued his opinion more than anyone else's.

Or...

I hit the FaceTime button before I could talk myself out of it. The house was quiet, so communicating shouldn't be an issue. "Tameron!" my mom said, joy in her voice. "It's so lovely to hear from you, honey."

She put her phone on the little tripod, then looked over her shoulder. I could see the logo of their plumbing business behind her on the wall. "Harold! Tameron is calling."

"Are you still at work?"

"We were about to leave," she said, ensuring her face was turned toward the camera.

She was better at that than my dad, who tended to forget when he got excited about something.

I didn't always have the heart to interrupt him, so every now and then, I missed parts of what he was saying.

Frustrating but minor in the bigger scheme of annoyances in my life.

My dad sat next to my mom, and she adjusted the camera so it captured both of them. "Hey, kiddo," my father said. "How have you been?"

I wiggled my hand. "Same old, same old. Not much changes in my life. Still

primarily focused on learning ASL.”

“We’re learning too,” my mom said.

I blinked. What? I must’ve misheard them. “Sorry, what was that?”

“We’re taking an ASL course for beginners,” Mom said. “Look, I can finger-spell my name.” She painstakingly slowly fingerspelled Margaret and tears formed in my eyes. “And I’ve learned the signs for ‘mom,’ ‘dad,’ and ‘son.’”

Her movements were slow and awkward, but she did the signs correctly, and holy shit, my parents were learning ASL. “That’s...” My voice croaked.

“Honey, are you okay?” Mom asked.

I nodded, barely able to see through my tears. “It means a lot that you’re learning ASL.”

My father cleared his throat. “We should’ve started sooner. We’ve been...waiting, I suppose. Waiting and hoping for you to get better.”

“It’s not gonna get better, Dad. It’s only gonna get worse.”

“Yeah, we realize that now. It took us a while to accept it. It was such a hard blow for us that I can’t even imagine what it must’ve been like for you.”

I wiped my eyes, not even caring that they could see me cry. “It’s okay, Dad.”

“No, it’s not. Your mom and I have been talking about it a lot lately. About how we’ve been so focused on what we lost—your hearing—that we forgot to celebrate what we still had. You’re still here with us, and that’s what matters most.”

Mom nodded emphatically. “We’re so proud of you, honey. The way you’ve handled everything... You’re so much stronger than we ever gave you credit for.”

Damn, now I was really crying. “I don’t feel strong most days.”

“But you are,” Dad insisted. “You keep going, keep trying.”

“And you’re making new friends,” Mom added. “Like that firefighter you mentioned last time. Nash’s friend.”

Heat crept into my cheeks. Had I mentioned Dayton? “Dayton? He’s...he’s actually my yoga teacher now.”

“Is he the one who’s fluent in ASL?” Dad asked.

I nodded. “He’s what’s called a CODA, Child of Deaf Adults. Both his parents are Deaf, and so are his brother and sister. He’s the only hearing one in his family, actually.”

I’d known this all along, but for some reason, saying it aloud made me realize how hard that must’ve been for him. He’d been the odd one out, the one who was different. Like me.

“So you practice ASL with him?” Mom asked.

“I do. He helped me with an assignment the other day, giving me feedback on a talk I had to do. It was super helpful.”

“We’d love to practice with you sometime,” Mom said. “Once we’re better at it, I mean. Right now, we’re still terrible.”

“You’re not terrible. You’re learning. That’s what matters.” I swallowed hard.
“Actually, I wanted to ask you guys something.”

“Anything, honey.”

“Dayton’s brother owns a garage and offered to let me tinker with cars some time.

Do you think that’s a good idea? I mean, I am getting pretty bored, and I have no idea what I could do for a job, you know?

My ASL isn’t good enough to work in the Deaf community, but I can’t always get by with my hearing aids either. ”

Dad’s whole face lit up. “You mean like we used to do with the Chevy?”

“Yeah, exactly like that.”

Dad’s smile widened. “That would be wonderful. You loved doing that, and you were good at it.”

“I was?”

“Of course you were. Your brain has always worked that way. You understand how things fit together, how they work. It’s why you were so good at your job in the Army.”

That was true. I’d had a knack for figuring out how something worked or how to fix what was broken.

The way my brain processed information made it easy for me to understand how different components worked together.

It was why I'd been so good at what I did...

until I wasn't anymore. Now, I was the broken thing, except I couldn't fix myself.

"Do you think I could make a career out of it?" I asked hesitantly.

"Why not?" Mom said. "Your dad did pretty well with his plumbing business."

"That's different. He owns his own business."

"So could you one day," Dad said. "But start small. See if you even enjoy it first. Take Dayton's brother up on his offer."

"Dax," I said. "His name is Dax."

Mom's face softened. "You sound like you've found some good people there."

"I have." My voice cracked a little. "I really have."

"Then trust them," Dad said. "Trust yourself too. You've always had good instincts."

Had I? Because my instincts about Dayton had been way off. I'd been so determined to dislike him that I'd missed what a genuinely nice guy he was. Hell, I was going to be his wingman tonight at a gay club. Talk about a one-eighty.

"Thanks, guys. For everything. For learning ASL, for supporting me..."

"We love you, honey," Mom said. "We always will."

After saying goodbye, I sat there for a while, staring at my blank phone screen. My parents were learning ASL. They were actually making an effort. And they thought I

was strong.

Maybe I was. Maybe all this time, I'd been stronger than I'd given myself credit for.

My phone buzzed with a text from Dayton.

Still up for tonight? No pressure if you've changed your mind.

Nope, I'm in. What time?

Can you be here at nine? Club doesn't get busy till ten anyway.

Sounds good.

That meant I could at least watch part of tonight's movie for our weekly Friday movie night.

That had become a thing when we'd discovered Bean had grown up in a conservative religious home and hadn't been allowed to watch TV or movies.

Or listen to anything but religious music, for that matter.

The kid had a massive deficit in his pop culture knowledge, so we'd taken it upon ourselves to educate him.

And since Bean needed a lot of sleep and was usually in bed by nine, we always started right after dinner.

Our movie night group had grown, now including Heath and Jarek, Creek's and Bean's boyfriends, respectively.

They were both good guys, but even if I hadn't clicked with them, it would've been hard to resent them since they took great care of Creek and Bean.

Jarek especially was so good with Bean, who could barely remember his own name on bad days.

Jarek had endless patience with him. I loved seeing them both so happy, even if it stung a little.

Thank god Nash was still single, or I'd feel like a total loser.

It had been Nash's night to cook, but he'd opted for Chinese takeout instead, which was rare for him.

He looked tired, a little pale. Maybe he'd had a rough call at work?

He didn't talk much about what he saw on the job, but it wasn't always pretty, I reckoned.

Even rarer was that he allowed us to eat in front of the TV so we could start the movie.

With my plate piled high with orange chicken, kung pao, steamed edamame, and a big scoop of brown rice, I settled in one of the reading chairs.

Tonight's choice was *The Mummy*, courtesy of Heath. "It's a classic," he insisted. "Required watching for every bisexual man. And if you're not gay or bi or pan already, you will be after watching this."

I snorted. "I highly doubt that. I'm quite secure in my straightness, thank you very much."

Nash shared a look with Heath that I couldn't quite interpret, but whatever. Maybe I had imagined it.

The movie was surprisingly entertaining, and I could see why it was considered a classic. The special effects were a bit dated, but the story was solid and the humor on point.

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And god, Rachel Weisz was hot. The way she carried herself with that confident swagger, the intelligence burning in those dark eyes as she played her role of librarian-turned-adventurer.

Her accent when she spoke, the way she bit her lip when concentrating on decoding ancient texts.

Even the little half-smirk she'd give when she knew she was right about something.

There was something magnetic about a woman who was both brilliant and badass.

And Brendan Fraser... I'd seen him before in a nineties classic called Blast from the Past with the amazing Alicia Silverstone, but he hadn't stood out to me there.

But he sure as fuck did now. His broad shoulders filled out that white shirt nicely, and when he took it off...

I found myself studying the lines of his chest, the way his muscles flexed when he fought.

His smile was infectious too—bright and genuine in a way that lit up his whole face.

Even his voice was appealing, deep and warm with just a hint of playful humor.

How had I never noticed before how hot he was?

Wait, what?

Since when did I notice if male actors were attractive? But here was no denying Fraser had that rugged adventurer thing that was hella appealing. He reminded me of...

Oh fuck.

He reminded me of Dayton. They were nowhere near the same age and their hairstyles and hair colors were different, but they shared the same easy confidence, that effortless charm.

And a similar build, though Dayton was in even better shape than Fraser was in the movie.

Not that I had studied him or anything, but the guy kept sending me pictures of Knives with him in them.

His smooth chest, his broad shoulders, those powerful thighs, that perfect six-pack that I hadn't even possessed in my best days.

Not even the scar on his stomach took away from his... beauty.

His beauty. I thought Dayton was beautiful. Gorgeous. Was that...?

Holy mother of god...

Not so straight after all. I was pretty sure that truly straight men wouldn't salivate over another man's body, and there was no denying that's exactly what I was doing. Over Brendan Fraser, obviously. Not Dayton. What the actual fuck?

As I watched the movie, my head kept spinning. I'd made fun of Creek for not realizing he was into men, and now I was in the exact same boat. Somehow, I'd spent

twenty-nine years considering myself straight, and now I had to admit I'd been wrong.

Dammit, that meant Heath had been right about this movie, and that plain pissed me off. Well, it would've been far worse if it had been Creek instead of Heath, but still. I hated being wrong, but there was no way around it here.

I was pretty quiet during the rest of the movie.

When it was done, Bean let out a huge yawn, mumbled his goodbyes, and disappeared into his bedroom, Jarek on his heels.

Heath and Creek followed right after, though my guess was they weren't going to sleep just yet.

Those two did love to fuck, and boy, was I grateful I could take out my hearing aids at times.

"You okay?" Nash asked as he stacked the empty plates. "Give me a hand with cleanup, would you?"

"I'm fine."

Nash snorted. "You're one of the worst liars I've ever met, kid. Try again."

I should've known he'd pick up on my emotions. He always did. "How did you know you were gay?"

To his credit, Nash only blinked at what must've been an unexpected question. "I've always known. I must've been eleven or twelve when I realized I was attracted to boys, and that was that. It never went away, obviously, as much as I hoped at times

that it would.”

“Your parents never suspected?” I asked as we carried the dishes to the kitchen, where I opened the dishwasher and started loading it.

“Never. When I came out to them, it was a nasty shock. I’m still pretty straight-passing, for lack of a better word. Few people ping me as gay, even other gay men.”

“Maybe because you’ve repressed it for so long? I mean, you weren’t out in the Army either.”

Nash flashed me a grin. “Not to everyone, but rest assured, I found plenty of fellow-minded soldiers to have a good time with.”

I snorted. “I don’t doubt that for a moment. You’re pretty good-looking...for a guy your age.”

I expected him to flip me the bird, but instead, he cocked his head and studied me. “That’s an unexpected observation from you, our only straight guy...”

Shit, did he know already? Had I betrayed myself that easily?

Then again, it wasn’t like I needed to keep this a secret from Nash.

He wouldn’t tell a soul if I asked him to keep it quiet, and he was usually the first person I talked to about stuff I struggled with anyway.

He’d been right by my side when I’d gotten the diagnosis that my hearing loss was irreversible, and he’d held me as I’d cried.

“I’m not so sure about that anymore,” I said quietly.

Nash nodded slowly. "I figured."

"How?"

"You were unusually quiet during the movie. You're always the one with a running commentary, especially if you haven't seen a movie. But not a peep out of you tonight."

I sighed, leaning against the kitchen counter. "I was trying to figure out why I thought both Rachel Weisz and Brendan Fraser were hot."

"Oh, he's seriously hot in that movie."

"Yeah, but I wouldn't have noticed that before."

"Before what?" Nash met my eyes. "What changed?"

"I don't know. This...awareness, I guess?"

"That's why they call it a bisexual awakening. It's something that can slumber for a long time before you become aware."

I dragged a hand through my hair. "I know that. I do. But to me, it was unexpected."

"Not to me."

"What do you mean?"

Nash leaned against the counter. "You've been pretty focused on Dayton lately."

Heat crept into my cheeks. "I have not."

“Oh please. You’re constantly texting with him about that kitten.”

“Because she’s cute.”

“And you agreed to be his wingman tonight at a gay club.”

“As a friend.”

Nash quirked an eyebrow. “A friend? That’s the first time you’ve called him that.”

“Well, he’s hard to resist, so I guess we’re friends now. He insisted, not me.”

“He’s a great friend, and I’m glad he finally wore you down. Plus, he’s a good-looking guy.”

I groaned. “He’s fucking gorgeous, and you know it.”

Nash’s eyes widened, and only then did I realize what I’d said. “I mean...”

“Don’t even try to take that back. You’re attracted to him.”

“I don’t know what I am.” I slumped against the counter. “This is all so confusing.”

“Welcome to the wonderful world of sexual identity crisis,” Nash said dryly. “But seriously, it’s okay to be confused. Take your time figuring it out. There’s no rush.”

“I’m going to a gay club with him in an hour.” I dragged both hands down my face. “And I can’t stop thinking about his abs.”

“Oh, they’re pretty damn spectacular...”

I groaned. “Not helping, dude. Not helping.”

Nash’s laughter followed me all the way up the stairs.

CHAPTER TEN

DAYTON

I rarely worried about my appearance when I was going in for a hookup.

A shower, some product to tame my hair, a tight shirt, and my best clubbing jeans usually did the trick.

I normally went commando with a condom in my pocket and a little packet of travel lube in case things took a different turn than I was expecting.

It was simple.

It was easy.

So I had no idea why I didn't this time.

Or why I spent forty-five minutes fussing with myself.

By the time I was done, Tameron was already in my living room having a conversation with Dax, and I felt a little bit like a tool because I was the one who'd asked him to show up at nine, and now it was nine-thirty.

I was not the late guy. Ever. I expected a sour expression when I finally came out, but instead, his eyes went wide as he looked me up and down. He had Knives on his lap and she squirmed away from him when he gripped her a little too hard.

I ran my hand down my shirt. It was black and silky with a little embroidery. ‘Bad?’

“No,” Tameron said aloud, then glanced sideways at Dax before lifting his hand and pinching his first two fingers to his thumb. ‘No.’

‘Hot,’ Dax assured me.

‘True?’

Dax rolled his eyes and repeated the sign with a pointed expression. ‘Yes.Trust.You’ll do fine. Just don’t bring a hearie home. I don’t want to hear awkward conversation in the morning.’

Tameron waved his hand in the air and repeated Dax’s sign for listen—thumb at his eyes, first two fingers up and bent. ‘What is that?’

‘Deaf listen,’ Dax told him quickly. ‘Hear with our eyes.’

Tameron’s brows flew up, and I could see him mentally filing that one away. After a beat, he slapped his palms on his thighs and pushed to his feet, turning to Dax. ‘Text me later?’

Dax nodded and offered him a fist bump, which Tameron gave before turning toward me. I had about a thousand questions all at once, but the feeling in my chest was a good one. Were they becoming friends?

I knew Tameron would never fully embrace a Deaf identity, but I knew he would feel less alone if he had other friends who lived an experience closer to his own.

It was obvious his military buddies would always be family.

They would have a closeness most people would never experience, and I loved that for him.

But I also knew he felt isolated, even in his own home.

I made a mental note to invite Tameron over to one of my dad's block parties the next time he threw one. But I'd give him that invite on a less awkward night. Shooting a wave to my brother, I turned away and grabbed my keys before following Tameron to the door to grab our shoes.

"Want me to follow you?" Tameron asked.

I shook my head. "Nah. I mean, unless you want to stay sober for the night."

"Oh. Uh..." He bit his lip for a second. "I kind of thought I'd be your DD."

"No, honey. I don't drink and fuck. Not at a club, and not at my age."

He rolled his eyes. "You and Nash both act like you're two steps from the grave. But I'm not going to peer pressure you. Today was kind of a weird day, so I could use a beer or two."

I ushered him out, burning to ask what happened but afraid he'd shut down again if I tried. We climbed into the car and I set the GPS for the parking garage near the club I liked. The silence between us when we hit the road was gentle and comfortable.

It was unexpected.

I glanced over at him a few times to find him relaxed with his gaze on the buildings ahead of us.

“Do you ever—” He stopped abruptly. “Never mind.”

Reaching up, I flipped on the low light that sat just under my sunglasses holder. It was dim enough that it didn’t reflect on the windshield, but it was bright enough that he’d be able to see my hands and lips. ‘Tell me,’ I signed.

He shot me a grateful smile, but it didn’t last. “I don’t want to offend you or make assumptions.”

“How about you try me?” I suggested.

He bit his lip, then nodded. “You’re really close with your family, right? You all have a really good relationship.”

“Yeah. They’re the best.”

“But you all...live in different worlds. Deaf and hearing. So even as much as they loved you, do you ever feel like...like you’re standing outside of them sometimes? Like there’s a wall between you that’s so clear you could run into it because you can’t see that it’s there, but when you do...it hurts?”

I let out a slow breath. He was touching on a trauma I had—a trauma that no amount of love and support from my parents or siblings could ever help. Because it was true. I would always be an outsider. I could have a Deaf heart, but the first label I was given by them was the “hearing one.”

It othered me. And it wasn’t out of malice, lack of caring, or anything like that. It just...was. It was something that could never be helped. It was a tiny wound that would always remain bleeding, though it wouldn’t kill me.

“Sorry,” Tameron said quickly. He must have read my face.

“No, honey. It’s just a tender spot for me.

My parents were great, but they had friends who weren’t.

I remember when I was like nine or ten, this lady came over.

She was a student-teacher doing her hours at my dad’s school.

She seemed nice enough, but when they weren’t looking, she came and told me, ‘I hope you realize you’ll never belong with us because you’re hearing.

’ I didn’t know what to say to that and didn’t tell my parents for weeks.

She came around often, and she’d always make little snide comments to me when they weren’t looking. ”

“Jesus,” Tameron breathed out. “Did you tell them?”

“My dad caught her one night,” I answered with a small laugh.

“I had never seen him so pissed off. He took her outside, and I have no idea what he said to her, but she never came around again. And when I went to visit him at work, she wasn’t there.

I felt kind of bad because opportunities for the Deaf, even in Deaf education, tend to go to hearing people.

But she was one of the first ones who really drove home that I was living in a world I didn’t fully belong in. That feeling never went away.”

“I’m sorry.”

“Don’t be. I know you’re on the other side of it,” I told him, turning my face as best I could so he didn’t miss a word.

“You were basically evicted from your world but then offered a chance to be a visitor. And even if you...I don’t know, get cochlear implants that work at a hundred percent, you’ll still be deaf. ”

“Yeah,” he breathed out. “The guys forget a lot. I mean, of course they do. This is new for all of us. And I can’t really blame them.

Everyone in the house is dealing with a mountain of shit.

We were all injured in the same blast. We all have PTSD and night terrors, insomnia...

feeling like we don’t belong anywhere because the world moved on without us while we were deployed.

So I can’t expect them to prioritize communication.

But sometimes we’ll watch a movie and they’ll forget the captions.

Or they mumble or turn away from me. Or they talk to me even when they see my hearing aids are off. ”

I nodded. “That has to be painful.”

“I don’t know how to talk to them.”

“Start small,” I told him. The GPS chirped for me to take the exit, and I realized we were almost there.

A small part of me wanted to give up on the night and go out to dinner.

To continue our conversation because this seemed a lot better than trolling for dudes who would be nothing more than a moment in my life.

But I didn't think he'd appreciate that.

"Easier said than done," Tameron told me as I pulled onto 11 th .

"It always is, but you have a great group of guys there, and you should trust them to hear you out when you need them to. I mean, they are better at that than you are anyway."

"I...did you just...?"

I grinned. "Too soon?"

He looked a little stunned, then burst into laughter, shaking his head. "You're an ass."

"But you kind of like me, don't you?" I pressed.

His smile didn't falter, but his laughter faded, and after a beat, he let out a breath. "I, uh...I think I do. Yeah. And I guess I owe you an apology for?—"

"Nope. Not tonight," I interrupted. I turned the car toward the entrance of the garage and pushed the button for the ticket.

Five minutes later, we were in a spot, and I turned to him.

"Whatever shit was between us before, consider it done and forgiven. You're dealing with a lot, Tameron.

It's okay to be angry at the world or at strangers who are sticking their noses where they don't belong. ”

He let out a breath. “Yeah. I was...insecure and angry. You were kind of a reminder that my life was different. But I've been working on it. And you're right. I do need to stop assuming everyone hates me.”

“Or that you're not a lovable guy,” I said.

His ears reddened in the dim light of the car. “If you say so.”

“I do.” I extended my hand to him, and when he gave me his, I held it gently—not a handshake, just a moment of comfort. “I really like our friendship, okay? I like you. So let's get me laid so I can scratch this itch, and then we can return to our normal lives.”

“If that's what you want,” he said. There was something...odd in his voice. Different. But I wasn't about to read into it now. So I didn't.

I let him go with a slow drag of fingers, then climbed out of the car and waited for him to join me. He was a warm weight against my side, a ballast, and while this was suddenly the last thing I wanted to do, I was oddly glad that the person there with me tonight was him.

He reached the curb, and for a moment, I thought everything was back to normal. Then he froze. In the dim parking lot lights, I could see his face was drained of color apart from two dark spots on the apples of his cheeks.

“Tameron?”

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He didn't respond. I wasn't sure if he was dissociating or if he couldn't hear me. I lifted my hand and waved in his periphery until his gaze darted toward me.

“Hi.”

His lips twitched up into the ghost of a smile. “Sorry.”

I made a Y with my dominant hand and tapped my chin. ‘What’s wrong?’

A beat of silence passed, then another. Finally, he stepped closer and pressed a hand to the center of his chest. “I can feel it. The-the beat. The music.” He rolled his gaze up toward the sky. “Since my hearing loss has been getting worse, I’ve noticed I’m more sensitive to other things.”

Ah. The myth of the super senses. But it wasn't exactly a myth. People Deaf from birth had more sensitive sight because they relied on it in place of hearing. People who were blind from birth had incredibly well-trained ears and sometimes even a natural inclination toward echolocation.

But people like Tameron—people dealing with the slow loss—often dealt with the dark side of losing a sense.

Everything else became a lot for a while.

And it didn't always go away. Wearing hearing aids, even ambient noise could be overwhelmingly painful.

My brother was profoundly Deaf, but he never, ever wore his if we were going to Deaf events or clubs.

I understood what he was talking about and moved closer, reaching up to his shoulders. “Take them off.” My thumbs brushed his earlobes, and he gave a single shudder.

“But—”

“Trust me?” I repeated myself in sign, and he nodded. “Take them off.” I lifted my hands and switched languages. ‘You know enough to understand.’

He swallowed thickly, then nodded. ‘Okay.’ His fingers had a slight tremble, but he reached up and plucked them from behind his ears and held them in his palm.

‘Do you have your case?’ I signed slowly.

He nodded, then reached into his back pocket for the small, slender gray box. Dropping them inside, he squeezed it so tight his knuckles went white.

‘Talk to me.’

Tameron took a deep breath, lifted his hands, then changed his mind and dropped them. “I don’t like going without them in public.”

‘I understand. But the music will be so loud,’ I signed, waiting to make sure he was following, ‘that it won’t make a difference.

And this way, your ears won’t hurt. You’ll feel the music.

’ I pressed my hand to his sternum and felt his inhale shudder in his lungs.

‘And you have enough hearing that it won’t be total silence.’

He tightened his jaw, then nodded. ‘Okay. Let’s go.’

I offered the crook of my elbow to him and he laughed, then curled his hand into it and let me lead the way.

The queer scene in the Bay Area wasn’t what it used to be. There had been a sort of frantic intensity about it in the nineties after the AIDS crisis started to wane. A sort of desperation to be seen and heard, not forgotten now that it wasn’t making the news cycle every other week.

So many were terrified the world would forget who we’d lost that we’d celebrated every chance we got. But society had shifted. We were older now, and wiser, but tired.

They had social media. A way of being constantly connected to each other across the globe that clubs felt—in a way—like a dying relic.

Of course they’d never fully go away. This wouldn’t turn into a ghost town.

There would always be people who needed to connect, have a drink, dance, and forget for just a little while how terrible the world could still be.

But it wasn’t the same.

In a way, I supposed that was a good thing. When we walked in and saw it wasn’t wall-to-wall people, Tameron relaxed even more. The tension began to drift from his body in little fits and bursts, and by the time we made it to the bar to order a drink, he was smiling again.

‘Thirsty?’

He pulled his lips to the side in thought. ‘Beer?’

‘I’ll order. Trust me?’

He rolled his eyes and nodded.

It took a moment for the ridiculously hot—and ridiculously young—bartender to make his way over.

He flexed his pecs in his black mesh shirt, the light catching on his nipple rings.

He eyed my pepper hair with the sprinkling of salt and gave me an up-and-down that told me if I wanted, he’d be a sure thing.

But he wasn’t my type.

And the longer I stood there, the more I wasn’t sure I even wanted a quick, dirty fuck anymore. It was starting to lose some appeal. The satisfaction wasn’t as good as my hand or a couple of cleverly designed toys I had in my closet, so what was the point?

“One Coke, one beer,” I said, shouting over the music. “Whatever lager you have on tap. Bartender’s choice.”

He winked at me, gave Tameron a quirked brow, then shook his head with a laugh as he wandered over to the taps.

I felt an elbow against my side and turned to find Tameron scanning the crowd. My middle finger dragged up my chest when I caught his eye. ‘What’s up?’

He bit his lip, then signed, ‘You-like-what? Who?’

It felt like a trick question. I liked him, but I couldn’t say that. I liked men who looked like him, but that would probably be creepy. And frankly, I didn’t really have a type. I liked men who were somewhere between rough and tender. Men who knew when to push and when to pull back.

I didn’t mind if they didn’t know what they were doing so long as it was enthusiastic. And fun. I’d let myself wonder what Tameron might be like, but that felt like a cruel game to play with myself.

He tapped my arm again and raised both brows as if to say, ‘Well?’

I scanned the crowd again, but no one caught my eye. ‘Let’s just dance,’ I signed right as the bartender slid the two plastic glasses toward us.

For a moment, Tameron looked like he wanted to argue, but after a second, he tipped half the foamy beer down his throat, swiped his mouth with the back of his hand, and nodded. “Yeah,” he said aloud, though, with the loud music, I was mostly reading his lips. “Let’s go.”

I’d forgotten why I was there, which was silly in retrospect. After a second beer, Tameron went to go find the restroom, and I swayed to the music, which had settled from a party beat to something a little more... I didn’t want to call it romantic, but it was easier on the senses.

“Hey, babe. It’s been a minute.” A voice spoke right next to my ear, and I was startled, spilling a little of what soda was left in my cup. Spinning, my eyes caught a familiar figure half in the shadows of the bar. “Marcus?”

He did a little spin. “You didn’t forget.”

I hadn't forgotten, but I also hadn't thought about him in years. He used to be my go-to—a quick call when I needed to get off so I could focus. He lived in San Jose, but he used to drive up and crash at his brothers whenever he needed a break from life.

He was not boyfriend material, a stern boundary I'd set with him and myself because he would always hint around it. But he was the kind of man who wanted to have his cake, someone else's cake, their neighbor's cake, and eat them all too.

I respected the lifestyle, but it had never been for me. When I decided to settle down—if I decided to settle down—I wanted it to be with someone I considered my best friend. Someone who made me feel safe, and that would never be Marcus.

I tried for a smile, glancing around quickly for Tameron, but he was still gone. “You look good.”

He laughed and touched my arm. “I know. I've been hitting the gym a lot.”

“Mm.”

“You still doing that hero thing? Fighting all those fires?”

He said it like it was a joke, like we hadn't been called to devastation across the state more often than I wanted to think about over the last few years. But that was yet another reason he had never been on my list.

“I just got transferred up north,” I told him.

His eyes gleamed and he swayed into me, pressing his chest against my arm. When I tried to pull away, his grip on me tightened. “So I guess I got lucky tonight.”

“Well, actually, I?—”

“Hey.” Tameron was speaking loudly, and I wasn’t sure if he was aware of it. He startled Marcus enough that I could pry my arm from under his fingers, and I stepped closer to Tameron. There was a wild, almost feral look in his eyes, and it made my heartbeat quicken.

“I thought you got lost,” I told him, leaning in toward his ear, but not so far he couldn’t catch my lips.

He stared at me, then over at Marcus. “Nah. Ended up in a conversation at the bar with a guy who was freshly discharged. A Marine.”

Marcus cleared his throat. “Dayton, babe, who’s your friend?”

There was an almost crackle in the air, then Tameron cleared his throat loudly and said, “Friend? Yeah, no. I’m his boyfriend.”

And for a moment, everything seemed to stop. My boyfriend. My boyfriend .

It wasn’t real, I knew that. But Tameron had just said he was my boyfriend.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

TAMERON

“He’s my boyfriend.”

That was the second time today I’d blurted something out, and both times, it had involved Dayton.

First, I’d offered on an impulse to be his wingman as he scored a hookup, and now I’d made him my boyfriend.

What the fuck was wrong with me? Why was my brain suddenly acting all weird when it came to Dayton?

“Boyfriend?” The guy looked from Dayton to me and then back. “I didn’t know...the market, babe.”

I missed some of that sentence, but it was probably something about Dayton being off the market.

And babe? Oh fuck, they knew each other? Jesus, what would Dayton do now? What would he think?

“Yeah, we’re pretty new,” Dayton said smoothly, sliding an arm around my waist. The casual touch sent sparks shooting through my body. “Sorry, Marcus. I wasn’t aware I needed to inform you of my relationship status.”

Marcus's eyes narrowed. "You two don't seem very coupley."

Dayton's arm tightened around me, pulling me closer. "We're taking things slow." His voice was warm and affectionate, and I had to remind myself this was all an act. "Tam's still figuring things out."

The nickname hit me right in the gut. No one called me Tam. Not even Nash. But coming from Dayton's lips, it sounded...right.

"That true?" Marcus asked me directly. Luckily, he was facing me so I could read his lips.

I nodded, then realized I needed to sell this better. Following some instinct I didn't know I had, I leaned into Dayton's embrace. "Yeah. Day's been really patient with me."

Day? Where had that come from? But Dayton's pleased smile told me I'd done good.

"Well, aren't you two adorable," Marcus drawled. "Prove it."

My heart stopped. "What?"

"Kiss. If you're really together, kiss."

Was I reading his lips right? 'He wants us to kiss?' I signed to Dayton.

Dayton's arm tensed around my waist. "We don't have to prove anything to you, Marcus, let alone with a kiss."

"No, you don't. But if you don't, I'm calling bullshit."

I met Dayton's eyes, seeing the question in them. He wouldn't push this. He'd let Marcus call our bluff and deal with the fallout. Because that's who he was—always putting others first.

But I didn't want him to. Maybe it was the two beers I'd had, or maybe it was my bi-awakening earlier, or hell, maybe it was just being tired of fighting my attraction to Dayton. Whatever it was, I wanted this.

So I grabbed the front of his shirt, pulled him close, and kissed him.

It wasn't the gentle peck I'd intended. The moment our lips touched, something inside me ignited.

Dayton's lips were soft but firm against mine, and when mine parted on a gasp, his tongue slipped into my mouth.

Heat exploded through me as I tasted a hint of the Coke he'd been drinking, but mostly pure Dayton.

His arm around my waist tightened, pulling me flush against him as he deepened the kiss.

I'd never kissed a man before, but holy hell, this was nothing like kissing women. There was no softness, no yielding. Just raw power and need as we devoured each other's mouths. My fingers were still tangled in his shirt, and I used that grip to pull him even closer, wanting more. Needing more.

We broke apart, both breathing hard. Dayton's pupils were blown wide, and his lips were red and swollen. Had I done that? Fuck, that was hot.

Marcus muttered something I couldn't make out.

‘Get a room,’ Dayton signed to me.

Marcus wanted us to get a room? Well, so did I.

“Sorry,” Dayton said, but his voice was rough, gravelly. “Got carried away.”

I focused on Marcus so I could read his lips. “Yeah, I can see that. I guess I was wrong and you two are together. Well, enjoy yourselves.”

I barely registered him leaving. All I could focus on was the way Dayton’s arm was still around me, the way his body felt pressed against mine. The way his eyes had darkened with desire. I refocused on him.

“Tam...” His cheeks were flushed, probably as burning as mine. “That was...”

“Sorry about...”

“Don’t.” He swallowed hard. “Don’t apologize. But maybe we should talk about what just happened.”

We should. We really should. But not here. Not with this many people around and me having to sign. There was no way I could do this in ASL. ‘Can we get out of here?’

His eyes widened slightly. ‘You sure?’

‘Very sure.’

He studied me for a moment, then nodded. ‘My place or yours?’

‘Yours. Nash would never let me live this down.’

His lips quirked. ‘Neither will Dax, but at least he can’t hear us.’

Us. There was an us now. Holy shit, what was I doing? But for once in my life, I didn’t want to overthink this. I just wanted to feel.

The drive back to his place was silent but charged with a tension I’d never experienced. Every time we stopped at a red light, I could feel Dayton’s eyes on me, and it took everything in me not to turn and kiss him again.

My hands were trembling slightly, and I couldn’t tell if it was from nerves or excitement. Maybe both. This was so far outside my comfort zone that I should’ve been freaking out, but instead, I felt...alive. More alive than I had in years.

When we pulled into his driveway, neither of us moved for a moment. Then Dayton turned to face me. ‘Are you sure you wanna come inside? It’s okay if you’ve changed your mind.’

I met his eyes. ‘I want to talk to you.’

He made the sign for okay, and we got out of the car.

Once inside, we headed for the living room, where Knives immediately came running.

Dayton picked her up with one hand and nuzzled her as he sat on the couch.

I hesitated for a moment, then put my hearing aids back on.

As always, it took a minute or so to get readjusted, but Dayton waited patiently.

“What happened today?” he asked. “You said you had a bit of a weird day?”

I hadn't planned on coming out to him, but after that stunt I pulled, I had little choice. "We watched The Mummy . It was...enlightening."

His eyes widened. "You had the classic reaction to that movie?"

"You mean, did I realize I was bi? I sure did."

He slapped his hand in front of his mouth, but I could still see the laugh crinkles around his eyes.

"It's okay to laugh."

"You sure? Because you're allowed to tell me it's not funny."

I shrugged. "Pretty sure that when I tell the others, they'll laugh their asses off too. Even Nash had trouble keeping his composure."

"You told him already?" Dayton's eyes widened.

"I tell him everything, so yeah. Right after the movie. He wasn't surprised at all."

"And now you're here with me." His expression grew serious. "After claiming me as your boyfriend."

Heat crept into my cheeks. "Sorry about that. I panicked."

"No need to apologize." His fingers brushed over mine. "But we should probably talk about what this means."

"You're not angry with me?"

Something flashed over his face too quickly for me to make out. “No, not at all. We’re good, I promise.”

“You knew that guy.”

“Marcus? Yeah, we dated. Years ago. And we run into each other from time to time.”

A completely irrational flash of anger burned through me at the thought that they’d been together. “He’s your type?”

“No, but he scratched an itch. We weren’t good together, but we weren’t bad either. Just...good enough, I suppose.”

“What’s your type? In men, I mean.”

He shook his head. “This is not about me. This is about you and your type, what you want to do with your newfound attraction to men.”

Well, my type was Brendan Fraser. And Dayton. But hell if I was telling him that. I’d already shown way too much of my hand tonight. I needed to keep at least some dignity. “I have no idea what my type is...other than Brendan Fraser.”

He laughed. “He’s everyone’s type, straight, gay, bi, pan, and anything else. If you don’t like him, there’s something wrong with you.”

“I guess I’m not special, then, but I don’t know anything else.”

“You didn’t like Marcus? He’s considered attractive, objectively speaking.”

I could barely repress a shudder. “He’s too...glib. He’s a player.”

“That he is. He’s arrogant, for sure. But most guys don’t mind if they’re just looking for a quick fuck.”

I had cockblocked him. It only now registered with me that I’d failed as his wingman. Instead, I’d forced him to return home...without having scored. “I’m sorry I ruined your chances tonight. For scoring.”

He shrugged. “I wasn’t really feeling it anyway.”

That was strangely comforting to hear. “I’m sorry anyway.”

“I got to kiss you.”

My cheeks heated at the memory. That had been an amazing kiss. One of the best I’d ever received, if not the best. Or was that because he was the first man I’d kissed and it was still so new? “Yeah. That was...”

I vaguely gestured, not having a clue how to put that into sign. Hell, I didn’t even have actual words.

“It was a great kiss.”

I perked up. “Yeah?”

“You didn’t think so?”

“It was fantastic. Ten out of ten. Five-star rating.”

One of the things I missed most when not wearing my hearing aids was the sound of laughter. Dayton had a great laugh. Very rich, melodious. I was glad I could hear it.

His laughter died down, but his eyes remained bright with mirth. “I’m glad you enjoyed it.”

“I did.” I hesitated, then added, “I wouldn’t mind doing it again.”

His expression shifted, growing more serious. His hands hesitated as emotions flashed over his face. Fuck, I’d crossed a line. I shouldn’t have asked. Offered. He’d made clear he wanted to be my friend, not some kind of experiment for me to explore my newfound bisexuality with. “Is that a no?”

“No. But we need to talk about this some more. Make sure we set clear expectations, that we’re on the same page. What do you want from this? From me?”

Those were all fair points, but I had no idea how to answer his questions. I dragged a hand through my hair. “I have no idea what I want other than to kiss you again.”

His eyes darkened. “That’s...very tempting.”

“But?”

“But I don’t want to take advantage of you when you’re vulnerable and still figuring things out.”

I snorted. “You’re not taking advantage of me. I’m a grown man who can make his own decisions.”

“I know that. But you’ve never been with a man before.”

“So? I’m not asking you to marry me. I’m asking you to kiss me.”

His lips twitched. “Just kissing?”

Heat pooled in my stomach. “Maybe more. If we both want that.”

“You want to explore your newly discovered attraction to men.”

And my attraction to him, but I wasn’t telling him that. I needed to know if I found him hot because I was into men now or if it was him specifically. It had to be the first, right? “Yes. Is that okay? Or is that wrong to say?”

“You think it’s somehow wrong to tell me you want to kiss me again?” His lips curved into a smile. “I’m not sure on what grounds I could possibly be offended by that.”

“Okay. I don’t know what I’m doing here, so I’m flying blind.”

His expression softened. “We can take it slow.”

“I don’t want slow.” The words came out before I could stop them. “I don’t want to rush into anything either, but... Fuck, I’m not making any sense.”

“You want to explore this new aspect of your sexuality without overthinking it.”

“Yes. Exactly.” I let out a relieved breath. “How do you always know what I mean?”

“Because I do actually pay attention to you.” His lips curved into a smile. “I’ve been paying attention since the day we met.”

Heat crept into my cheeks. “I was such a dick to you.”

“That’s in the past now. You were dealing with a lot, and I’m sure you had a hard time processing all those emotions. Grief is a bitch.”

Grief. Funny how that one label he chose fit so perfectly.

There had been anger, hope, acceptance, followed by more anger...

but all of it had been part of a grieving process for who I had been.

I would never hear again, never be a soldier again, never serve my country again.

The old Tameron was gone. Dead, in a sense.

And somehow, Dayton had captured that all in one word.

Grief. He truly understood. "Thank you."

He quirked an eyebrow. "For what?"

"For understanding."

"You're welcome. Can we now consider that topic closed? There's no need to keep bringing it up. It's done. You apologized, I accepted. Let's move on."

I couldn't resist. "You're that eager to kiss me again?"

He shook his head, rolling his eyes at me. "Sure, we'll go with that."

"If you're not, I can find someone else who will?—"

My words were cut off when he wrapped his hand around my neck and pulled me in, covering his mouth with mine.

This kiss was different from our first one.

That had been all heat and passion, but this was slower, more deliberate.

His tongue traced my bottom lip before slipping inside, and I opened eagerly for him.

His hand cupped my jaw, tilting my head for a better angle, and holy fuck, the man could kiss.

When we finally broke apart, we were both breathing hard. “That was...” My hands were shaking.

“Yeah.” His eyes were dark with desire. “Want to take this to my bedroom?”

My heart skipped a beat. “Yes.”

He stood, holding out his hand. I took it without hesitation, letting him pull me to my feet. As we walked to his bedroom, my nerves finally kicked in. What the hell was I doing? I’d never been with a man before. I had no idea what I was doing.

But then Dayton smiled at me, and all my doubts faded away. This felt right. This felt good. And I wanted more.

As soon as we were in his room, he closed the door behind us and turned to face me. “Are you sure about this?”

I nodded. “I want this.”

He stepped closer, his hands coming up to cup my face.

His lips met mine in a soft, gentle kiss.

It was a stark contrast to the heated kisses we’d shared earlier, but it was perfect.

I melted into him, my hands coming up to grip his shirt.

He deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding against mine, and I moaned into his mouth.

He pulled back, his breath coming in quick pants. 'God, you taste good,' he signed with one hand, the other still wrapped around my neck.

I smiled, my cheeks heating. Somehow, seeing him sign those words made them far more erotic than they would've been if I'd heard them. "So do you."

He grinned, then leaned in to kiss me again. This time, his hands slid down to my waist, pulling me closer. I could feel his erection pressing against mine, and it sent a jolt of desire through me. I wanted more. I wanted everything.

I broke the kiss, my breath coming in quick pants. "Dayton..."

He looked at me, his eyes dark with desire. "Yeah?"

"I want... I want more."

CHAPTER TWELVE

DAYTON

Tameron was nervous, and I couldn't remember the last time I'd been with a virgin. Or, well, a man who hadn't been with another man before. It was obvious Tameron was comfortable with sex and his own body, but I wanted to take it slow.

The first time I ever touched a dick that wasn't my own, I hadn't quite known what to do with myself. I'd thought, then overthought, and then squeezed so hard the guy got up and left me sitting in a puddle of my own precum with a flagging hard-on and a tomato-red face.

He'd told people about it the next day too, and I'd gotten the nickname Vise, which had followed me around for too long.

I didn't want that for Tameron, not that I would ever humiliate him, no matter what he did or how tightly he gripped me. But if someone had been tender with me at first, just a little, I might not have struggled with my identity in the beginning.

So when he stood there, knees shaking, I carefully put my hands on his hips and waited for his gaze to meet mine. "How do you want to start?"

"Shouldn't you be deciding that? You're the expert."

I laughed, leaning down to press a kiss to his jaw. "I know how to make you feel good, and I can definitely give you an experience you'll never forget, but you're

going to take the lead tonight, gorgeous. So. Where do you want to start?"

He hummed deep in the back of his throat, the sound probably involuntary, and I did my best not to think about the fact that I'd wanted this for a while. All the way back to when I thought he couldn't stand me.

It was wild that he was here now, in my bedroom, ready and willing.

"What was your first time like?"

I knew what he was asking, and I shuddered. "Not ideal."

He licked his lips, then glanced over my shoulder at my bed. "Can we sit?"

Taking his hands, I tugged him toward the edge of the mattress, then slid on top of the covers.

My well of patience tonight felt infinite, and I didn't mind as he worked through his struggle until he finally bent at the knee and dropped down beside me.

The moment we touched again, he melted against my side and let me take him into my arms.

"My first good time," I said, rucking up the back of his shirt so I could trace my fingers over his flush-warmed skin, "was with a man who was, like, ten years older than me. He'd just lost his wife."

"Oh. He was bi?"

"I'm not sure he knew what he was. I think the marriage was to please his parents. But whatever the case, he loved her. He was sad, but he was also very needy."

Tameron shuddered, and I heard him choking back a moan. “Yeah?”

I tightened my grip on him, fingers dipping past the waistband of his jeans. His ass was round and the muscle was thick and bouncy. “Very. He came without me touching his dick.”

“Oh god,” he groaned, turning his face in toward my chest.

“It was extremely hot. I got a bit of an ego about it,” I confessed, and Tameron lifted his head, grinning at me. “You said ego?”

“Mm.”

He snorted a laugh. “That’s hard to imagine.”

“Really?”

He shrugged. “I mean, you’re not shy about being good at what you do. You must be really good to get Nash to respect you that fast. And I’ve seen you at the gym. I’ve seen how you are with the older crowd. You’re kind. And you don’t make them feel, like, pathetic.”

I wondered then how many people had made Tameron feel that way since his injury. I touched his jaw with the edge of my thumb, tracing the slightly coarse beard that was growing thicker. I wanted to feel it between my thighs, but he probably needed to work himself up to that.

“No one is pathetic. No one.”

He breathed in, then said, “Can we kiss again?”

I doubted that would ever be a no. I spun him gently to his back, then swung my leg over his thighs and pressed my hands to the bed on either side of his shoulders. Our gazes met for a long moment, then he lifted up as I bent down, lips touching.

His were so soft. Christ, they were so soft, and his tongue was wet and warm and so fucking good at making my toes curl. The man was a master at kissing, and I realized I could easily get off this way. I could let him devour my mouth while I humped his thigh and spilled all over his front.

And maybe we'd do that.

But not tonight.

Breaking the kiss, I pulled back and pushed his shirt up to expose his stomach. His abs jumped at my touch. "I want to jerk you off."

He let out a harsh groan and his hips fucked upward. "Yeah? Can I—can I touch you too?"

"You can do anything you want to me."

"On your back?"

I didn't answer with words. Instead, I rolled over and spread my legs just a little.

When he went for my shirt, I arched my back so he could lift it to expose my chest. His fingers were tender in their exploration until they got to my nipples.

He bit his lip, brow furrowed in thought, then he pinched the right barbell and tugged a little.

I moaned, my eyes squeezing shut at the pleasure racing through me. I was sensitive there since getting them pierced.

“Not like a woman,” he said.

“No,” I answered with a laugh. “Is that what you’re comparing it to?”

“It’s... I’m sorry. That’s offensive, isn’t it?”

“It’s okay to notice the ways we’re different as long as you don’t expect me to be like one in bed.”

“No.” He leaned in and licked a stripe over the tender nipple. The heat was intense.

“No. There’s no confusion here. I can tell you’re very much a man.”

Something in me settled. I hadn’t realized how worried I was that he might have been trying to justify it all in his head. But he wasn’t. He was present. He was with me. Seeing me .

I cupped his jaw with one hand, using my other to guide his fingers toward the zipper and button on my jeans. “I want to be touched.”

He hesitated, but only for a second. The button released with a pop, the zipper whispering as he slid it downward. His lips parted on a soft pant as he spread the fly into a wide V, exposing the tent in my boxers.

“Whatever you want to do,” I reminded him.

“Tell me if I’m getting this wrong. And tap me if I don’t hear you,” he added.

I touched his chin, then nodded when I had his attention. ‘I trust you,’ I signed.

His ears turned faintly pink, and he nodded, drawing his lower lip between his teeth. 'I might make noise.' He dropped his hand back to my stomach and said aloud, "Sometimes I don't realize it, and I think the sounds might be...weird."

I pressed two fingers to his lips. "They're not weird. They're you. And I like you."

He huffed a laugh against my skin, then pulled his head back and parted the slit in my boxers.

My cock sprang free, sitting hard, fat, and wet at the tip as he let the shaft rest on his palm.

He closed his fingers around me, sliding up and down like he was attempting to get used to the feel of another man's dick.

"Yeah. Like that," I said.

His gaze darted to my lips. "Like that?" he repeated for clarification.

"Yes."

He squeezed a little harder and began to rub a little faster. "What else do you like when someone does this for you?"

There were a lot of things, but I wasn't sure he was ready for me to ask him to play with my ass or lick my balls. So I thrust against his hand and said, "I like it wet."

He swallowed thickly. "With m-my...my mouth?"

I grinned at him, reaching up to cup his cheek. "Well, yes, gorgeous. I like that a lot. But not tonight. Lube is fine. There's some in the drawer beside you."

He looked both disappointed and relieved at the same time. Rolling over, he hooked his ankles around mine to keep himself steady, and I could hear him rummaging around.

There was a sudden pause, and then he made a soft, choking noise. “Um...”

I tapped his side, and he looked over his shoulder, holding up a small black bag with the string undone. I smiled sharply at him. “We can talk about those next time.”

They were a couple of my vibrating toys for when I was in the mood to get off that way.

His eyes were heated, pupils blown wide, and he nodded as he dropped the bag back and came away with the lube. It was a small tube, nearly half gone since I’d been taking care of myself for a while now, but he didn’t look judgmental about it.

He was also clearly familiar with lube, which made me feel better about his skills with women. Naturally wet or not, it never hurt to add a little more slick to the party. He spread some on his palm, then looked me directly in the eye as he grabbed my dick again and began to stroke.

“Oh fuck. Yes, god. Shit .” I grunted hard as I fought back the sudden urge to come. It really had been too long since someone else had touched me. “Hnng, Tam. Tam, sweetheart, can you?—”

He loosened his grip, and the need retreated. “What am I doing wrong?”

I couldn’t help a laugh. “Nothing. You’re too good, and I’m going to lose it in a sec, but I want you to come with me.”

“Oh, I—how do you want me?” He bit his lip again, and I reached out my thumb to

pull it away from his teeth. It was slightly puffy and tinged pink.

“Straddle me, then take your dick out. Let me see you.”

He looked a little unsure—maybe a little embarrassed.

I had a feeling his past lovers hadn’t put him on display.

But he moved gracefully, straddling my thighs, then he lifted onto his knees and shimmied his jeans down until his cock was sitting at full mast, flushed and surrounded by a thatch of dark hair.

“Beautiful,” I murmured. He blinked at me, so I signed it.

“You think?”

Grinning, I reached out and felt the weight on my hand. His cock was thicker than mine and just a little shorter. He was cut, and the head was fat and wet at the slit. I rubbed my thumb over it, watching his eyes close and his body tremble.

“Feels good,” he murmured.

“Yeah? It’s been a long time, hasn’t it?”

“Mm?” His eyes opened. “Sorry, I lost most of that.”

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It was too easy to repeat myself, which I did as I began to hold him tighter, jerk him harder.

He didn't answer me. He just grunted hard, thrusting his hips into the circle of my hand, his head tipped back on a loud groan.

Before I could lose myself in his noises, his eyes flew open and he dropped forward, hands slamming on either side of my head. "Oh my god, your brother!"

I looked around frantically for a second. "What?"

"What if he's home?" His eyes were wide and wild.

I grinned at him and shook my head. "Honey, he can't hear either of us. He won't know."

"I—oh. Oh." Slapping a hand over his face, he dropped his forehead against mine. "How did I forget?"

"It happens. But you can forget about him. You can forget about everything except this." I pushed my hand back between us, and this time, I guided his cock to mine. My hand wasn't big enough to fit all the way around both of us, but I got a good grip and squeezed.

Tameron sucked in a sharp gasp and pulled back. "Oh. That's...oh." He gave a short, experimental thrust and then swallowed heavily. His face was ruddy, making the faint freckles he had stand out. "That's...that feels..."

“I know.” I was losing it again, feeling his hard cock thrusting against mine. And there was something to be said about the fact that it was the only part of us touching without clothes. Everything narrowed down to that point—our cocks and my hand—and I loved it.

I sped up, my arm aching as he began to match me thrust for thrust, and I could feel it in the way his dick kicked that he was close.

“I—oh, oh, oh ,” he said. His eyes were closed again as he chased the sensation.

“Yes, come on. Come on, baby. Come for me. Come all over me,” I said, pitching my voice loudly.

He grunted hard, his knees tightening against the outsides of mine, and then, with a short, sharp cry, he let go. He came in hot ropes, splattering over my belly, dribbling onto my shirt and the waistband of my boxers.

The heat of it was too much for me. I squeezed us both hard, shoving my hips up and releasing. The orgasm was more of a slow burn—a heavy thing that coursed through me as my cum joined his, and I felt the sudden urge to wrap my entire body around him and hold him.

But I didn’t. I let him choose what felt right.

As his breathing recovered, he blinked down at me. “Is cuddling, you know...?”

I lifted a brow.

“Hetero—uh, normal. Or whatever?”

I burst into laughter and knocked him to the side, curling around to spoon him. “No,”

I said, right up against his ear, kissing the back, right above where his hearing aid was attached. “Cuddling is not heteronormative. And don’t overthink it, okay? You like what you like.”

He nodded and took a deep breath—slowly in and out—then settled his weight back against me. “This was different.”

“In a good or bad way?”

Tameron shook his head. “No, neither. Just...different.”

“Verdict?”

He hummed softly, then twisted in my arms until his leg was hitched over my hip and his chest was pressed against mine. I could feel our cooling cum starting to dry and stick us together, but I wasn’t bothered, and he didn’t seem to be either.

“Nine point five out of ten.”

I blinked. “What do I have to do to get that half a point?”

Biting his lip, he smirked. “Let me think on it. Fantasize a little. I’ll let you know.”

“So that means you’d like to do this again?”

“I wouldn’t be opposed. I mean, if you’d be interested.”

I would. But I didn’t want to seem too eager. I had no idea what he was interested in.

“What are you looking for from me?”

“I don’t know.” He looked almost frightened, and I understood. This was new for

him. “More of this.”

“I can do that.”

“Is it okay if we don’t, you know, label it or anything? Can it be just this?”

That made my chest ache a little, but I was happy to take whatever he was willing to give me. “Whatever you need.”

He was quiet for a long beat. “Will you teach me to sign that?”

The way his entire body relaxed was enough for me to promise him anything.

He leaned into me like he felt safe in my arms. My heart kicked up a notch.

I wasn’t foolish enough to hope this could turn into something more, but I was also hopeless enough to believe that someday, I might have a chance to have the man I wanted to keep as mine.

For good.

I grinned after a second, then surged in and kissed him. “Let my arm recover from that hand job, then I’ll teach you whatever you want.”

The week after Tameron and I had been together, I was restless.

We weren’t at zero communication, but it had dwindled, and I couldn’t tell if he was having a bi-panic about it all or if he was just busy.

I thought maybe I’d see him at yoga and get a feel for what was going on, but he was a no-show there too.

He sent an apology text with no details, and all that left me with was more questions.

And I was too chicken shit to ask any of them.

So, instead of managing my anxiety like a grown-up, I decided to escape to my parents' house for the afternoon and distract myself.

Turning the knob at their front door, I smacked the doorbell three times, watching the lights flicker as I came in. Luckily, it wouldn't be a chaotic day with siblings, small children, aunties, and neighbors.

I'd texted earlier, and my mom was out, but my dad was fiddling around the garden now that he'd set up his barbecue gazebo. The doorbell also had a flashing light on the back deck, so I figured he'd seen it—though it was a crapshoot with him.

He hadn't seen my texts.

Pulling open the sliding glass door, I found him lounging back in the sun like a cat, a small grin on his face. I stomped, and he opened one eye and gestured for me to sit.

'What do you think?' He pointed toward the gazebo.

Before taking the empty chair, I leaned over the deck to stare at his handiwork. 'It's crooked.'

He made a soft "meh" sound and waved me off. 'It'll hold.'

'Against what?'

He held his hands out and shook them like he was freezing, then put his crooked first finger and thumb over the back of his nondominant palm and shook it before shaking

both fists. 'Big earthquake.'

I rolled my eyes and sat down. 'The big one is never coming.'

He wagged a finger at me. 'Never say never. You know what happens.'

I closed my eyes, then laughed and opened them when I was hit in the face with a balled-up napkin. 'It looks great. I can't wait for the next dinner.'

He puffed out his chest proudly. 'I'm best. Champ!' I couldn't argue. My dad was a very handy guy. Always had been. He was the reason I'd had both the knowledge and the confidence to go into the career I'd chosen.

'How are the girls?'

He got his proud-dad face on. 'Good. Dolly started laying again. I hope you and Dax want eggs.'

We could always use eggs, so I nodded my fist. 'Yeah, thanks.'

He sat forward, a frown on his face, and then shook his head. 'What's wrong?'

The only real time I cursed growing up in a Deaf house: my ability to hide my feelings was a goddamn joke. 'Nothing.'

He gave me a pointed stare and a single quirked eyebrow. I wasn't going to get away with brushing him off.

'That friend I told you about? The veteran?'

He hummed deep in his chest. 'Yes. Late deaf.'

‘That-that,’ I signed. ‘We had...’ I stopped. I didn’t really want to give my old man dirty details about my sex life. But I did want some advice. ‘You and Mom didn’t fall in love right away, did you?’

He snorted. ‘You know the story. She didn’t want a guy from a hearing family. Thought I was too slow. It took a lot of roses and chocolates to win her over.’

I was pretty sure it was more like showing off his abs and strutting around campus in a muscle shirt everywhere she was than flowers and chocolates. But my dad was both a peacock and a romantic, so he probably did both.

He didn’t question me when I brought up their romance. It wasn’t a Deaf conversation if you didn’t tell three irrelevant childhood stories before getting to the point.

‘How long would you have waited until you gave up?’

‘On your mom?’ He scoffed loudly and clicked his tongue. ‘Never. Never give up on your mom. She was the one. My true love.’

A year ago, I would have laughed in the face of the idea of true love. Now...I wasn’t so sure. I was happy to be patient with Tameron. I was happy to let him experiment with me. And there would never be strings unless he asked for them.

But I wished I was brave enough to ask him if he wanted more than just...this.

‘Dayton,’ he said, using my childhood sign name of a D tapped against his heart. ‘What happened?’

‘I like him.’

Dad sat back with a small huff. 'Does he like you?'

'Yes. But I don't know if he likes me the same. Or enough.'

He pulled a face. 'Sorry. That's hard. Do you have faith?'

'Some.' Enough for now, but how long would it last? 'I want you to meet him. Even if it turns into nothing, I want him to experience a Deaf family. Deaf joy. He hasn't had a lot of that since he was discharged.'

'You know we can do that,' my dad pointed out with a grin. 'When do you see him next?'

And, well, that was part of the problem, wasn't it? It had been over a week now, and while he'd replied with emoji to my kitten pictures and we'd ended the night on a promise that both of us wanted to do this again, there'd been nothing more.

No conversation, no asking to see me again, no nothing. Just...pointed silence.

'I don't know,' I confessed.

My dad cracked his knuckles. 'Let me know when you do. I don't need much of an excuse to fire up the grill and text the whole family.'

That made me laugh, and it felt good because it was true. Once I got Tameron to agree, there would at least be something good for him to experience. Something different from what he'd seen in the past few months as he learned the language.

And maybe with that bridge, he would have a bit more hope. Maybe with that bridge, he'd see something in me worth keeping around.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

TAMERON

“You’re being a dick.”

I looked up from the book I’d been reading on my Kindle, curled up on the couch, and found Nash pinning me down with a hard stare. “What?”

“You’re being a dick.”

I had heard him right. “What did I do now?”

“Dayton said he hasn’t heard from you in two days.”

I made a face. “Christ on a bike, he’s bitching to you about that?”

Nash gave me a slap to the back of my head. He barely touched me, probably out of consideration for my hearing aids, but I still felt like he’d full-on smacked me. “Dayton doesn’t bitch, which, by the way, is a derogatory and sexist term you should stop using. It implies it’s something women do.”

I considered that. Hmm, he might have a point, actually. Not something I’d ever thought about, but now that I had, it kinda rang true. “Okay.”

“Okay, what?”

“I agree it’s not a good term to use. I still maintain that Dayton shouldn’t have come to you.”

“He didn’t, dipshit. I had to practically drag it out of him since he was moping about something, and he finally told me he thought he’d done something wrong since you’d gone incommunicado on his ass. A rather spectacular ass, I might add, as we both know. So what gives?”

Nash sat on the coffee table, close enough so I’d have no issues hearing him...or reading his lips where needed. There went that excuse. “I’ve been...thinking.”

“Something you do way too much of.”

“I needed some time to figure things out.”

When I didn’t say anything else, Nash made an impatient gesture. “About what? Don’t make me force you to tell me because we both know I will if I have to.”

Oh yes, he would. Nash wouldn’t hesitate to use any and all methods at his disposal. Bribery, blackmail, beating your ass—he didn’t care as long as he got what he wanted. I’d seen alligators with a less tenacious bite.

“What did Dayton tell you?” I finally asked.

“Nothing, other than that he thought he might’ve done something wrong. No details. He refused to tell me more, stating it wasn’t his story to share.”

Fuck, that was considerate of him. Like, really nice.

And once again, I was the asshole. With a deep sigh, I resigned myself to the inevitable.

“We kissed. Dayton and I, I mean.” Nash gave me an eye roll that said, “Who else, dickhead?” Fair point again.

“And we did...some more. Hand jobs,” I added quickly when Nash’s eyes narrowed.

“We exchanged hand jobs. It was...good. Really good.”

“And then you ghosted him?”

“I didn’t ghost him. Did he say I ghosted him? Because I didn’t. I texted him back when he sent me pics of Knives. That’s not ghosting.”

Nash buried his head in his hands for a moment, letting out a loud groan. Looking up again, he said, “I can’t tell if you’re really this obtuse or if you’re fucking with me.”

I frowned. What the fuck did that mean? “Obtuse?”

“Dim-witted. Slow. Oblivious.” Nash apparently saw something on my face because he sighed again. “Christ Almighty, you’re serious. Okay, let me back up. Do you agree there’s a difference in how you communicated with him before you guys hooked up and after?”

Hooked up? Exchanging hand jobs was considered a hookup?

Hmm, come to think of it, it was. With women, it most often involved sex.

Penetrative sex—though that was about the least sexy term ever.

Sure, oral could be involved, but nine out of ten times, it was a quick fuck.

That was a little more complicated with two guys, so yeah, hand jobs made sense.

Or blowjobs. Fuck, how would it feel to have Dayton blow me?

Or to have his cock in my mouth? My cock jumped to half-mast at the thought.

Nash cleared his throat. Shit, right, he'd asked me a question. My cheeks heated as I realized the truth. Of course there was a difference. "I pulled away," I said softly. "I answered his texts, but nothing more."

Nash nodded. "You made Dayton think he did something wrong, and he's hurting over it."

I swallowed. "I didn't mean to. I just...I needed time to figure out my own shit."

"Okay, fair, but you could've told him that. Instead, you left him to come to his own conclusions, and guess what? They're not positive. He thinks he fucked up."

I hadn't thought of it that way. "I didn't mean to give that impression."

Nash's expression softened. "I know you didn't, but you get into your head so much sometimes that you forget others are involved too. People who want to know what's going on, who want to help you. All you need to do is ask."

I hung my head, feeling very small. "I suck at asking for help."

"You do, and I'm not sure why. Do you see it as a sign of weakness? Of failing?"

My shoulders hunched even lower. "I hate being dependent on someone else. I want to do it myself."

Nash waited long enough to reply that I raised my head again and met his eyes, endlessly kind now.

“Stubborn. That’s what you are. Goddamn stubborn.

But I get it. I’m not much better myself, so it would be hypocritical of me to get on your case about it.

But please, Tameron, try to remember that you have people around you who want to help you...

and Dayton is one of them. For reasons I can’t quite fathom, he has a soft spot for you, so don’t shut him out.

My guess is he’ll understand far more than you give him credit for, given a chance. ”

I slowly nodded. “I’ll try.”

With a last firm shoulder squeeze, Nash left me to my own devices again. Reading was out of the question now, of course. Not when I knew I’d inadvertently hurt Dayton. Again. I grabbed my phone and fired off a quick text.

Can we talk?

Uh-oh

No, not like that. I want to apologize.

For what?

For being a dick

I thought we had settled that?

For being a dick again

...

I shut you out

You did.

It wasn't your fault.

Okay.

I mean it. This was all me. I needed some time.

...

Which I should've told you. I know.

I was worried.

About me?

Yes. And that I'd done something wrong.

Fuck. Nash had been right. Dayton had been blaming himself.

That had never even occurred to me before Nash pointed it out.

Dayton was... Jesus, the man was a firefighter, a battalion chief, and one of the most competent, confident men I'd ever met.

How on earth could I have known he'd get all upset about me not communicating?

It was humbling, but it also filled me with an unexpected warmth. It meant he really did care for me.

Can I explain in person?

I'd love that. When?

Tonight? After dinner?

Sure. Text me when you're on your way, okay?

Will do. Thanks.

Thanks for what? For allowing you to spend time with me? My ego isn't quite that oversized, you know.

Not what I meant, but whatever.

I was restless the rest of the day until I could finally leave. When I got to Dayton's, he opened the front door before I could ring the bell.

"Hi." I shoved my hands into my pockets.

"Hi."

Wow, weren't we two stellar conversationalists?

Dax was in the living room, apparently on a video call with someone, signing at breakneck speed. I waved at him and he briefly interrupted his conversation to greet

me back. ‘When are you coming to the shop?’

‘Soon. Promise.’

‘Okay.’

I waved again, then followed Dayton to his room.

“He’s serious, you know,” Dayton said, and it took me a second to realize he was talking about Dax.

“His invitation?” When Dayton nodded, I said, “I will take him up on it. Just haven’t found the right time yet. I still get tired easily.”

Dayton nodded once, then gestured to his bed. ‘Sit?’

I hesitated, then sat. Dayton settled beside me, far enough away that we weren’t touching. That was good. I needed to focus.

“I’m sorry,” I said.

“You already said that.”

I let out a sigh. “I know. But I’m sorry for pulling back from you emotionally. I needed some time to figure things out, but I should’ve told you that. I didn’t mean to make you think you’d done something wrong.”

Dayton’s face softened. “I know you didn’t.” He hesitated, then asked, “I take it Nash talked to you?”

“Yeah. Though talking is a bit of an understatement. It was more...berating.”

Guilt filled Dayton's expression. He hadn't been kidding when he'd told me his face was an open book. "That was never my intention. I hope you know that. I didn't tell him to talk to you."

I snorted. "Tell him? No one can tell Nash what to do. For a career soldier, he's damn stubborn in following orders...though much better in handing them out." I smiled as memories rushed me. "And we're all eager to obey. He has a way of making you want to follow him, you know?"

"He inspires trust," Dayton said, and I nodded because he'd described it perfectly.

"So no, he talked to me because he hated seeing you hurt." I shifted. "Which, you know, is fair enough."

Dayton's smile was gentle. "He's a good friend."

Ouch. "Unlike me."

"You'll learn."

I wasn't sure if that was a compliment or not, but I'd take it because he wasn't wrong. "I'm not good at opening up and I suck at asking for help, as Nash pointed out to me this morning as well. But I'll try to do better."

Dayton studied me for a few beats. "I was scared you'd changed your mind."

"About what?"

"About...us."

Us. I liked that term. It implied we were something more than friends. That we

were... I couldn't quite finish that thought. "I didn't. Trust me, I'm still bi. I don't know what I'm doing, but I do know I want to explore with you."

Dayton's eyes softened. "I want that too."

"So what happens now?"

Dayton smiled. "We take it slow. We figure things out together. And we communicate. No more shutting each other out, okay?"

I nodded. "Okay."

"So, are we good?"

"We're good."

The relief that washed over Dayton's face was palpable. "I'm glad you came over. I missed you."

My cheeks heated. "I missed you too."

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Dayton's smile widened. "That's good to hear. Listen, I wanted to talk to you about something else. I mentioned you to my father, and he and the rest of my family would love to meet you. Would you be up for that?"

Meet them? Oh Jesus, they were all Deaf. That meant doing all communication in ASL. I wasn't ready for that. "That's really intimidating," I said, my hands trembling slightly. "My ASL is nowhere near good enough for that."

Dayton's expression softened. "I understand that. It can be overwhelming, but I promise they're all very nice and understanding. They won't judge you if you make a mistake or don't understand something. They'll be patient with you."

I bit my lip, considering his words. It would be a good opportunity to practice my ASL and get more comfortable with it. And if Dayton's family was anything like him, they would be kind and welcoming. "Okay, I'll do it."

Dayton's face lit up with a smile. "Great. I'll set something up and let you know the details."

I nodded, feeling a mix of excitement and nerves.

"So, what do you want to do now? We could watch a movie, talk, or, you know, engage in some more exploring... Whatever you're comfortable with."

I considered his options, then smiled. "I think I'd like to do some more exploring."

Dayton's eyes darkened with desire. "I'd like that too."

He leaned in and kissed me, his lips soft and gentle against mine. I melted into him, my hands coming up to grip his shirt. He deepened the kiss, his tongue sliding against mine, and I moaned into his mouth.

We fell back onto the bed, me stretched out on my back and Dayton settling on top of me.

I really liked having his weight on me, his strong body pinning me down.

Dayton's fingers traced the planes of my chest, skimming over my nipples and making me gasp.

I tugged at his shirt, eager to feel his skin against mine.

He sat up just enough to pull his shirt over his head, then helped me remove mine.

For a moment, we just stared at each other, taking in the sight of newly exposed flesh.

My eyes were drawn to the large burn scar that spanned Dayton's stomach.

Without thinking, I reached out to touch it, my fingers ghosting over the uneven skin.

Dayton shivered but didn't pull away. "Got that on the job a few years back," he explained softly.

"It only adds to your beauty," I said without thinking, maybe giving away more than I should have.

But Dayton's eyes shone with emotion, so I didn't regret it.

He pulled me close and claimed my mouth in a searing kiss that left me breathless.

His hands started wandering again, exploring my skin.

His fingers skimmed down my sides, making me shiver and arch into his touch.

I was already achingly hard, my cock straining against my jeans.

Dayton rolled his hips, pressing his own hardness against mine and drawing a moan from my throat. I wanted him so badly. Wanted to feel every inch of his body against mine, skin to skin, with nothing between us.

As if reading my mind, Dayton's hands went to the button of my jeans, popping it open and slowly dragging down the zipper.

I lifted my hips to help him tug them off, leaving me in just my boxers.

Dayton hooked his fingers in the waistband and pulled my boxers down my legs, finally freeing my aching erection.

I gasped as the cool air hit my heated flesh.

Dayton's gaze was molten as it raked over my body, taking in every detail. "God, you're perfect," he murmured reverently.

His large hands slid up my thighs, thumbs brushing tantalizingly close to where I needed him most. I squirmed impatiently, silently begging him to touch me.

Dayton seemed content to take his time, though, hands exploring every inch of exposed skin, mapping out the planes of my body like he was committing me to memory.

His touch left trails of fire in its wake, my nerves singing with pleasure.

When his fingers finally wrapped around my straining cock, I couldn't hold back the broken moan that spilled from my lips.

He stroked me slowly, grip firm and sure as he worked me from base to tip.

I was already leaking, clear fluid beading at the slit.

Dayton swiped his thumb through it, spreading the slickness and making me shudder.

His calloused hand on my most sensitive flesh felt so good.

He set a steady rhythm, working me from base to tip as his other hand reached down to cup and massage my balls. It felt incredible, better than anything I'd ever experienced. But I needed more. I needed all of him.

"Dayton..." I panted. "Want to feel you... Please..."

He released me, ignoring my whine of protest, and quickly shed his own jeans and underwear.

Then he was back, settling between my spread thighs, our cocks aligned.

He rolled his hips, sliding against me, and we both groaned at the delicious friction.

I reached up to grip his shoulders, fingernails digging into his skin as he started to move faster, thrusting against me.

The pleasure was indescribable, our slick flesh sliding together in the most intimate way.

Dayton shifted, changing the angle slightly, and suddenly, he was rubbing right over

that sensitive spot behind my balls with every thrust. I cried out, back arching off the bed as shockwaves of bliss radiated through me.

“That’s it, let me hear you,” Dayton growled, picking up the pace.

I was so close already, my body wound tight and quivering on the edge.

Dayton could tell. He reached between us, taking both our cocks in his large hand and stroking in time with his thrusts.

It only took a few more pumps of his fist before I came undone, my release pulsing out over his fingers with a silent scream.

Dayton followed me over the edge a moment later, my name a broken moan on his lips as he shuddered and twitched above me. I felt the hot splash of his release mixing with mine and it drew another full-body shiver from me.

He worked us through the aftershocks, milking every last drop before collapsing on top of me, both of us spent and panting. We lay there for long moments, trying to catch our breath, sweat cooling on our skin.

Dayton nuzzled into the side of my neck, pressing soft kisses to my overheated skin.

I ran my hands up and down his back, enjoying the play of his muscles under my palms. We lay there for long minutes as our breathing evened out and our heart rates returned to normal.

Finally, Dayton lifted his head to look at me, a soft smile on his face.

“You can now check off frotting from your Bingo card.”

Frotting. Such an ordinary word for what had been an extraordinary experience. “I can indeed.”

“So, what’s next on your list?”

I had absolutely no clue.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

DAYTON

Once again, I hadn't seen Tameron at the gym.

But this time, it was different. His texts weren't the same as before.

They were better. He asked me how my day was, how my shift was going, how I was feeling.

I felt a little braver earlier that week about asking him where he was, and his answer had been immediate:

Bad vertigo spells lately. My ENT thinks my hearing loss in one ear is getting worse and it's screwing with my equilibrium. I have an appt for a new audiogram and then to see about getting my hearing aids adjusted to compensate. I'll be back when I can do downward dog without falling over.

Do you want me to bring you soup?

I think I'm covered for now. Bean's doing a bit more experimenting in the kitchen. But ask me in a few days? I'm not sure how many more bowls of Italian wedding soup I can stomach.

I sent him a few photos during the week of Knives being a scarf around my neck and a couple of the tiny pinpricks of red she left behind with her tiny knife claws. I got a

few heart emoji in return, and I felt better.

No, not just better.

I felt settled. It was a strange sensation. I wasn't used to it. I was a man of easy contentment, but I hadn't realized how much I wanted someone in my life. Tameron was probably the last man I should go for.

He was uncertain, fickle, and still dealing with so much baggage that a relationship was the last thing he needed. And yet...

Here I was now. Tripping head over heels.

I wouldn't pressure him though. I wasn't going to bring it up. Whatever was going to happen would happen, and I needed to accept that. I would quietly pine away, take whatever he was willing to give me, and make sure my toys got a good workout whenever he wasn't around.

Stretching my arms above my head, I went down into a forward fold. I was currently on my three days off from the station, and I was going to use that time by being at the gym as often as possible.

I needed to recenter myself as I waited for Tameron to make time for me...and to figure out what he wanted out of all of this.

“Am I early?”

I turned to see Barbara—one of my favorite students. She'd started in my chair yoga class after her hip surgery. Right now, she was in a bright-purple romper with the ends of her gray hair dyed to match.

“Yep, but feel free to set up. I’m trying to get a bit more limber so I don’t have to join you all yet.”

She laughed, patting my back as she walked behind me. “Oh, you have years yet, honey.” As I dropped back into my fold, I heard the chair scrape across the tiles. “How’s that brother of yours doing, by the way?”

I rolled my eyes since she couldn’t see me. All of my little old ladies loved Dax. And so did a few of my little old men. “He’s good. He’s been working a lot this week. Seems like everyone’s got something going wrong with their cars.”

“Isn’t that the truth? Last week, my dash started lighting up like the damn Rockefeller Christmas Tree.” I heard the gentle slap of her yoga mat against the floor as she flipped it open and dropped it. “I should have gone to him.”

“He wouldn’t say no to the business. He’s been trying to save up for a down payment on a boat,” I told her. The newest wild hair up his ass, but I wasn’t about to get in his way.

“Just give me his card. I wouldn’t mind hanging around that shop all day. If I were forty years younger...”

“Barbara! Don’t make me take you outside.”

She burst into a fit of giggles, but it slowed when the door opened and a few more of my students walked in. I said my quick hellos, then walked to the corner of the room to set up the music.

“Big crowd.”

My entire body went still. There wasn’t a chance in hell I wouldn’t recognize that

voice. Turning my head, I saw Tameron hovering shyly in the doorway, leaning heavily on a walking cane. He was holding his body slightly to the side, which told me he was still dealing with vertigo.

I was more than familiar. My mom had it pretty badly, and there were days she couldn't get out of bed.

"Hey." I jerked my head for him to come in, and he took a few hesitant steps forward. "You feeling better?"

Pulling a face, he shrugged, and I could see the frustration hovering in his eyes. "Depends on what you're comparing it to. I'm finally upright and can drive again, but I'm not totally steady on my feet once I get to walking."

He was finally close enough to touch, but I didn't dare. Not here. Not when there were eyes and ears everywhere.

"I got adjusted though." He tapped the little box behind his ear. "It's done wonders for the screaming locusts in my head."

I offered him a sympathetic look before dipping around him to adjust the thermostat. I kept this class warmer than the others because their bodies needed the extra help with relaxation. "You want to stay?"

"What class is right now?" Tameron asked.

I forgot it wasn't his normal day at the gym. "It's my senior chair yoga."

He bit his lip and watched the people set up.

"You'd be welcome, though I have to warn you, some of them are a little...forward,"

I warned, leaning in close. Barbara had looked over and now had her eye on Tameron. I was more than prepared to tell her to back off.

She caught Tameron's eye and winked, and he let out a startled laugh. "Oh."

I turned my body toward his. 'She's really into my brother,' I signed slowly.

Tameron choked a bit in the back of his throat. 'Dax?'

I nodded my fist. 'She's trying to get his business card out of me so she can watch him work on her car all day.'

"Oh lord," he whispered. "I might skip this class."

"Probably a good idea. She means well, but you know..."

He made a face that told me that, yeah, he did. "So, I just came by to sign an accommodation request form, but now that you're here..." He trailed off.

I reached out and gently brushed a touch over his arm. When he looked up, I signed, 'Anything.'

He licked his lips, then swallowed heavily. "I think I'd like to officially take you up on your offer to meet your family soon. I mean...it'll be good for me, right? Everyone is always saying immersion is the best way to learn."

I chuckled. "That's not exactly immersion, but yeah. It'll be good. My dad's spent years working with veterans who have hearing loss."

His eyes widened. "He—oh. Did I know that?"

“Probably not,” I confessed. “I didn’t want you to think I was, like, proselytizing for the Deaf community.”

He opened his mouth, then shut it again. “Is he Deaf because he served too?”

“No, no. He was the first Deaf kid born to a hearing family. Typical story,” I said, waving my hand.

“Parents were told that ASL would stunt his intellectual growth, so he was shoved into a residential deaf school that only taught oral language and was forbidden from signing until he got to college. But my dad’s a lot like me. ”

“Stubborn as fuck?”

I burst into laughter. “Exactly. He started learning from books in secret and then taking classes at the community center when he got older. He was accepted into Gallaudet, where he met my mom and...well, the rest is history. But he understands what it’s like to straddle two worlds.

He made a choice between them, and he’s happy with it, but he knows that’s not for everyone. ”

“It sounds like maybe he was the best dad for you.”

I couldn’t argue with that. There would always be the inherent trauma of being born into a culture that would never fully belong to me.

No matter how hard my parents worked to make me feel included, I had to accept the truth that I didn’t totally belong.

That I would always be different. That deep down, they would have preferred me to

be like my brother, even if they loved me exactly the way I was.

But it could have been so much worse. I'd seen it be worse.

"I think you'll have a good time. And it won't be as intense as a Deaf event," I told him.

He paled a bit. "We have an assignment—ah—to attend one near the end of the semester."

Leaning in again, I put my hand on his arm. "I'll find you a good one. Maybe an adult-only, queer Deaf cabaret show?"

The tips of his ears pinked. "They have those?"

"They have just about anything you can think of. Don't panic. Now, if you're not going to join, you'll have to get out. I can already see from Barbara's face that she's getting ideas, and rumors are going to spread if we're not careful."

"Oh." His gaze darted toward her, then back to me. "Well. That wouldn't be the worst workplace rumor. Would it?" There was a hint of vulnerability in his voice that I couldn't pretend not to hear.

But I let it slide.

"There have been worse ones. Like once when I sat in chocolate and didn't realize it until after my class was over."

He slapped a hand over his mouth to hide his laugh. "Oh my god."

"That one followed me to the station," I told him with a grimace. "Anyway, see you

soon?”

“Text me tonight,” he said.

My heart did a little kick-flip as I nodded and then watched him walk out. I stood in a daze until someone cleared their throat, and I turned to see Barbara smiling at me.

“Not a word, Babs.”

She made a zipper motion over her lips. I didn’t trust her, but like Tameron said, a rumor about us wouldn’t be the worst thing in the world.

Right?

Standing in front of my parents, I folded my arms over my chest, my expression stern. Dax was in his usual spot in the corner of the L-shaped couch, trying and failing to hide a smile. He wasn’t part of this though. He knew how to behave.

Mostly.

‘Calm down,’ my mom signed. ‘You’re not going to war.’

‘That,’ I signed almost frantically. ‘You can’t make that joke in front of him. He went to war. It’s not funny.’

Her face fell and she glanced at my dad before looking back at me. ‘You’re dating a veteran?’

‘We’re not dating?—’

‘Bullshit!’ my brother signed, vocalizing loudly to catch my attention.

‘We’re not dating,’ I repeated, giving him a hard stare. ‘We’re...exploring.’

My dad choked on a laugh, and my glare turned to him. ‘Sorry, sorry.’

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‘See-see,’ Dax signed. ‘It’s only a matter of time.’

This was pointless. ‘Rules,’ I said, then held out my hand and tapped my first finger. ‘Number one, no bringing up the military. I don’t know how sensitive he is, and he was discharged after the incident that took his hearing.’

Everyone nodded.

‘Two’—I tapped my middle finger—‘no making jokes about dating. He’s not sure how he feels about?’

‘You?’ Dax offered.

‘Men.’

Dax quickly held up his hands in surrender.

‘Three...’ My finger hovered. ‘Sign slow, be patient. He’s learning. Don’t make fun of him if he gets stuff wrong.’

At that, both my parents looked offended. ‘You know we won’t,’ my dad reminded me.

I did. I did know that. I was just being sensitive. ‘I want him to enjoy his time here. He hasn’t had the best experience since he started exploring his deafness, so he’s nervous. I told him this is a safe space.’

My dad leaned forward and made a noise in the back of his throat as he waved his hand at me. ‘It is safe. And he’ll see this can be good.’

‘No pressure,’ I warned him. ‘He might not ever feel Deaf pride.’

‘None of that matters,’ my mom insisted. ‘What matters is that he feels happy.’

That was so like her. I smiled, then let her tug me down for a group hug, though Dax had no intention of joining. Instead, he shot me a middle finger over my dad’s back, and I responded in kind.

The hug didn’t last long. My dad hopped up to check on his girls, my mom to check on the roast, and Dax got on FaceTime with whomever he was talking to that week. The house settled back into normal, and the only thing making me feel off was the anxiety sparking and popping up and down my spine.

Then the lamps began to flash, and I ran before anyone could get any ideas. My socked feet skidded on the floor as I came to a halt, and I caught myself on the door handle. “Breathe,” I told myself, then followed my own orders.

The lights flashed again. Shit, right. I had to actually answer the door.

I heard footsteps coming, so I quickly yanked it open before whoever was behind me could approach. My heart started beating hard, the way it always did when I saw Tameron Halsey—yes, I’d finally learned his last name.

“Tam.”

His lips quirked at the nickname I’d accidentally given to him. I was still testing it, but so far, every time I used it, he blushed. “Hey. Am I—oh. Um.”

I felt a presence behind me and turned my head to see my mom creeping up. ‘Go!’ I ordered. She rolled her eyes and scoffed but turned and walked off. After a beat, I gave Tameron my attention. “Sorry. They’ve been given strict instructions on how to act today.”

“Oh god, don’t say that!” he said, mortified. “They’re going to think I’m some fussy little princess.”

My neck heated. I kind of liked the idea of him being a fussy little princess.

But it was obvious he didn’t. Reaching out, I took him by the wrist and tugged him inside, gesturing to where he could put his shoes.

“Relax. It’s not like that. But my parents can be overwhelming.

They mostly associate with other Deaf people and forget their way of socializing can be a lot to someone who has... ” I hesitated, then said, “PTSD.”

He swallowed heavily. “Yeah. Okay. Thank you.”

Smiling, I tugged on him a little, and he came into my arms easily, melting against my chest. He tucked his nose into my neck and breathed in deep. “Come on. I’ll show you around and then we can go outside and meet my dad’s girls.”

He pulled back. “His...girls, you said?”

“Chickens.” I pinched my thumb and forefinger together, with the back of my hand touching my lips. “He has a bunch of them. He’ll probably make you take eggs home.”

“Those are like gold,” he said with a grin. “I’m not gonna say no.”

The tour through the house was uneventful. He stared at the way the living room was set up—the chairs and the couch making a sort of C shape so no one was left out of the signing sightline. And then all the mirrors on most of the walls, which I caught him staring at.

“Deaf people don’t have a preternatural ability to know when someone’s coming up behind them. Mirrors help. Also, so you can face the other direction, but see if someone’s talking to you.”

“I never thought about that,” he said quietly.

I knew that. There was so much he didn’t know—so many things that could make his life easier. He just had to relax and stop seeing accessibility as a mark of failure and loss. But it wasn’t the time to bring that up again. He’d come to that conclusion on his own.

In reality, I just wanted this day to be about him feeling comfortable with my family. I still wasn’t ready to fully hope that he and I could make something of this, but if we wanted to try in the future, I needed him to know now that this family would be ready and willing to be his too.

Hearing or Deaf, there was a place for him.

Making our way into the kitchen, he hung back as I waved to get my mom’s attention. She knew I was there but took her time turning around. Her gaze found his and she gave him a slow up-and-down look before walking over.

He stuck his hand out nervously, and she scoffed, pulling him into a hug.

‘Sorry. Deaf thing,’ I signed sheepishly.

My mom laughed and patted him on the chest. ‘You’ll get used to it.’

He frowned, so I interpreted aloud for him, and he flushed. ‘Thank you. That was nice. I haven’t had a hug from a mom in a long time.’

My mom’s face threatened to do that thing where she got all emotional and shattered, so I quickly threw my arm around him and pulled Tameron away. “Come on. Chickens,” I said and signed.

‘Tell your dad to bring in some carrots,’ my mom signed after me.

I threw a quick ‘Okay’ over my shoulder as we slipped out the sliding glass door and onto the deck.

The air was cooler than it had been when I got there, a briny breeze wafting past as I led the way to the stairs and down to the grass.

The house was on a hill—just like all the houses in the city—but the yard was bigger than most and the walls were high.

It gave the place a sort of detached feel that a lot of homes in the Bay Area didn’t have. I loved it.

“My dad,” I said, pointing. He was leaning over the fence, throwing something at the chickens. Feed? No. I cringed. Crickets. They started hopping as the girls began to go wild, running after them.

We got close enough that I could wave, and my dad turned, grinning when he saw us. This time, Tameron was ready for the hug. He was taller and larger than my dad, but he seemed to shrink in his arms.

It was blatantly obvious that Tameron had been missing this—that he'd been deprived by distance and injury of this thing with my parents that I was taking for granted too often.

“...heard so much about you,” my dad was saying aloud. He didn't often use his voice at home, so I appreciated him giving Tameron a break. “Dayton won't shut up about you.”

Tameron's eyes caught mine, and I gave my dad a glare. But it was ineffective. “He's been wonderful.” He signed the word wonderful. ‘Thank you for having me.’

My dad grinned. “So polite. Let's keep this one.”

‘Stop,’ I ordered.

My dad smiled wider. ‘No.’

Dinner went as planned. Tameron marveled at the way the table was set up, and I could see he wasn't used to having such easy access to communication.

My parents signed slow, Dax was his usual dipshit self, no one brought up the military, and no one asked Tameron if he was ready to settle down with me and give my parents more grandbabies.

All-in-all, it was a success. Mostly.

But I could tell something was off after my dad shoved a wicker basket into his hands, telling him it was full of eggs, fresh squash from the garden, and his number to text in case he needed anything. Tameron nodded, smiled, got more hugs, and was mostly spared the long Deaf goodbye.

Twenty minutes later, I managed to get him out the front door and to his car parked at the curb.

“Thanks for inviting me,” he said, his tone subdued.

I said nothing until he stowed the basket away and then turned back to me. “Was this the wrong thing to do?”

He clenched his jaw, then shook his head. “It would be easier, wouldn’t it?”

I frowned and stepped closer. “What do you mean?”

“To just...embrace this. To be Deaf.” He signed it, and I could tell what he was trying to say. “I feel like I’m choosing to run in sand, uphill, in waist-deep water with these.” He tapped his hearing aid on the left side.

“You don’t have to choose.” I eased him back against the car, boxing him in with my body. His tension seemed to ease when I pressed my chest against his. “There are devices that can make your life easier. There are things you can ask of your friends to help you get by.”

“Like what?”

I laughed and nodded. “Like flashing doorbells and making sure all your videos have captions. Like having voice-off days where everyone signs, even if you’re not around, so they get used to it.

Like asking them to repeat themselves when you’re lost,” I added, and his eyes darted away for a second.

That was probably the most common crime in his house.

“Like listening to you when you need to be heard.”

“I hate feeling like a burden.”

Unable to stop myself, I brought my hand up to his jaw and waited for him to look at me.

“I know it’s hard. I can’t imagine what you deal with after what you’ve been through.

And I know it’s not just you. I see it with Nash at work.

He tries too hard, like he has to be perfect.

Like he’s trying to make up for something. ”

Tameron swallowed heavily, but he said nothing, and I knew it wasn’t his place to give away Nash’s secrets.

“But because your guys get it, maybe rely on them. Tell them what you need. Stop shutting everyone out.”

“Easier said than done,” he muttered, glancing away.

I tapped his chin until he was looking at me once more. ‘I know,’ I signed, ‘but it helps to try.’

He groaned, then thrust his hips forward. “Can’t you just kiss me and forget about all this heavy stuff?”

I grinned. “Yeah.” Pinching his chin between my fingers, I drew his lips to mine. It was hot but mostly PG for the neighbors. When I pulled back, I let out a heavy sigh

and knocked our foreheads together. “I have to be at work at six in the morning, or I’d invite you over.”

“It’s okay. But...can we plan something soon?”

“Yes. Please,” I added. I needed him to know I wanted to spend time with him. I wanted this—whatever it was, for however long he wanted me back. “Text me later.”

“Tonight,” he said. “Maybe...maybe we can try something over the phone?”

Oh. I hadn’t thought of that. “That sounds nice. FaceTime?”

“Yeah,” he said, his voice a little thready. “I’ll be up. I haven’t been sleeping well.”

I kissed him again, longer this time, deeper, like a promise of what was to come the next time I could keep him in my arms for longer than a few minutes. “Let me know when you’re ready for an overnight. I’ll fuck you into a deep, deep sleep.” Maybe that was too much. Too far.

But he shuddered and groaned, rocking his half-hard cock against my thigh. “I’d like that.”

“Yeah?”

He was silent for a long beat before he met my gaze and nodded. “Yes.”

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

TAMERON

Stop shutting everyone out.

Dayton's words kept playing through my head. Was he right that I had been closing myself off from the others? Nash, not so much, but Creek and Bean? I had...and that hurt to admit.

I thought we'd been there for each other, had each other's backs, but the truth was that I was there for them and had their backs...but I wasn't allowing them to return the favor.

Nash always said I was too much in my head, that I always tried to figure out my own stuff, and he wasn't wrong. I didn't like to rely on others, not even on those closest to me.

Maybe also because Creek and Bean were so happy now that they'd found love.

Creek had had such a hard time accepting the loss of his leg, and Bean...

While I was well aware that it wasn't a competition to see which of us had it the worst, the fact was that if this were up for a whose-life-sucks-the-most award, Bean would win hands down.

He had no choice but to depend on others since his brain constantly let him down. I

would've gone mad in his shoes.

So now that they were both happy and in love, it was a thousand times harder to burden them with my issues. I refused to bring them down, and besides, it wasn't like they could help me anyway. No one could.

They couldn't help me learn ASL. They couldn't process what the loss of my hearing meant for me.

They couldn't be expected to make all the accommodations for me like Dayton's family did with the mirrors and the round tables.

I'd never felt more at home anywhere, more seen, but how did I leave my whole world behind and move into their world, into Deaf culture?

I had so many questions and no answers, so many problems and no solutions, so many challenges and no energy left to rise to meet them. I was tired. Exhausted.

So maybe Dayton did have a point that I should open up more. Not because the others could help me, but because they could listen and offer a shoulder to lean on. Fuck, I sucked at leaning on others. But I would try.

Nash had asked for a dinner with all of us minus partners, saying we had some updates to share, and so we sat around the table, enjoying a lovely seafood pasta Bean had made. He'd come a long way in his cooking skills, and we were all grateful for it.

"This is delicious, Bean," Nash said, shoveling another forkful into his mouth.

Bean flashed him a broad smile. "Thank you. It's a favorite at the bar as well."

"It could use a bit more heat," I said, only teasing him a little. Bean couldn't always

tell when we were teasing him, so we'd all dialed back on messing with him. It was no fun when someone ended up hurt.

Bean flipped me the middle finger. "Everything needs more heat for you. I could add a Carolina Reaper to it, and you'd still think it needed more."

"Carolina Reaper?" Creek frowned. "The fuck is that?"

"It's officially the world's hottest pepper," Bean told him.

Creek scratched his head. "How do they measure that? By how much water you need to drink after eating it?"

"Actually, milk helps better than water," Nash said. "Especially whole milk, as the fats help dissolve some of the heat. I learned that on the job. Yogurt or sour cream do the job as well."

Creek shuddered. "I don't even want to know why you needed to learn that. It can't be healthy, eating something that hot."

"It's not if you're not used to it." Nash shot me a look. "It can cause irritation and even inflammation of your esophagus, stomach, or intestines."

I let out a sigh. "I liked you better before you went all doctor on us."

And that earned me another middle finger. I was on a roll here.

"Anyway, they measure the heat of peppers using a special scale called the Scoville scale, and Carolina Reapers are the hottest peppers on the planet," Bean said.

Creek made a face. "That's a hard no from me. Jesus fuck, I can't even imagine how

much that would hurt coming out of my ass.”

I debated making an anal joke but decided to let it pass. They hit a little differently now that I was bi. Which, come to think of it, the guys didn’t know either. Maybe that was something I could start with?

“Speaking of asses,” I said in what had to be the worst segue in history, “I have something I want to tell you guys.”

Bean sat up straight. “Are we at the announcement part of the schedule? Because if we are, I have something to share as well.”

Nash smiled indulgently. “The floor is yours, Bean.”

I opened my mouth to protest that I’d been first, but a warning look from Nash had me close it again. Apparently, he knew what Bean was going to say. Well, of course he did. We all told him everything first.

“Jarek asked me to marry him...and I said yes.” Bean flat-out squealed, and pandemonium ensued as we all congratulated him, hugging him.

“I’m so happy for you,” I said as I gave him a fierce hug. “No one deserves it more than you.”

His eyes were moist when he let go and cupped my cheek. “So do you. You’ll find your happiness too.”

When we all sat down again, it hit me. Getting married meant Bean would be moving into Jarek’s house. I cleared my throat. “Have you guys picked a date yet?”

“It’s not official yet, but we were thinking three months or so from now. Neither of us

wants something big, so it's not like we need a lot of time to plan or prepare. Just close family and friends."

Three months. He'd be moving out in three months.

"So you're moving into Jarek's house, I assume," Creek asked.

Bean ducked his head a little as he nodded. "Yeah. I know that's a change, but?"

"It's all good," Nash said. "We all knew this was a transitional period that wasn't supposed to last forever."

Sure, but...

"I think I want to move out as well," Creek said softly. "Heath's been so patient with me, but I know he'd love for us to start our life together with the two of us. And I think I'm ready to leave the nest, so to speak."

I swallowed thickly. Creek and Bean were both moving out.

I should've known this was coming, but somehow, I still felt blindsided, like the ground was disappearing from under me.

A dizzy spell hit, and it took everything I had to keep calm and keep breathing.

My hands curled into fists, and I focused on inhaling, exhaling. Inhale, exhale.

Everything would be okay. I could survive without them. I would have to.

"It's a big change," Nash said, and they were all looking at me as if they expected me to fall apart at any moment.

So I clenched my fists and smiled through the pain that was tearing me up on the inside. “Couldn’t be happier for you guys. I’ll be fine, I promise.”

“Will you be taking in new people, Nash?” Creek asked.

Nash shrugged, his eyes still glued to me. “Don’t know yet. I’ll cross that bridge when I get to it.”

“I was asking because my brother may be interested.”

That got Nash’s attention, and he whipped his head to face Creek. “Forest? Your brother Forest?”

“Yeah. I told you he’s moving here, and well, he’s struggling to find affordable housing on a teacher’s salary. I figured he could take over my room.”

“Oh. Right. Of course. I mean, I’ll think about that, okay? I will let you know. Or him. Whichever you prefer.”

I blinked. What the hell was wrong with Nash? Maybe he was more affected by Creek and Bean leaving than I had realized. At least we had that in common.

“Sure,” Creek said, looking a little baffled by Nash’s reaction. “Whatever you want, Top.”

“What did you want to tell us?” Nash then asked me as if he were desperate to change the topic. “Before Bean made his announcement, you said you had something to share.”

“Did I take away your moment?” Bean looked horrified. “If I did, I’m so sorry. I didn’t mean to. I was just so excited to share my news.”

I waved his apology away. “All good. You deserved the spotlight.”

“But what did you want to say?” Creek asked, looking curious.

Stop shutting everyone out. Easier said than done under these circumstances. They were moving on with their lives, as they should, and of course I was happy for them.

And Nash would move on too. He was already finding his footing in his job and loving it.

It would only be a matter of time before he found love, and I’d be the one left behind.

Maybe I should start looking for somewhere else to live because I didn’t want to become a hindrance to Nash living his best life.

The man had an overinflated sense of responsibility and he’d insist on taking care of me to the point where it would come at the price of his own happiness. Hell if I was gonna let that happen.

So I plastered on a smile and waved my hand dismissively. “It wasn’t important. Let’s focus on the future. I wish you guys all the happiness in the world as you start the next phase of your lives.”

“We still want to be there for you,” Creek said, in itself a testament to how Heath had changed him because those were not words he would’ve uttered before.

I smiled at him, at everyone. “I know. Like Nash said, it’s all good.”

It would have to be.

‘We use topicalization for emphasis, expediency, or clarification.’

I had a hard time following my teacher as he reminded me of some aspects of ASL grammar.

I'd been told there would be a time when I'd become so fluent in ASL that I wouldn't have to translate in my head when I was using ASL, but I was nowhere near that point yet.

I had about a second delay in processing what he was signing, so I was constantly behind, trying to catch up. It was exhausting.

Yes, I was improving, but not at the rate I had expected.

My teacher had told me it was because I wasn't practicing enough.

He'd all but ordered me to spend more time with Deaf people, so I'd be forced to use ASL.

He was right that I relied on my hearing aids, but it was scary to let go of that comfort, of that backup.

But if I didn't, would I ever become proficient enough in ASL?

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I forced myself to refocus on my teacher, who was now explaining that my word order kept favoring English instead of ASL.

And I understood. I really did, but it was still hard to replace one with the other.

My brain wasn't wired for languages. And it wasn't that I was messing it up. It was his impatience with me.

The disappointed look when I signed, 'I lost my phone at the store yesterday,' hit me. He made me feel like I was never going to get this right. I just needed to remember that his impatience and disappointment weren't the norm. Dayton was always kind about it. And so was Dax.

I wasn't a failure. I just needed more time.

Luckily, he called it quits a little early.

Apparently, he had a funeral to attend, which sucked for him but was good news for me because my brain was mush.

I debated canceling on Dax, who had finally managed to convince me to head over to his shop, but I really did not want to be that person.

I was a man of my word, and so I'd suck it up.

Look, this week sucked anyway. Ever since I'd learned that Creek and Bean would be moving out soon, this dark cloud had settled over me.

It would lift again at some point, but I was allowed to be sad about it, right?

Or even pissed off. In fact, Nash had told me as much that same night, stopping by my room.

Being angry was normal, he'd assured me.

Glad to hear there was at least one normal thing in my life.

The drive to Dax's shop took longer than expected due to heavy traffic, but I finally made it.

When I stepped into the reception area, flashing lights went off everywhere.

Moments later, a guy popped up, dressed in dark-blue oil-stained coveralls, wiping his hands off on a cloth that couldn't be dirtier if it had been black.

"Hi," he said. "Can I help you?"

'I'm a friend of Dax,' I signed.

He smiled with relief. 'You Tameron?'

I nodded.

'I'm Bush. Welcome. Come with me.'

Bush? What kind of name was that? Then again, it wasn't like Tameron was common and I had any right to criticize. I still wasn't sure what my parents had been thinking when they named me that. At least it was easy to spell and pronounce.

I followed Bush into the actual shop, and the first thing that struck me was the silence.

Over the years, I'd set foot in plenty of car shops, but there had always been music blaring, sometimes to the point where you could barely communicate.

But here, silence reigned supreme, only interrupted by the occasional clank of tools, the whirr of a screwdriver, or a muttered curse.

I breathed out, then quietly removed my hearing aids. My teacher wanted me to practice, and here was my chance.

Dax was bent over an ancient Subaru, gesturing at a woman sitting behind the wheel to start the engine.

It spluttered to life with enough noise that I could hear it even without my aids, though through a thick layer of cotton.

Dax studied the engine, then gestured for her to turn it off again.

He couldn't hear it, of course, but my guess was he'd been sensing the vibrations since he'd had both hands flat on the car.

Bush waved at him, and Dax looked up, then spotted me. He waved and immediately came over. This time, I was expecting the hug.

'Good to see you. Glad you came,' he signed.

'Happy to be here. Thanks for inviting me.'

Dax gestured at a corner, where what I surmised to be an old car sat under a tarp.

‘Have a look.’

I carefully took the tarp off, then gasped.

I quickly folded the tarp and handed it to Bush, who watched me with a smile, then slowly walked around the old Ford F-100 pickup.

Oh, she was a beauty, even if she was in pretty bad shape with rust all over and four flat tires.

Mint green, with a short bed and a single cabin, she was from the late seventies, most likely.

Popping the hood, I looked at the engine and whistled between my teeth. Damn, it seemed to be original, with very few parts that looked newer. That would need some serious tuning, but it was in decent shape for a vehicle of that age. Fully restored, she’d be breathtaking.

Dax tapped me on my shoulder. ‘What do you think?’

‘Gorgeous. A lot of work.’

He shrugged. ‘You have time.’

Well, he wasn’t wrong on that one. ‘Is it yours? Or from a client?’

‘She was gifted to me.’

Oh wow. That was quite the gift.

‘You can work on it,’ he continued. ‘I don’t have the time right now. If you want.’

I did want. At least it would give me something to do. Something that required little communication and would allow me to relax. 'Thank you. I would love that.'

He slapped my shoulder. 'Perfect. Grab anything you need from the shop. If you need to order parts, tell Bush. He can order for you.'

Five minutes later, I walked around her again, my phone in my hand as I noted everything wrong with her. She needed a lot of work, but she'd be so worth it. A classic fixer-upper. Kinda like me, and despite everything, that thought made me smile.

But I would start with the engine because that was the heart of her. If I couldn't fix that, it would make no sense to restore her outside beauty. She needed to run before she could look pretty.

'Do you have plastic bags and stickers?' I asked Bush.

'Labels?' he fingerspelled.

Ah, that was the sign I'd been looking for. I repeated it. 'Labels.'

'Sure.'

He took me to a storage room and pointed out where I could find everything. Dax ran a well-organized shop, everything neatly in bins and drawers with printed labels. That would make things considerably easier.

Bush pointed at a notepad on a rolling cart in the storage room. 'Please note here what you used.'

Easy enough. I grabbed some bags, labels, and a Sharpie and wrote them down on the

notepad. I had no doubt I would need more, but this was a good start.

Back at the truck—she needed a name, didn't she?—I took a lot of pictures and a few videos with my phone, then grabbed a toolset and got to work. I labeled each part of the engine as I took it out and examined it for rust or damage, making notes on my phone of my findings.

Within minutes, I was lost in thought, my mind finding this strange peace as it focused on the task at hand.

At least for a little while, I could forget about everything else.

About Bean and Creek moving out. About Nash moving on.

About me being left behind, struggling to find where I belonged.

I didn't have answers or solutions for any of those things, but this? This I could do.

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

DAYTON

My job had been a little too simple lately. It had been easy to forget it wasn't just rescuing kittens and showing up to fender-bender accidents or the occasional toaster fire in a kitchen. Sometimes, it was bad. Sometimes, it was shake you to the core, not everything survived bad.

It had been a good, long while since I'd stood under the heavy spray of the station shower, trying to scrub soot from the insides of my ears and the roots of my hair while doing my best not to hear the devastated cries of the victims repeating over and over in my head. But my job wasn't over after this.

No. I had to get dressed, put on my game face, and check on everyone.

Nash in particular.

He'd been the perfect EMT on the call, of course.

He'd graduated to driving the ambulance, and he'd done it with a focus that many of my people didn't necessarily have, following close behind us.

On site, he'd taken a command role in a subtle way, and he had an instinct about where people should be, so I'd followed his lead.

We got the fire out, and while not all the injuries were minor, everyone in the

townhouse had lived. Even the three cats and two dogs.

But it was a total loss. Everything these people owned was ash and char, and the man in the house wouldn't walk away unscathed. Nash had been the one to get him on the stretcher after we got him out. He'd been trapped by a fallen beam just outside of what had been his office.

I'd seen Nash dressing the man's burns before they loaded him into the ambulance, and his recovery was going to be bad—painful, long, and expensive.

And then I'd seen the look in Nash's eyes: hollow and haunted. He'd managed a smile when I asked if he was okay, and I had believed him when he told me yes. But I also knew it was a half-lie.

He was fine to drive the ambulance back to its bay, which shared a massive concrete parking lot with the fire station. He was fine to use my shower to wash all the soot off himself and get his paperwork finished at one of the dining tables.

He was fine to go back to a cot and lie there for a while after his shift was over.

But he also wasn't fine.

And it was my job as a battalion chief and as his friend to make sure he didn't spiral.

Most of the crew were subdued—a couple playing Xbox, some grazing in the kitchen on the pizzas we ordered, a couple dozing in recliners. Nash was nowhere to be found. I poked my head into the bunk room, but it was empty like always after a call like this.

Usually, the crew stuck together. It was easier to process when they were all together, and I thought Nash might enjoy our company, but I wasn't surprised that he'd gone

MIA. And I had a feeling I knew exactly where he was.

The spiral staircase was hard on the knees, but I liked the aesthetic it brought to the station.

I took them two at a time, then let myself onto the massive second-floor deck.

It didn't take long to spot him, even in the dark.

It was going on five in the morning now, and there was the barest hint of dark cerulean along the horizon where the sun would start to rise.

That tiny bit of glow caught on his form. He was huddled in a thick pullover, the hood tucked up over his hair, curled in on himself on one of the dining chairs at the far end of the deck. He stiffened when I walked over, but he didn't tell me to fuck off, so I was taking that as a good sign.

My own chair made a horrific squeak as I pulled it away from the table, and I heard the faintest snort as I sat.

"No one ever accused you of grace," he said, his voice a little hoarse from the smoke. We all wore masks, but the EMTs were often too busy handling victims to grab one.

"Growing up in a Deaf house," I told him. "I could be as loud as I wanted and no one cared."

He turned his head slightly in my direction. "Was it hard?"

"Nah. I mean, not in the way you're asking.

" The dining chairs out here had a light bounce to them, and I found myself rocking.

The motion was self-soothing, which was exactly what I needed right then.

I fought off the urge to fall into a coughing fit and cleared my throat instead.

“I got to know how awful people could be at a pretty young age, and that kind of sucked. But we were normal. My parents had good jobs, we did Disneyland for milestone birthdays, and I spent my formative, rebellious teenage years smoking weed at the beach five miles from my suburban home.”

He laughed. “I get you.” He paused for a beat. “But it was different, right? Like from how other people lived.”

I had a feeling I knew where this was coming from. I knew Tameron had internalized a lot of what he’d seen at my parents’ house. Needing more to live the same way as he used to would mean changing things in his house.

“I didn’t mean to disturb your peace at home.”

He swiveled his chair around and looked at me. “Why do you think you did?”

I laughed. “Because I know this is about Tam.”

His lips twitched and he looked like he wanted to say more, but after a beat, he shook his head. “It took me a while to get him to talk about the dinner. He liked it, by the way. He liked your family. A lot. He’s, ah...you know he’s been hanging out at the garage with Dax?”

Yeah. I knew. Dax hadn’t talked a lot about it, and despite wanting to pin him down and force him to tell me every detail about working with Tameron, I’d been good. “Dax likes him. Says he’s a quick learner.”

“He is. He’s a fuckin’ brilliant guy. All my guys are.” His voice went quiet, and I knew he was dealing with more than just Tameron wanting things to be easier at home. “I don’t like letting people down.”

I leaned over the table and stretched my arm out so I could squeeze his. “Do you think you’ve let any of them down?”

His eyes met mine, and he didn’t answer that question. “You know how hard it is to be the one in control. Whatever goes right is on you. But whatever goes wrong...” He trailed off.

The weight in my chest was heavy and I fought the urge to touch the scar on my stomach.

I knew. I knew how wrong it could go when someone made a bad call.

The scars were one of the many reasons I wanted to become a chief.

I wanted to be better than the one who’d given me an order that had scarred me.

“I thought the weight of being in charge would ease once we were here. Civilians again,” he said, then laughed. “Ridiculous. I mean, I doubt we’ll ever really be civilians again.”

I didn’t know what to say to that. People like my family had been banned from serving—even in times of war, they were always seen as less than.

I’d never done anything except register for the draft at eighteen.

I had a couple of friends who’d been in ROTC in high school, but I had no plans to give myself or my life to an organization that treated the people who raised me like

they were second-class.

But getting to know these guys, I understood the nuance now. There was the military system, and then there were the people who served in it. Whatever their reasons, whatever their background, they were people who had suffered.

They were men like Nash—good men who would never be able to fully shake the pain of trauma and loss and would probably always struggle to talk about it.

“Was tonight too much?” I asked.

He looked startled, then laughed. “No. I—ah. I feel like I owe you an apology. It’s still kind of instinct for me to take over.”

I grinned at him and squeezed his arm once more before settling back. “You were good on that call, and I don’t mind being bossed around by EMTs who know what they’re talking about. And you do. I can see you getting into leadership sooner than you think,” I added. “If that’s what you want.”

He looked torn. “It’s a lot of responsibility.”

“It is.”

Silence settled around us again. The sky began to lighten even more on the horizon.

“I want to know I’m doing right by them,” Nash said quietly after a long, long while. “My guys. I want to know that when they leave, they won’t need to come back because I did everything I could to get them to the point they were ready to be on their own.”

“Who’s leaving?” My heart began to thud. Who and where are they going? I wanted

to ask. Was it Tameron? Did he want to go back home—wherever he was from?

He took a while to answer. “Bean’s gettin’ married. And Creek wants to move in with Heath. That one stings less. Heath got himself a new place to live just up the street. Doubt those two fuckers will be cookin’ for themselves most nights. But Jarek lives near the Bay. In the city.”

An hour wasn’t an impossible drive, but it was a long distance. I basked in the relief that it was someone besides Tameron. I had no say over him, of course. We weren’t dating. There were no strings, as much as I wouldn’t mind being tied down.

But I wasn’t ready to give up yet on what could be.

“You gonna retire from here when you’re old?” Nash asked, interrupting my thoughts.

I cleared my throat, then finally gave in and let myself cough for a few seconds. My mouth tasted like ash. “Maybe. I don’t know. I like teaching at the gym, and I might want to do that before my joints are too fucked to be good at it anymore.”

He grinned and pushed his hood back, turning his face toward the sky. He took in a deep breath that ended in his own coughing fit, and he swiped his hand over the back of his mouth. “Tastes the same.”

“Mm?”

“The smoke.” He’d been close enough to the fire to get a good lungful, and I remember what that was like—my first call to a fire. The taste didn’t leave my mouth for weeks.

He turned his chair toward me a bit more. “How can I make his life easier? What can

I do at home so he...?” He stopped and swallowed back the words he clearly wanted to say. So he doesn’t leave ? “So it’s easier for him?”

I smiled gently. “Why don’t I make you a list?”

His body relaxed and he settled in his chair once more. “Thank you, Chief.”

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It was weird to hear him call me that. Even if it was true, I wasn't his chief, and he had an authority about him that was easy to defer to.

I winked at him and reached over to give him one more pat. "It'll get easier. And less lonely."

He blew out a puff of air and said nothing, but the silence that fell was more comfortable this time and the weight of the night started to ease.

Can I come over?

Anytime. Knives could use some cuddles.

Like I was going to say no. Tameron had been quiet lately. His texts had been just a little off. I'd asked him a few times if everything was okay, and he'd insisted it was. He was fine. Just busy. He was working out at the gym more often and spending more free time at Dax's shop.

A part of me wanted to be jealous about it.

I didn't love that my brother got to see him more than I did, but I knew this was good for him.

I knew that giving him a sense of both purpose and independence was integral to his recovery.

And belief in himself that going deaf didn't mean he had to lose anything but his

hearing.

Can we be voice-off?

That was a surprise. He rarely wanted that. He was still eager to keep every sound he could, especially since his loss was still progressing. His latest audiogram hadn't been great. One side was deteriorating faster than the other, which gave him a constant sense of imbalance.

The hearing aids were the only thing that helped even things out.

But I also knew from family members who weren't profoundly Deaf that struggling to hear all the time was mentally exhausting, and it did something to my insides that I could be that safe space for him.

That also probably meant he wasn't asking for what he needed at home as often as he should. I knew it wasn't Nash, and I doubted it was the other guys. This was obviously Tam's issue, and it wasn't my job to push him.

But maybe...maybe I could help.

I've been voice-off all day. Happy to extend it.

Be there in twenty.

Door's open. Just come in.

I was currently rotting on the couch with Knives sleeping on my chest. She was going to lose her shit when he came in, of course. She always did. But I was basking in her little cuddles while I could. It was my first real day off—no station, no gym—in forever.

I always felt a strange sense of guilt when I had a day of doing nothing. My parents hadn't liked it when my siblings and I were "unproductive," as they had called it. And it was never a bad thing, but there were times I'd wished they would have just let us be.

Knives began to purr louder as I shifted just slightly to the left. I scratched my fingers along her scruff and she yawned right in my face, then settled her chin on her paws. My chest twisted and I lifted my phone, very carefully taking a selfie.

I'd save that one for when Tameron was having a really bad day.

And speak of the devil. The lights flashed before I heard the door open, and a moment later, he appeared. He made an aww face, but it was only seconds before Knives was shoving her tiny claws into my chest and taking off at breakneck speed.

'Not happy to see me,' he signed.

I scoffed and jerked my head toward the spot on the couch beside me. 'She's feeling wild.'

He grinned and shucked his jacket, dropping it on Dax's empty chair before sliding along the cushions. I let him settle for only a moment before dragging him down beside me. His body was tense, but he gave a small, happy hum as he settled in.

His ear pressed against my chest, and I could feel the distinct lack of a hearing aid attached to his skull.

'Hey,' I signed, tapping him. He shifted backward so he could give me signing space. 'You drive here without them on?'

His eyes were a little wary. 'Yeah.'

‘Afraid?’

He bit his lip, then nodded. ‘A little. I turned on the music really loud. It sounded nicer that way than with...’ He tapped behind his head.

I knew that complaint well. My mom had residual hearing and was obsessed with Christmas music during the holidays, but she never ever listened with her devices on. She hated the way it sounded, so I’d put in earplugs and she’d crank the speakers as high as they would go.

‘I think it was too loud. Got weird looks from people.’ He pulled a face, and I wanted to praise him for being more expressive, but I didn’t want to draw attention to it either.

‘Fuck them,’ I signed slowly.

He blinked, then burst into laughter and shrugged. ‘Yeah.’ He settled back down against me, pinning my arm to my side. It was an unspoken request for silence, and I was more than happy to give that to him. I wanted to rot, and I was happy to do it while feeling his heart beat against my ribs.

Knives joined us a little while later, purring hard enough that her entire body vibrated as she settled in the space where our bodies were touching. Tameron let out another happy hum and snuggled her close.

It was nice.

It was too close to the fantasy of what I wanted my future to look like, but for the moment, I let myself bask in what could be.

“Hi.”

It had been hours since Tameron had shown up at my door, voice-off, anxiety high.

It was strange to hear him speak now, but he was fresh from a shower and hovering in my bedroom doorway.

We hadn't established whether or not he was staying, but he had his shirt off and a pair of sweats slung low on his hips.

'Come in,' I signed.

He nodded, closing the door behind him, then he hooked a finger over his ear. "They're on."

"Okay," I said slowly. "Feeling better?"

He let out a tiny puff of air as he nodded. He'd been quiet during dinner and tense while we watched a few episodes of Schitt's Creek , but he seemed...I didn't want to say better now, but at least more relaxed.

And definitely more sure of himself. He walked over and spun me in my desk chair, settling his body between my legs. His gaze was caught on my crotch. I was soft but wouldn't be for long.

"See something you like?" I asked.

He laughed and pressed the tips of his fingers to my shoulders. "What's it like sucking cock?"

Yep. My dick was immediately on board. "Uh...do you want me to show you?"

"No, I..." He licked his lips slowly. "I think I want to see for myself. I mean, I'm

familiar with how it works, but...was it hard to get used to?"

I touched his chin, drawing his gaze to my mouth. "About as hard as eating out a woman. So to speak."

"Save your puns," he said, and I burst into a small fit of laughter.

"Fine. Sorry. I mean it though. It's different, but it's not worse. And it's not better. It might help not to try and compare the two, you know?"

He blew out a puff of air, then sank to his knees without preamble. I grunted in surprise as his shoulders knocked my legs wider apart, and he stared up at me with big doe eyes. "I get what you're saying."

Cupping his cheek, I ran my thumb over his bottom lip. His scruff was rough against my palm. He shivered, then licked his lips and reached forward, curling his fingers in the waistband of my sweats.

"Yes?"

I nodded, then gripped the arms of my chair to lift my ass. With a firm tug, my sweats and boxers slipped down my thighs and settled around my calves, and Tameron ran his rough palms up the insides of my legs.

I couldn't take my eyes off where his skin met mine. He was more tan than I was, and there were flecks of oil in the corners of his nails. His biceps flexed, the faint, fine-line tattoos dancing with the movement.

"I don't want to get this wrong," he whispered.

I lifted my hand. 'You won't.'

He nodded, then his lips parted as he took my cock in his hand and held it. I didn't think I'd ever been harder in my life. I pulsed in his grip, the tip wet as he gave it a single stroke, then he breathed in deep through his nose, leaned forward, and fit the head just past his lips.

There was a slight graze of teeth, but I didn't hate it. My lungs sucked in a sharp breath, and I fought off a lingering tickle from the fire. It was easy to ignore, especially with the way he was looking up at me again.

He was fucking beautiful like this—his mouth a perfectly round O , his cheeks dark with a flush, his hair mussed because—oh. I'd done that. My other hand was gripping him by the back of the head, and I hadn't even realized it.

'Sorry,' I signed quickly. I moved to take my hand away, but he grabbed my wrist, guiding my fingers back to where they'd been.

"Please," he said, pulling away from me to speak. "Guide me."

My body gave a single, almost violent shudder. A moan lodged itself in the back of my throat, and my knees felt weak as I nodded and gripped him again. The more I tightened my hand, the more his body relaxed into mine.

His lips softened and then they were on me again. I gave him a moment to adjust—to taste—then I gently began to push. He moaned, the sound vibrating against me as he sank lower. I watched him for any tension, any fear, but there was none.

He kept his eyes on my face as his jaw opened wider, and he rolled his tongue as I slipped almost all the way into his mouth.

"Fuck," I gasped. "Like that. Tam, baby?—"

He moaned again, then swallowed. The sensation had my balls going tight, and it took me a moment not to spill right there. I would come down his throat someday, but not tonight. I wanted to take him with me right now.

Giving three short thrusts past his lips, I gently tugged him away. He went easily, releasing me with a pop, and didn't protest when I urged him to his feet and pulled his own pants down to his knees.

He looked at me as he kicked them away, then he yanked me to my feet and jerked his chin toward the bed.

I nodded, grabbing both hands, and I backed up until my knees hit the mattress and I collapsed.

Tameron's strong hands guided me down, and he swung his leg up and over me as I shuffled to sit against the headboard. His weight settled on my thighs.

I lifted his hand, licked his palm, and then guided him down to grip us both. "Just like this," I told him, then grabbed his hips.

He nodded and held me tight. His hand was smaller than mine, so he took himself in his other one, keeping the same motion—a firm, fierce stroke. The room suddenly filled with the sound of skin slapping skin.

"Let me hear you," he gasped. He tipped his head forward and nipped at my lips. "Please, Day. Let me have your voice."

I didn't hold back. I groaned loudly, thrusting into the circle of his fingers, and he sped up his hands even more. "Uh, uh. Yes. Just like that. So fucking good. So perfect. Love this so much. Tam, love this, love?—"

He kissed me. Maybe he was afraid of what I might say next. Hell, I was terrified. I sucked on his tongue and bit at his mouth as my orgasm crashed through me. With a heavy moan, I let go, spilling over his knuckles, and he stroked me as my dick kicked and emptied my balls onto us both.

He followed seconds later, letting my cock go to pin my shoulder to the bed. His moan was deep and thready, and as he came, he sobbed. It took me a moment to break out of the haze to realize that he was actually crying, and when he let his own dick go, he collapsed against me.

My arms gripped him tight, pressing him hard into my chest, rocking him back and forth. Shit, had I fucked up?

“I’m sorry, I’m sorry,” he was whispering.

I waited until his breathing evened out a bit, then I eased him back and tipped his chin up to look at me. “Was it the sex?”

He shook his head. His eyes were still red-rimmed, his cheeks stained with tear tracks.

The answer offered no relief. No peace. He still looked shattered. “Do you want to talk about it?”

He swallowed thickly, then shook his head again. His eyes grew worried, like maybe he was afraid I’d force the issue.

I lifted a hand and signed, ‘Do you want to stay with me tonight?’

After a long, long beat of silence, his grip on me tightened, and he nodded.

I nodded and brushed the hair back from his forehead. “Okay. That’s fine. As long as you need.”

After another pause, he lifted his fingers to his chin and tipped them forward. ‘Thank you.’

I didn’t think I needed to tell him in that moment that he would never need to thank me for this.

CHAPTER SEVENTEEN

TAMERON

Two a.m. I stared at the bright-red numbers on Dayton's alarm clock, watching them mock me.

Next to me, Dayton slept peacefully, his chest rising and falling in a slow, steady rhythm.

His face was relaxed in sleep, all the usual tension gone from his features.

One arm was thrown casually over his head while the other rested on his stomach, his fingers occasionally twitching.

Every now and then, he'd let out a soft snore, and even without my hearing aids, I could feel the gentle vibration of it through the mattress.

I should be sleeping too. God knows I was tired enough, both physically and mentally. My body was wrung out from a day of working on the truck at Dax's shop and then from sex with Dayton. But my brain refused to shut up.

The nightmares didn't help—vivid flashbacks of the explosion, the ringing in my ears that never quite went away, the screams of my teammates.

Sometimes in my dreams, not everyone made it out.

Those were the worst ones, where I'd wake up gasping, drenched in sweat, convinced I'd failed them.

Even when I managed to fall asleep, I rarely stayed that way for long.

But my sleeping issues had gotten worse lately, and I knew why. Everything was changing, and I had no control over any of it.

My hearing was deteriorating further. The latest audiogram had confirmed what I'd already suspected: the hearing loss in my left ear was progressing faster than my right, creating an increasingly disorienting imbalance.

Even with my hearing aids adjusted to compensate, sounds felt distorted and lopsided.

My ENT had warned me this might happen, but experiencing it was something else entirely. The constant vertigo spells were a lovely bonus, reminding me that this wasn't just about losing sound. It was about losing my equilibrium, my independence, my sense of normalcy.

Then there was the news about Bean and Creek moving out soon.

Every time Bean talked about the wedding, his face lit up like a beacon.

Fucking impossible to resent him when he was so goddamn happy.

The man had walked through hell and had come out the other side in love and stable. It was nothing short of a miracle.

And Creek was pretty much the same. If you'd told me a year ago the man had the capacity to look goofy and in love, I would've laughed you out of the room. He'd

been grumpy personified. Yet here we were, and he was smiling more than a beauty queen at a pageant.

Plus, Nash was getting busier with work, and more importantly, he was building a life for himself. He had a job he loved, and it would only be a matter of time before he met someone and fell in love too.

And then there was Dayton. I turned my head to look at him, fast asleep next to me.

He hadn't moved since he'd fallen asleep, his face turned toward me, his features relaxed.

He looked peaceful. Beautiful. That was a word I never thought I'd use for a man, but he was beautiful, inside and out.

And what had started as casual exploring had turned into something much more complex, and I had no idea how to handle that.

Was I really bisexual? Or was I projecting because Dayton was the only one who seemed to understand me, who still had time for me, who listened to me and really heard me, saw me?

No, that wasn't it. My attraction to Dayton was real, and I'd noticed other men as well. So yeah, I was bi. But what did that mean for me? For us? For this thing between us that was supposed to be casual but felt anything but?

Because I was falling for him. Hard.

I couldn't deal with a relationship on top of everything else.

I was drowning in my own life, in my struggles.

Where did I fit in? What was my place? I had no job, no purpose, no direction.

I had no idea where I belonged. Not in the hearing world anymore, but not in the Deaf world either.

I was stuck in between, and it was getting harder and harder to stay afloat.

Three a.m. Time had crawled by at a snail's pace, and I was no closer to sleep than I had been an hour ago. Every time I closed my eyes, my thoughts spun faster, like a hamster wheel picking up speed.

I couldn't stay here. The walls were closing in on me, and Dayton's steady breathing was both soothing and suffocating. I needed air. Space. Room to breathe.

As quietly as I could, I slipped out of bed and got dressed. Dayton didn't stir, not even when I accidentally bumped into his dresser. He slept like the dead when he was off shift. At least I didn't have to worry about waking him.

In the kitchen, I found a notepad and pen and scribbled a quick note:

Had to clear my head. Thanks for everything.

-T

Brief. Impersonal. But what else could I say? "Sorry I'm such a mess" didn't quite cut it. Neither did "I think I'm falling for you, and it terrifies me."

The night air hit me like a slap in the face as I stepped outside. Good. The wet embrace of a drizzle helped clear my head a little. I got into my car and just...drove. No destination in mind, no purpose other than movement. Being still meant thinking, and thinking hurt too much right now.

I couldn't go home. Nash would hear me come in—the man had the hearing of a bat, I swear—and then he'd want to talk. He meant well, but I couldn't handle his concern right now. Couldn't deal with those knowing eyes that saw right through me.

So I drove. Past closed storefronts and empty streets. Past late-night diners with their neon signs casting an otherworldly glow. Past couples stumbling home from bars, arms wrapped around each other. God, I missed that feeling of being young, carefree, and happy.

I ended up at a viewpoint overlooking the Golden Gate Bridge. The sight never got old, no matter how many times I saw it. Tonight, the bridge was lit up against the dark sky, its reflection shimmering on the water below.

I parked the car and killed the engine. Without the rumble of the motor, the silence was absolute. I debated putting my hearing aids in but decided against it. The silence matched my mood.

I'd never felt so utterly alone in my life. It was like drowning, watching everyone else swim to shore while I struggled to keep my head above water. Bean and Creek had found their lifeboats in Jarek and Heath. Nash was building his own raft, piece by piece. And here I was, barely treading water.

My phone lit up, Dayton's name flashing on the screen as he FaceTimed me. Shit. He must've woken up. I hesitated, then answered it.

"Hey. Gimme a second to put my hearing aids in." He waited as I connected them, then breathed through the dizzy spell. "Okay."

"Are you okay?" His voice was rough with sleep, but it held an edge of worry.

"Yeah. Sorry I left like that."

“Where are you?”

I dragged a hand down my face. “At the Golden Gate viewpoint.”

“Want me to come get you?”

Yes. No. Maybe. “You have to work later.”

“I don’t care.”

Those three words hit me right in the chest. He didn’t care. He’d come anyway, just because I needed him. And that was the problem, wasn’t it? I was starting to need him too much.

“Talk to me,” he said softly. “What’s going on in that head of yours?”

Maybe it was the darkness. Maybe it was the physical distance between us. Maybe it was just that I was so fucking tired of carrying it all. Whatever it was, the words spilled out. “I’m drowning. I’m lost. I’m... I don’t know what I am. Who I am. Where I belong.”

“Yeah, you have a lot on your plate right now.”

Hearing him say that brought tears to my eyes.

I hadn’t realized how much I needed him to listen, truly hear what I was saying rather than offer some quick reassurance that everything wasn’t that bad.

It was. It fucking sucked. “Everyone else is moving on. They’ve found their path forward, but I’m stuck. ”

“That’s okay,” Dayton said softly. “You don’t have to have it all figured out right now.”

“But I should. I’m twenty-nine years old, and I have nothing. No job, no purpose, no direction. And things will only get worse. My left ear is deteriorating rapidly, and...” My voice broke a little. “And I’m scared, Day. I’m fucking terrified.”

“I can’t even imagine.”

“I’ll lose everything that matters to me. Everything and everyone I love.”

“You won’t lose everything,” Dayton said, his voice gentle. “Your friends and family love you. They’ll learn. Look how far Nash has come with his signing already.”

I dragged a hand through my hair. “But it’s not the same. Even if they learn ASL, which will take years to become fluent, the ease of communication will be gone. No more quick chats in the kitchen. No more inside jokes. No more...” I swallowed hard. “Everything will be different.”

“Different doesn’t mean worse.”

“Doesn’t it? I’ve seen how hard it is for Dax to communicate with hearing people. Even when they try, there’s always this...barrier. This invisible wall between them.”

“Between us, you mean?” Dayton asked softly. “Because I’m hearing and my family is Deaf?”

That gave me pause. “I didn’t mean...”

“I know you didn’t. But yes, there’s always something. A barrier, like you said. But that doesn’t mean the relationships are less meaningful or the love is less strong. It

just means we have to work a little harder at it sometimes.”

I buried my face in my hands. “I’m so tired of having to work harder at everything. I’m tired of having to prove myself, of having to fight for every little thing. I just want things to be easy again.”

“I know, honey. I wish I could make it easier for you.”

The endearment hit me right in the chest. “You do make it easier. Your friendship”—I vaguely gestured at him and then myself—“whatever we are is the best thing in my life right now. But I’m still drowning.”

“Anyone would be overwhelmed under those circumstances, Tam. This is not your fault or your shortcomings. It’s okay to feel like this. Anyone would when dealing with all that.”

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“I hate it!” I burst out. “I don’t want to feel like this. Sorry for myself and angry. I’m so angry all the time...”

“At yourself?”

“At myself, at Creek and Bean for being so goddamn happy, at Nash for always having his shit together, at the asshole who caused the accident, at everyone. The whole word pisses me off.” Then, I reconsidered. “Not you. I’m not upset with you. I didn’t mean to imply that?—”

“I didn’t take it that way. Don’t worry about it.”

“I hate being angry. I don’t want to be that person, the veteran who is bitter for the rest of his life because of something that happened. That can’t be me.”

“You won’t be. You’ll find a way through this.”

Silence fell between us, but it wasn’t uncomfortable. Dayton was giving me space to process, to continue if I wanted to. That was one of the things I loved about him. He knew when to push and when to just listen.

Loved. Fuck.

“I wasn’t supposed to feel this way about you,” I whispered. “This was supposed to be casual. Fun. Exploring. But you... You’re the only one who gets it. The only one who understands. And I can’t... I can’t...”

“Can’t what?”

“I can’t be a burden to you too. I’m already one to Nash, to everyone else. I won’t do that to you.”

“Tam...” His voice was gentle but firm. “You’re not a burden. To anyone. And especially not to me.”

I let out a bitter laugh. “Right. The guy who can’t sleep, can’t hear, can’t figure out his life, can’t get his shit together. Sleepless, jobless, and if this continues, probably homeless soon. What’s not to love?”

“You couldn’t be more wrong.” Something in his voice made me catch my breath. “You’re brave. Resilient. Kind. Funny. Smart. Should I go on?”

“Stop.”

“No. You need to hear this. You’re not broken, Tameron. You’re adapting. And yeah, it’s hard and it sucks and it’s not fair. But you’re doing it. You’re learning ASL. You’re working on cars with Dax. You’re making progress, even if you can’t see it right now.”

Tears burned in my eyes. “I’m so tired, Day.”

“I know, baby. I know.” His voice was impossibly gentle.

“Thank you for listening.”

“Don’t ever thank me for that.” He hesitated, emotions flashing over that expressive face. “I don’t know how to ask this, Tam, but I have to. Are you okay? Do I need to worry about you?”

It took me a few seconds to realize what he meant, and warmth flooded my chest. No, I wasn't suicidal, but the fact that he asked, that he took me so seriously, brought tears to my eyes all over again. "I don't want to kill myself."

He blew out a breath. "I had to ask."

"Yeah, and I'm grateful you did."

"Still, let me come get you."

I shook my head, even though he couldn't see it. "No. You need your sleep. You have a shift later."

"I don't like you being out there alone."

"I'm fine. I just... I needed some air."

"Okay. But text me when you get home? Please?"

"I will." I hesitated, then added, "Thank you. For listening. For understanding."

"Always."

We said our goodbyes and hung up. I sat there for a while longer, watching the lights of the bridge shimmer on the water. The talk with Dayton had helped a little. My chest felt less tight, like I could breathe again.

But it wouldn't last. These feelings, these fears, would come back. They always did. And I couldn't keep running to Dayton every time that happened. We were supposed to be casual. Friends with benefits. Nothing more.

Even if my heart wanted more. Even if his gentleness and understanding made me yearn for something I couldn't have. I was too much of a mess for a relationship. And Dayton... He deserved better than someone who was drowning.

With a deep sigh, I started the car. Time to go home and face another day of pretending I was fine.

When I walked in the door, it was barely five a.m., but Nash was in the kitchen, making breakfast. He took one look at me and gestured for me to take a seat. "I'll make you some eggs."

"I'm not hungry."

"I wasn't asking."

No, he never was. Resigning myself to my fate, I plopped down on a chair. The fact that Nash didn't tell me to wash my hands was not a good omen. It meant he knew something was going on, something bad enough that he was giving me a break. How did I get him off my back?

I watched him confidently move around the kitchen, grabbing ingredients and tools with practiced ease.

Nash had always been like that—efficient and purposeful in his movements, no wasted energy.

It was part of what had made him such a great soldier and capable leader, and now it translated perfectly into his new role as an EMT.

Even something as simple as making breakfast became a carefully orchestrated operation.

The familiarity of it all made my chest ache.

How many mornings had I watched him do this exact same thing?

Making enough food to feed an army because that's what we were, his little army of broken soldiers that he'd taken under his wing.

Soon, there would be two fewer mouths to feed.

The thought made my throat tight. Change was coming, whether I was ready for it or not.

He looked good though, more relaxed than I'd seen him in ages.

The EMT work suited him, gave him purpose again.

Unlike me, Nash had found his place in the civilian world.

He'd rebuilt himself into something new while still maintaining his core identity.

I envied that about him, his ability to adapt and thrive no matter what life threw at him.

He plated a generous helping of eggs and some bacon, then put it in front of me.
"Talk."

"Nothing to say. I went for a drive."

"At three in the morning?" He quirked an eyebrow. "After spending the night at Dayton's?"

I stabbed a piece of bacon with my fork. “How did you know I was at Dayton’s?”

“Because I’m not an idiot. Plus, he texted me to make sure you got home okay.”

Warmth flooded my chest. Of course he had. Because that was who Dayton was—caring, considerate, always putting others first. “I’m fine.”

“You’re many things, but fine isn’t one of them.” Nash sat across from me with his own plate of food. “Something’s eating at you. Has been for a while.”

I shrugged, pushing the eggs around my plate.

“Is it Bean and Creek moving out?”

My fork clattered against the plate. “What makes you think that?”

“Because I know you. And for what it’s worth, I’m sorry for the way that went down. I know you wanted to tell them about you being bi, and that got completely overshadowed by their announcements. That one’s on me. I should’ve managed that better.”

I snorted, though part of me did feel better that he’d acknowledged it. “It’s not your responsibility anymore to manage us, you know?”

He rolled his eyes. “Yeah, right.”

“I mean it. It’s not.”

“That’s not how I see it, but that’s not important right now. What’s important is you and the fact that you’re struggling with the changes.”

I was so not meeting those inquisitive eyes right now. “I’m happy for them.”

“You can be happy for them and still be sad or even angry about them leaving. The two aren’t mutually exclusive.”

I blew out a long breath. “When did you get so wise?”

“I’ve always been wise. You just never listened.” He smiled to take the sting out of his words. “Talk to me. Please.”

And for the second time, I did. I talked. “Everyone’s moving on. They’re finding their place, their purpose, and I’m... I’m still stuck. Still lost. Still broken.”

“You’re not broken.”

“No? I beg to differ since there’s a lot in my body and head that’s not functioning the way it’s supposed to.”

“Not functioning the way it’s supposed to, maybe,” Nash said. “But that doesn’t mean broken. Different isn’t the same as broken.”

“You sound like Dayton.”

Nash’s lips quirked. “He’s a smart man.”

I dragged a hand through my hair. “Yeah, he is. And kind. And patient. And I’m...” I gestured at myself. “This.”

“And what exactly is ‘this?’”

“A mess. Lost. Drowning.” I met his eyes. “You know what my latest audiogram

showed.”

He nodded slowly. “That your left ear is deteriorating faster.”

“Which means I’ll lose what little balance I have left. I already have vertigo spells multiple times a day. How am I supposed to work like this? Be independent? Not be a burden to everyone around me?”

“Is that what you think you are? A burden?”

“What else would you call it?”

Nash’s expression hardened. “I’d call it being family.

Being there for each other. Like you were there for me when I had nightmares so bad I couldn’t sleep for days.

Like you were there for Creek when he first got his prosthetic and kept falling.

Like you were there for Bean when he couldn’t remember his own name. ”

“That’s different.”

“How?”

“Because...” I struggled to find the words. “Because they got better. They improved. This?” I gestured at my ears. “This only gets worse.”

“So?”

“So I don’t want to be that guy. The one everyone has to accommodate. The one who

needs help all the time.”

Nash leaned forward. “Like we accommodated Creek’s leg and Bean’s memory issues? Like how you all work around my PTSD and control issues?”

I opened my mouth to protest, then closed it again.

“We’re all broken in some way,” Nash continued. “We all need help. That’s what family is for. To be there for each other.”

“But Bean and Creek are leaving.”

“They’re moving out,” Nash corrected. “Not leaving. There’s a difference. They’ll still be around. We’ll still have family dinners and movie nights. They’re just...spreading their wings a little.”

“But it won’t be the same.” My voice cracked. “Everything is changing.”

“Of course it’s changing. That’s what life does. But different doesn’t mean worse.”

“You sound like Dayton again.”

Nash’s lips twitched. “Maybe because we’re both right.” He studied me for a moment. “Speaking of Dayton... What’s going on there?”

I stabbed another piece of bacon. “Nothing.”

“Bullshit.”

“It’s casual. Exploring.”

Nash quirked an eyebrow. “Is it? Because from where I’m sitting, it looks like a lot more than that.”

“It can’t be.” The words came out sharper than I’d intended.

“Why not?”

“Because...” I gestured helplessly. “Because I’m a mess. Because I can barely handle my own life right now. Because he deserves better than someone who’s drowning.”

“Have you asked him what he wants?”

I shook my head. “I can’t.”

“Why not?”

“Because what if he wants more?” The words burst out of me. “What if he wants a real relationship? I can’t... I can’t give him that. Not now. Not like this.”

Nash’s expression softened. “Why not?”

“Because I’m not ready. I’m still figuring out who I am, what I want, where I belong. I can’t drag him into that mess.”

“Maybe he wants to be dragged in.”

I buried my face in my hands. “He deserves better.”

“That’s not your decision to make.” Nash’s voice was gentle but firm. “You don’t get to decide what he deserves or wants. That’s his choice.”

“But—”

“No buts. You’re doing that thing again, where you make decisions for other people because you think you know what’s best for them. For the record, you don’t. You have to learn to let others in, to allow them to help you.”

“Easy for you to say,” I muttered. “You’ve got your shit together. New job you love, making new friends...”

“You think I’m not scared shitless?” Nash’s voice was sharp. “You think I’m not terrified that I’m gonna fuck this up? That I’ll lose you guys now that you don’t need me anymore?”

That made me look up. “What?”

“You heard me.” Nash dragged a hand through his hair. “I built my whole identity around taking care of you guys. What happens when you all move on? When you don’t need me anymore?”

“We’ll always need you.”

“Will you? Bean’s getting married. Creek’s moving in with Heath. And you...” He hesitated. “You’ve got Dayton now.”

“I don’t have Dayton,” I protested. “We’re just...”

“I swear to all that’s holy, if you say ‘just friends’ one more time, I will kick your ass.”

It was hard to be angry with him when he’d bared his soul to me. “Is that really what you’re afraid of? Losing us?”

“More than anything else.”

I’d never considered that, never realized that the dependence we had, for lack of a better word, went both ways. “I hope you know how much we appreciate you. Love you. How much I love you.”

Jesus, I damn near choked up there at the end, saying those words that should be so simple yet were so hard to get out.

“On my good days, I know. But on my bad days, on days like you’re having right now, it’s mighty easy to lose sight of that.

To focus on what I’ve lost instead of what I’ve gained.

On what could’ve been instead of what is and will be.

On the past instead of the present and the future.

” He reached over the table and put his hand on mine in an uncharacteristically sappy gesture.

“And I love you too, Tameron. Which is why I’m telling you that you can do this.

You can get through this. But you can’t do it alone...

and you don’t have to. We’re here. Creek, Bean, Dayton, me. We’re here. Lean on us. Please.”

CHAPTER EIGHTEEN

TAMERON

I didn't like people. There were a handful of people in my life I loved, a few more I respected, and a hell of a lot I tolerated.

Which was why I wasn't exactly excited about my first group therapy session.

Hell, I had worked really, really hard my entire life to avoid exactly this, yet here I was, stuck in a muggy room with seven other people.

Most of them looked happy to be here, which I found disturbing. You weren't supposed to like group therapy. In fact, I was pretty sure there had to be a universal law somewhere that said you should resent the fuck out of it. No offense, but people who liked it were...weird.

"Welcome, everyone," the therapist said. Her name was Dr. Chen, and she had kind eyes behind her glasses. "Since we have two new people added to the group, let's start with introductions. Who would like to go first?"

Several hands shot up eagerly. Jesus Christ, what was wrong with these people?

A woman in her forties with short, spiky hair and tattoos up and down her arms spoke first. "I'm Maria. I had a double mastectomy six months ago after being diagnosed with breast cancer. Cancer-free now, but still adjusting to my new body."

Dr. Chen nodded encouragingly. “Thank you for sharing, Maria. Who’s next?”

A guy about my age raised his hand. “I’m Josh. I have retinitis pigmentosa. Basically, I’m slowly going blind. Started noticing issues about a year ago.”

One by one, they shared their stories. An amputee who’d lost his leg due to sepsis.

A woman with MS. A guy with Parkinson’s.

Each story was different, but they all shared one common thread: their lives had changed dramatically because of something that had changed in their bodies and their health, and they were struggling to adapt.

The Parkinson’s guy was new as well, and he shared a little more about himself.

The guy was only fifty-five. That had to suck hard.

Finally, it was my turn. “I’m Tameron. I’m going deaf. Progressive hearing loss from an explosion during my military service.”

“Would you like to share more about your experience?” Dr. Chen asked.

“Not really.” The words came out sharper than I’d intended.

To my surprise, several people chuckled. “That’s exactly what I said my first time,” Maria said with a laugh. “My wife basically forced me to go, claiming that talking helped, and I was determined to prove her wrong. Well, as much as I hate to admit it, she was right. It has helped.”

I shot her a skeptical look. “How?”

“Because for the first time since my diagnosis, I was around people who got it. Who understood what it was like to have your body betray you, to have to relearn how to live.”

Josh nodded emphatically. “Exactly. My friends and family try to understand, but they can’t. Not really. They don’t know what it’s like to wake up every morning wondering if today will be the day you lose another piece of your vision.”

Fuck, I could relate to that. Every morning, I woke up wondering if my hearing would be worse, if the vertigo would be more intense. If this was what I had to look forward to for the rest of my life.

The woman with MS, whose name I’d already forgotten, spoke up. “I used to be a dancer. Ballet was my life. When I got diagnosed, I thought my world had ended. But coming here, talking to people who understood, it helped me realize my life wasn’t over. It was just different.”

I couldn’t help but scoff. “And what, now you’re all sunshine and rainbows about it?”

She shook her head. “No. I still have bad days. Days when I’m angry and bitter and want to scream at the unfairness of it all. But I also have good days. Days when I’m grateful for what I still have, for the people in my life who support me.”

Dr. Chen smiled at her. “Thank you for sharing that. It’s important to acknowledge both the struggles and the triumphs.

Which brings us to today’s topic: gratitude.

Research has shown how important gratitude is to our well-being.

Gratitude is strongly associated with positive emotions, increased happiness, and

overall life satisfaction, but surprisingly, there are also physical benefits, such as better sleep and fewer illnesses.

And last but not least, gratitude has been shown to enhance stress resilience by promoting more adaptive coping strategies.

And resilience is something we all could benefit from, right?

So let's talk about gratitude. What are some things you're grateful for in your life? "

I shifted uncomfortably in my seat, my mouth suddenly dry.

Gratitude? What the hell was I supposed to be grateful for?

My life had gone to shit. I couldn't hear, I couldn't work, I couldn't even go for a fucking run without feeling like I was going to pass out.

What was there to be grateful for in that?

Maria raised her hand. "I'm grateful for my wife. She's been my rock through all of this. And for my kids, who have been so understanding and supportive."

Josh nodded. "I'm grateful for my guide dog, Luna. I've only had her for a month and we're still training, but she's given me a new sense of independence and freedom."

The Parkinson's guy, whose name was apparently Tom, cleared his throat. "I'm grateful for my neurologist. She's been amazing at helping me navigate this new reality."

It all sounded a little too Hallmark-happy for me, but they truly seemed to mean it. How did they have the ability to be grateful when so much was going wrong?

And then it hit me. Nash. Dayton. Creek. Bean. My family. Heath and Jarek. Day. They had been there for me, even when I was at my worst. Even when I pushed them away, lashed out, shut down. They never gave up on me. They kept showing up, kept supporting me, kept loving me.

Fuck. Maybe there was something to this gratitude thing after all.

Dr. Chen turned to me. “Tameron? What about you? What are you grateful for?”

I took a deep breath, feeling everyone’s eyes on me.

“I’m grateful for my friends,” I said, my voice rough.

“My roommates understand what it’s like to come back from war with pieces missing, and they are there for me, even when I’m an asshole about it.

And for... I’ve recently made a new friend, and he’s been super supportive, even when...

” I chuckled. “That asshole thing again.”

The words felt foreign on my tongue but also strangely right. Like a truth I hadn’t wanted to acknowledge. Because acknowledging it meant admitting that maybe things weren’t as hopeless as they seemed. That even amid all this shit, there were still things, people, worth being grateful for.

Dr. Chen smiled at me, her eyes warm. “Thank you for sharing that, Tameron. It takes a lot of courage to open up like that.”

I shrugged, feeling self-conscious. “Yeah, well, don’t get used to it.”

The group chuckled, and I felt a strange sense of camaraderie.

“Can I add something to that?” Tom asked.

When Dr. Chen nodded encouragingly, he said, “I was a total dick the first few weeks after my diagnosis. I was...am a lawyer and about to make partner, but I was also an ultra-runner and training to do my first Ironman. It felt like the diagnosis took my future away from me, and I was so angry that I took it out on everyone around me. But then, one day, my wife sat me down and told me she understood why I was angry, that I had every right to be, but that I needed to find a way to channel that anger into something productive. Because if I didn’t, it was going to eat me alive.

And she was right. That’s when I started coming to these sessions, which have made a world of difference. ”

I nodded, understanding exactly what he meant.

The anger, the bitterness, the resentment—it was like a poison, seeping into every aspect of your life until it consumed you.

My whole breakdown—as I now referred to it—the week before had been about that.

About that simmering anger inside me that had nowhere to go...

Except it did.

When I was first diagnosed, my therapist talked to me about the stages of grief and informed me I would be going through something very similar.

She’d then recommended going to a rage room to let that anger out.

I'd done it twice, and Jesus, that had been both fun and therapeutic. I'd felt so much better after.

But then I'd decided I was done with those stages and would be accepting my new life...

and I stopped going to therapy and stopped working on my anger.

Fuuuuuck. God, I was gonna hate every second of telling Nash that group therapy had been an excellent idea.

Though, in all fairness, it had been more of an order than a suggestion, but that was Nash for ya.

I cleared my throat. "I recommend a rage room."

"A what?" Maria asked.

"A rage room. It's this space you can rent for, like, fifteen minutes or something, and they give you a baseball bat to beat the shit out of old furniture, TVs, glass, you name it. It sounds stupid, but it's?—"

"That doesn't sound stupid at all." Maria sat up a little straighter. "That sounds amazing, actually. I need to suggest that for our next date night."

Going to a rage room on a date with your wife? That had to be a lesbian thing 'cause I couldn't think of anything less romantic. But hey, power to them.

"Is that something you do regularly?" Dr. Chen asked me.

I sank a little lower in my seat. "I did it twice. Felt amazing. And then I...stopped."

“Can I ask why?”

Of course she would ask. I shrugged. “I didn’t think I needed it anymore.”

“Do you still feel that way?”

Oh, she was good. I wasn’t sure what she’d seen on my face, but she’d definitely picked up on something. I sighed, knowing there was no point in lying. “No. I don’t. I thought I was past the anger stage, but I’m not. It’s still there, simmering under the surface, waiting to explode.”

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Dr. Chen's expression was thoughtful. "That's a great insight, Tameron. Recognizing when we need help, when we need an outlet, is a huge step. And it's okay to need that outlet, even if you thought you were past that stage. Grief and anger aren't linear. They come and go in waves."

I let out a breath I hadn't realized I'd been holding. "Yeah. I'm starting to see that."

"Anger is a natural response to loss and change. It's not something you can will away or ignore. It's something you have to work through, in your own time and in your own way."

"And how do I do that?" I asked, hating how lost I sounded.

"By acknowledging it. By giving yourself permission to feel it. And by finding healthy outlets for it, like the rage room you mentioned."

I chewed on my lip, considering her words.

It made sense, in a way. I'd been so focused on trying to pretend everything was fine, on trying to be strong so no one would see how much of a mess I was, that I hadn't given myself the space to actually feel what I was feeling.

To process it. Shit, did that mean I'd have to start all over again?

Dr. Chen glanced at the clock. "We're almost out of time for today, but I want to leave you all with a challenge."

This week, I want you to keep a gratitude journal.

Every day, write down three things you're grateful for.

They can be big things or small things. It doesn't matter.

The point is to start training your brain to look for the good, even in the midst of the bad.

We'll discuss your experiences next week. Sound good?"

Homework. Should've seen that one coming. Kill. Me. Now.

"Tameron, can you stay behind for a moment?" Dr. Chen asked.

Was I already in trouble? But her smile was friendly as she waited until everyone else had filed out. "Just wanted to check in with you and ask how this first session was for you."

"It was fine."

Fine was such a perfect word that covered a multitude of sins.

"Were you able to follow? Understand everything?"

Oh, she was asking about my hearing. "Yes, thank you."

"If there's anything I can do to make it easier for you, please let me know. My goal is to be inclusive and accommodate for all disabilities."

Shit, now she actually made me like her. "Thank you. I appreciate that."

“It gets easier.”

“What does?”

“Both therapy and dealing with your new reality.”

The therapy part, I was willing to accept, but the new reality, not so much. What did she know about that? But then she gave me a sad smile. “After a viral infection a few years ago, I lost all sense of smell and taste. Permanently.”

My eyes widened. Oh fuck, to never be able to taste great food ever again? Or experience the delight of a cold beer after a long day of hard work. Never smell the ocean again or the lavender my mom put between the bed linens. “I’m sorry. That must’ve been heartbreaking.”

I truly meant it because I couldn’t even imagine.

“It was. My husband and I were wine lovers. Amateurs, but we loved trying new kinds. Now, I can’t even taste if something has alcohol in it. Everything tastes bland to me.”

So she did know what it was like. Shame filled me for assuming she wouldn’t. “At least with my hearing aids, I can still hear the lyrics to my favorite songs. Music doesn’t sound the same with hearing aids.”

She put a kind hand on my shoulder. “It’s not a competition of which disability sucks most. I just wanted you to know that everyone in this group knows what you’re going through... Including me. This is truly a safe space. I hope, over time, you’ll be able to open up here.”

I shuffled my feet. “I don’t do well with that. With opening up. I’m not a talker.”

“Well, it’s not exactly taught in the military, is it?”

I huffed out a laugh. “You can say that again. The motto was suck it up and drive on.”

“We’re here to help you unlearn some of those lessons.” She gave my shoulder a squeeze before letting go. “I’ll see you next week, Tameron. Remember, three things you’re grateful for every day.”

I nodded, not trusting myself to speak. I gathered my things and headed out, my mind reeling. As I stepped into the bright sunshine, I took a deep breath, letting the warm air fill my lungs. I could feel the tension in my shoulders easing just a bit.

I pulled out my phone and typed a quick text to Nash.

Group therapy wasn’t completely terrible. Don’t let it go to your head.

His response was almost immediate.

Told you so. Proud of you, T.

I rolled my eyes but couldn’t help the small smile that tugged at my lips. Dammit, he was gonna be insufferable about this.

I pocketed my phone and started walking toward my car. As I did, I noticed a small patch of wildflowers growing in the cracks of the sidewalk. Their delicate purple and yellow petals seemed to be reaching toward the sun, a small burst of beauty amid the concrete jungle.

I paused, staring at them for a long moment.

They were a reminder that life could still be beautiful, even in the most unexpected places.

That even during pain and struggle, there was still something to be grateful for.

Despite the odds, despite the harsh conditions, they had found a way to grow, to thrive.

They were survivors, just like me. Just like everyone in that group. We were all fighting our own battles, facing our own challenges, but we were still here. Still standing. Still growing, even in the most unlikely of places.

I smiled to myself as I continued walking. Maybe I could do this gratitude thing after all. That was one thing to be grateful for today: resilient weeds.

When I reached my car, I pulled out my phone again and opened a new Note. At the top, I typed Gratitude Journal . Beneath it, I wrote:

Wildflowers in the sidewalk cracks.

Friends who give a shit, even when I'm an asshole.

Group therapy that doesn't completely suck.

CHAPTER NINETEEN

DAYTON

Bad things always come in threes. At least, that's what my mom always said to me. She was the more superstitious one when I was growing up. Knocking on wood, throwing salt over her shoulder, avoiding cracks in the pavement like they could actually break someone's bones.

We'd had cats, but never a black one, though I didn't think she'd love Knives less if she was a little void monster. But she hung a horseshoe above our front door wherever we lived and always lit candles whenever friends or family were having trouble.

I'd learned to listen to her instincts, and when one bad thing happened, I braced for two and three.

The second came when Dax busted his hand at work.

He had a car with a faulty hood stand and didn't hear the creak before it slammed down on him.

All of us had perfected our one-handed signing as teenagers, of course.

We were rarely without a bag of chips or a giant sandwich in one hand, and we had to communicate somehow.

But it was like me busting half my jaw or taking a punch and half my lips swelling up. And Dax was pissed off and miserable at the forced time off work.

‘It’s not like your shop is going to go anywhere without you,’ I reminded him, sliding a burger his way.

He glared at me, his hand wrapped up like a balloon with the ace bandage over the ice pack.

He flipped me the middle finger, which told me he was in no mood for comfort, so I turned on the show with the haunted house he’d been into lately and increased the caption size so he could sit back and not squint at the TV.

The fucker was also avoiding an eye doctor appointment so I’d have to deal with that bad attitude when he learned he probably did need glasses.

That was a fairly mild issue, at least, and I went to bed feeling better, though not entirely.

Amid taking care of Dax, I was also profoundly aware of the silence coming from Tameron’s side of the phone. Again.

This time, he at least sent me a text letting me know the next few weeks or so were going to be rough and not to expect much from him.

I sent him a heart, then made sure to shoot off photos every time Knives was being adorable, a couple of the sunrise on my drive to work, and then one of my particularly well-put-together Italian sub, which got a squinty-eyed emoji smile in return.

So that was something.

But over the last three weeks, I'd missed our conversations.

I'd missed the feeling of being important to him.

And above all, I'd missed the feeling of him lounging beside me.

He was always so warm and soft. His tension drained away when he was sleepy, and he was open in ways he didn't allow himself to be when he was fully cognizant.

I wanted to be there when he started letting go. I wanted to be part of his life when he decided where he fit into the world and when he started loving himself again. But I had no idea if I was invited to that part.

Maybe I was just a stopgap. A way to fill the time until he knew what he wanted. It was what I'd agreed to, of course. We were still no strings, and despite falling for him and him mentioning casually he had some kind of feelings for me, we'd made no promises.

That was answer enough for me.

So...maybe that was the third bad thing? Knowing that when times got tough, Tameron turned away?

I supposed that would have been easier if that were the case.

But it wasn't.

No good calls ever came in during the wee hours of the morning. I was dead asleep, but my alert started blaring so loudly that I felt like my soul had momentarily left my body. I was on autopilot when I answered.

“Car fire, suspected arson. Police are in pursuit of the suspect. Northwest corner of Fifth and Branch.”

The switch in my head flipped, and I became the battalion chief. I was no longer the sad sack of shit pining over my friend with benefits. I was the man my crew depended on.

I took the turns at Mach 10—or at least, they felt like Mach 10.

It was probably no more than thirty, but I flew the rest of the way there, my little siren blaring through the streets.

Coming to a skidding halt, I saw the smoke first and then the flames.

They weren't in the engine. They were inside the cab of the little two-door beater.

From where I was standing, I could see the windows were caked with soot, and the engine was already there, drenching the flames.

“Seatbelt's stuck,” Myers called to me, walking over with his face shield down.

“When did you get here?” I asked, throwing on turnout gear and an SCBA. I adjusted my mask and then took a couple of test breaths before heading for the car.

“Two minutes ago,” he said, handing me a pair of wire cutters.

The flames were hot and a heavy boulder in my gut told me that no matter what I did, I was too late. We hadn't been fast enough. That was the reality of the job—even more than the building fires where we rescued people with burn injuries and saved all their pets.

It was more than feeling a little down because we hadn't prevented every wound.

Sometimes, it was this.

Sometimes, it was the worst possible outcome.

If it had been my first, I wouldn't have been able to cope with it the way I could now.

I felt every inch of ache and sorrow as I managed to cut the body free.

The flames were out, but the fire had spread rapidly, and I knew that the arson investigators wouldn't have to dig deep for evidence of an accelerant.

I could still smell it lingering in the smoke.

The ambulance was nearby, with the stretcher a few feet from me and a sheet to throw over the body. We got them transferred over and away from the prying eyes of everyone who had gathered to watch. In the distance, I could hear someone throwing up.

Then, the call came on the radio that the suspect had been caught and was currently being transported to the station. Detectives would be on the scene after that, and my job would be over. Mostly.

Swallowing thickly, I glanced at the remaining EMTs, waiting to see if anyone else was in the car. None of them were Nash, and I was grateful for it. His burden was heavy right now, and I didn't want this on his shoulders.

I gave them a quick nod, then stuck my head in to check the back seat.

The last thing I needed was to find evidence of a car seat.

But there was nothing. Some melted Styrofoam from fast food joints and a perfume bottle that had exploded from the heat.

The scent was sickly, burned with a flowery undertone.

It was something I wouldn't forget for a good, long while.

I felt a shiver go up my spine and breathed through it before turning away. It was my fault for testing the universe. My fault for assuming that it would all blow over and everything would be fine.

"You good, Chief?" I had no idea who was speaking to me and grabbing my arm, but I let them.

I pushed my mask up and looked over to see Rob, one of the guys who'd been around years longer than me. He'd turned down every offer of a promotion. He said he didn't want the responsibility, and on nights like this, I got it.

"You're pale."

I took a breath. "I'll be alright. You know how it is."

The look in his eyes said that, yeah, he did. These moments were few and far between, but they happened often enough. I wasn't desensitized yet, and god help me if that ever happened.

I wanted to feel the pain, regret, and bitterness.

It was what kept me human. It was what kept me good.

"See you at the station?" I told him.

He squeezed my arm again. “I’ve got it from here.”

That was my cue to go, a dismissal he had no right to order, but one I was going to listen to because I trusted my team and knew when I could take a step back.

BZZT! BZZT!

Fire! The alarm!

Except no. It wasn’t a fire, and there was no alarm.

It was my phone because I’d been so wiped from being at the station all day that when I’d gotten home that afternoon, I’d forgotten to put it on Do Not Disturb.

Knives was on my chest, ramming her little face into my jaw like she knew it was important, and on the second ring, I realized it wasn’t a call.

It was FaceTime.

That meant family or...shit, no. It was probably Tameron.

My fingers scrabbled on top of the nightstand until they came in contact with the phone, and with a single eye open and half-focused, I answered. “Hey. Hi.” My voice was a barely there rasp.

“Oh my god, I woke you. It’s six p.m.!” Tameron exclaimed.

I grabbed Knives off my chest and attempted to sit up.

“Yeah. Uh...long night. Bad call. Got stuck at the station all day doing paperwork and talking to investigators.” I blinked a few times to clear the vision of Tam on my

screen and felt my face break into a smile when I could see him clearly. “Hey, wait. You’re calling.”

I could see his right ear pink slightly. “Yeah. Sorry. Uh...I should have texted first, or?—”

“What? No. Sweetheart, you can call me whenever you want. It’s fine.” I frowned. “You got your captions on, or do you want me to sign?”

“I have captions on, and it’s connected to my hearing aid. It’s good to hear your voice,” he added softly.

My chest went warm. “You doing okay? It’s been a while.”

He shook his head, and I knew he wasn’t dismissing my question. “Things have been a lot lately. Uh...I...yeah. Can we talk?”

My heart immediately dropped to the pit of my stomach. I knew what that meant, and frankly, this had been a long time coming. I had just hoped it wouldn’t be so soon. “Yeah. Yes. Of course. Whatever you want.”

He blinked, then rolled his eyes. “Oh my god, Day. No. I’m—this isn’t—I don’t mean we need to talk. I mean, can we talk? I’m working really hard on letting people in, and I’d like to include you in that.”

Relief hit me so hard it made me dizzy. “Shit, sorry. It was a bad night. I didn’t mean to jump to conclusions.”

At that, he looked torn. “Let me come over and cook for you. Is Dax there?”

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I actually had no idea. “Hang on, let me check.”

Rolling off the bed, I stretched, scratched my balls through my sweats, and then shuffled out into the living room, where I hit the switch that would flash all the lights in the house.

I waited a moment, but I was met with silence and stillness.

“I think he’s out. Probably at my parents whining about his hand. ”

Tameron pulled a face. “I heard it was bad. I wasn’t there when it happened, but the guys told me he won’t be back for a while.”

I rolled my eyes and scoffed. “If you ask him, it’s a harrowing injury that nearly took his life. He didn’t break anything though. Just some bruised bones and stitches in his pinky where it got jammed in the hinge.”

Tameron winced hard. “You’d think I’d take hearing about injuries better than this, but I swear the idea of pinching my fingers like that makes me feel like I’m getting kicked in the dick.”

I burst into laughter. God, I was so gone for him. “I’d take care of you if it ever happened.”

His face softened, and he let out a sigh. “I know you would. Um...is he okay though? I mean, can he sign?”

“Not well, but he’s always been a lazy fucker anyway,” I said with a wink.

“Trust me, he’s just fine, and eventually, you’ll learn to do it too.

” I moved back into the bedroom. If I was going to see Tameron for the first time in what felt like forever, I didn’t want to look like I’d pulled a body out of a burning car.

Even if that was exactly what had happened. My stomach twisted a little at the memory, and I shoved it aside.

“Day?”

“Mm.”

“You okay?”

He was too good at reading me. “Like I said, rough night. But I want to focus on you, okay?”

He hesitated for a beat, then nodded. “Can we, uh...can we do voice-off again?”

‘Of course,’ I signed quickly.

He grinned. “Not now. I have things I want to say, and I need...I need my voice to say them.”

“Of course,” I repeated aloud. “Anything you need. You know that, right?”

“I’m starting to get it, yeah.” He bit his lip, then said, “So, can I come cook for you?”

“Oh, sweetheart?—”

“I know what you’re going to say. You don’t need me to do that. But I can tell you’ve been through it. Let me do this for you, okay? It’s kind of my current love language, and I want to be there if you’re having a rough time. You’ve done so much for me, and I feel like I haven’t been doing enough.”

“You have, but I won’t say no to a home-cooked dinner,” I told him. I stroked the side of my phone with my thumb, wishing it was him. “See you soon?”

“Yep. I’m going to swing by the store, then I’ll be there.”

“The door’s unlocked. Just come in when you get here. I’m going to shower and try to get the rest of this smoke smell off me. I can’t wait to see you.”

His face softened again, some of the tension draining. He lifted his hand and formed a Y, then gently shook it back and forth. ‘Me too.’

I fought the urge to give him that three-fingered sign—the ‘I love you’ sitting heavy in my chest. But not yet. And maybe not ever. I waited for the call to disconnect, then pressed the phone to my forehead and took several deep breaths.

“Okay. Shower. Shave. Brush your nasty teeth,” I told myself as I headed back to my bedroom. “Get it together and be the man he needs you to be. Your shit can wait. You’ve got this. You’re fine.”

I wasn’t sure, though, that I was actually fine.

By the time I was dressed and finger-combing my hair, I saw flashing lights. I should’ve known Tameron wouldn’t just walk in, but I felt a small pulse of gratification when I heard the front door open and close.

He didn’t call my name though. I heard the thud-thud of him kicking off his shoes

and then, a moment later, the sound of a pan hitting the stove. He wasn't wasting any time getting started, and I was done wasting time having him be in my house without having kissed him.

I made my steps heavy for him like I did for Dax as I came down the hall. He must have spotted me in the dining room mirror because he didn't turn when I entered, but he did lean back when I slid my arms around his waist and buried my face in the crook of his neck.

He seemed...lighter, somehow. Not less burdened, but like he was carrying it easier. His skin was warm under my lips as I kissed his neck, and then I let go and spun him so I could press my mouth to his. He took me easily, happily, like he'd been waiting for this as long as I had.

And hell, maybe that was the truth. Maybe while he was dealing with everything he had going on, he'd missed me just as much.

"You feel so good," he murmured, pressing his temple against my chest.

I combed my fingers through his hair, careful to avoid his hearing aids behind his ears, and I rocked us from side to side until he breathed out and pulled away.

"Do you want to talk about it?" he asked.

My eyes widened. "Oh, honey. No. Tonight is about you."

He scoffed as he turned back to the stove and began to throw hunks of meat into a pan.

They had a rich, spiced smell from whatever seasoning he'd used, and my mouth began to water.

“Tonight is not about me. Tonight is me wanting to see you and tell you I’ve been so incredibly grateful for your patience. That’s all.”

I waited for him to look back at me, which he did after adding some chopped garlic. “You don’t need to be grateful that people give you the bare minimum.”

He shook his head. “Yeah, I do. I know I’m not an easy man to love. And don’t,” he started when I opened my mouth to argue, “tell me I’m not. I have trauma, and sometimes I can’t control how I respond to things, but I still have to take responsibility for the way I treat other people.”

“That sounds like something my therapist has said to me,” I told him.

He froze as he stirred what was in the pan. “Your therapist?”

“Yeah. My therapist.” I reached out and brushed a lock of hair away from his forehead. “You don’t get through this job without seeing things you don’t want to see.”

“Like last night?” he pressed.

I wasn’t getting out of this without talking, was I?

I swallowed heavily. The night hadn’t ended with me heading back to the station.

I had to give a statement to the investigators.

I had to recount what I’d observed when I arrived on scene.

I had to think about the body—the man, it turned out—and how it was likely all done on purpose.

I didn't ask why. I didn't want to know. Seeing the results of whatever had happened between the two people was enough. And there was a chance I might have to testify in court, so I couldn't just forget what happened. I couldn't tuck it in a box and hope the memory eventually atrophied.

"Someone died."

He sucked in a breath.

"The call woke me up—I was at home asleep. A young man was trapped in his car. He was gone before any of us were on scene. There was nothing we could do, but it was...a lot. I hate it when I'm too late." My voice cracked, and I cleared my throat. "It was arson."

"Holy fuck."

Bowing my head, I shrugged. "In this job, more often than not, I see the best of people. I see them scared and vulnerable. I see a lot of elderly people having heart attacks and car accidents because people—good people—ultimately made one bad decision. I've seen house fires because someone was trying to be romantic and lit too many candles.

"I took a breath. "But sometimes I see this. I see the worst of people."

"Yeah," he said very quietly. "After everything we've been through, I don't know how Nash can still..." Tameron trailed off and went back to cooking for a long beat. "I don't know how either of you does your job."

"Sometimes I don't either." I shifted closer, and he turned the burner off and twisted to face me. The food wasn't done, but I wasn't hungry.

I let him wrap me in his arms and guide me out of the kitchen and onto the sofa. We sat in the curve of the L, me between his legs, my head resting on his chest. His fingers painted lines up and down my back until I felt like I could breathe again without falling apart.

“It’ll be easier tomorrow,” I told him, looking up so he could see my lips. “And easier the day after that. But I’m really glad you’re here, and I’m sorry I’m raining on all the reasons you came to see me.”

He laughed and rolled his eyes. “This is why I came to see you. To be this for you when you and everyone else have been holding me up for so long.” He held his breath, then let it out on a soft sigh. “I started group therapy.”

I sat up a little straighter. “Sweetheart?—”

“Yeah, yeah. Nash has already given me the insufferably long I’m proud of you speech, okay. And I get it. I should have been doing it for a while now.”

Cupping his cheek, I shook my head, then let go and signed, ‘No. It’s on your time.’

He mouthed the words, then offered a small smile. ‘I know. But it’s hard.’

‘It will always be hard.’

“Always?” he clarified aloud.

“Yes.” I picked up his hands and pressed one kiss to each palm. “Always. But you did it, and that’s what matters.”

“Now you sound like my therapist,” he complained.

I grinned at him as I fell back down against his chest. “What a fucking pair, eh?”

“You and me?”

“Mm.”

His hands tightened around me and he sucked in a breath like he wanted to say something else, but in the end, there was only silence. I didn’t mind. How could I when I had him like this, in my arms, exactly how I wanted.

There was no telling how long it would last—another day. A month. A year. Maybe until I drew my last breath. I was surviving on hope and waiting for the other shoe to drop, but in this moment, I was content.

There were no dead strangers, no lonely past, no uncertain future.

There was just his breath and mine, and his heart beat steady against my ear.

“I’m happy right now,” he said softly.

I knew what he was saying. I knew how big those four words were. Lifting my face, I met his gaze, then kissed him for everything he was worth.

CHAPTER TWENTY

TAMERON

How did people even survive before the internet? It had taken me an hour or two to do some solid research into what would have been the most awkward conversation on the planet if I'd had to ask someone in person.

Nash. I would've had to ask Nash, and the thought alone made me break out in a sweat. I trusted him with my life and then some, but that didn't mean I wanted him to explain the ins and outs of anal sex to me. The ins especially—and I snorted at my own lame joke.

Things were good between Dayton and me. Something had shifted, though it was hard to pinpoint what. It helped that he'd allowed me to be there for him instead of me always being the one needing help. Like that had restored some kind of invisible balance in our relationship.

Or maybe it was because I was making an effort to open up more. Jesus, that shit was hard. Four sessions of group therapy, and I still resented every moment of it. Though I suppose that was a step up from my initial vicious hate, so there was that.

Either way, I was trying to talk to Dayton more about things, including the stuff he couldn't possibly be interested in yet seemed to be.

He patiently listened to me talk about restoring cars, about why I decided to enlist, about the friendship with Nash, Creek, and Bean, about my continuing struggles with

ASL.

Not only that, but he asked questions and gave advice when I asked.

The man was either a saint or a masochist. I hadn't decided which one yet.

He talked to me more too, including about his work, and I felt privileged to be able to listen to him when he needed to vent or unload.

I'd seen my fair share of shit in combat, so his stories didn't bother me.

While I might have PTSD in some form, it was mild in my case and mostly related to the accident.

I wasn't easily triggered, and thank god for that.

But all that talking and sharing was bringing us closer.

And nine out of ten times, after talking, we ended up in bed.

Kissing, making out, swapping blowjobs and hand jobs.

Two days ago, we'd made each other come with the most insanely hot frotting session ever.

I'd come in my pants like some high school kid, but with zero regrets.

I was ready for more. Dayton hadn't put any pressure on me, which meant a lot to me. He probably hadn't wanted to put any pressure on me, and I respected the hell out of him for that. But I wanted more. Hell, I wasn't even sure why I had waited this long.

The only remaining question was whether I wanted to top or bottom for my first time. Topping would be much easier, of course, and I had no doubt Dayton would let me. But was that what I really wanted?

Not to get all philosophical and shit, but if I wanted to open up more and let people truly into my life, wasn't this a great metaphor for what I needed to do with Dayton? Let him in...literally?

Hence my research. I'd seen gay porn, obviously.

One did not discover one was bisexual without watching some.

That had to be some kind of law or something.

And it had been hot as fuck. The Ballsy Boys especially had some amazing stuff.

But porn was not real, and so I'd wanted to get my facts straight, no pun intended.

Now all that was left was telling Dayton.

How in the name of everything holy did one approach that?

I wasn't romantic by any definition—in fact, one ex-girlfriend had accused me of not having a romantic bone in my body, and she probably wasn't far off—but even I could see that an announcement like “I'm ready to fuck or get fucked, should you be so inclined” wouldn't exactly set the mood.

And with Dayton hell-bent on respecting my boundaries, he wouldn't bring it up, so it would have to be me.

We'd ordered in from some hole-in-the-wall Vietnamese place that had the most

amazing pho I'd ever tasted, and now we were stretched out on Dayton's couch, watching the original Twister movie.

"I love disaster movies," Dayton said as he played with the short hairs on my neck, his arm firmly wrapped around me. "The more stressed I am, the more I appreciate them. As if watching someone else's life fall apart makes mine seem better."

I chuckled. "I've never looked at it like that, but you're right."

"Though I do have to turn off my brain sometimes because they get so much wrong, especially when emergency responders are involved."

"God, yes. It's one of the reasons I can't watch anything about the military. Well, more specifically about the Army. I loved Top Gun , for example, even though I know damn well very little of that movie is real."

Dayton snorted. "That movie has scenes that are so homoerotic straight men get aroused."

Homoerotic? What was he talking about? Then it hit. "Oh, you mean the volleyball scene?"

"Tell me that didn't turn you on, even before you realized you were bi."

Had it? I only needed to think about it for a moment before the truth hit. "Jesus, you're right. How did I never realize that?"

His laugh reverberated through his chest. "Like I said, even straight men react to that, so don't worry. And they did a beautifully updated version in Top Gun: Maverick . Miles Teller is"—he kissed his fingers dramatically—"chef's kiss."

“I assume you’re not talking about his volleyball skills?” I asked dryly.

“Your assumption is correct.”

“Hmm, if we want to get in the right mood, maybe we should put that one on because this”—I pointed at Bill Paxton, who was now trying to get his truck out of a precarious situation while Helen Hunt yelled at him—“is not one I watch for the eye candy. No offense.”

Dayton half-turned to me so we were face-to-face. “The right mood? For what?”

And here I was, thinking I’d been subtle. “You know, mood. In general.”

His eyes narrowed. “I thought you were in a good mood? Is something wrong?”

Fucking hell, I sucked at this. “For sex. I was trying to set the mood for sex.”

“Since when do we need to have a certain mood for sex?”

I let out a bone-deep sigh, surrendering to the inevitable. “I wanted to work up to a moment where I could subtly tell you that I’m ready for more than what we’ve been doing so far and not make it sound transactional. Clearly, I failed spectacularly.”

At first, Dayton’s eyes widened, but then he slapped a hand over his mouth as a snicker escaped him. I sighed. “You’re allowed to laugh.”

And so he did, but then he grabbed my neck and dragged me in for a kiss, and pretty soon, neither of us was laughing.

As Twister continued in the background, we kissed until our bodies were pressed flush together, until our lips were throbbing, until we ran out of breath.

And then Dayton's gorgeous brown eyes focused on me. "You sure?"

"Yes. And I want to bottom."

He swallowed. "That's... I can't wait to be inside you, baby. I'll make it good for you, I promise."

Something soft and fuzzy unfurled in my chest. "I know."

He kissed me again. "Bedroom?"

I nodded, my heart skipping a beat. I wasn't nervous so much as excited.

Hand in hand, we made our way into Dayton's bedroom, where he closed the door behind us and locked it. I waited until he looked at me, then removed my hearing aids. I wanted to feel him, to focus on my other senses rather than wasting energy trying to hear everything.

The look in Dayton's eyes as he nodded his approval nearly took my breath away.

The fondness, the affection, the desire.

It was all there, wrapped in a gaze so intense it made my knees go weak.

He stepped closer and ran his hands down my arms, his touch electric even through the fabric of my shirt.

At the hem, he paused, then slowly lifted it.

I raised my arms to help him get it off, and it landed somewhere on the floor, quickly forgotten.

Dayton leaned in and pressed soft kisses along my jaw as his fingers traced patterns on my bare skin.

I shivered and tilted my head to give him better access.

The drag of his stubble against my throat was a delicious kind of torture, and I couldn't stop the small moan that escaped me.

He pulled back to look at me, his pupils blown wide.

“So responsive,” he signed, his hands shaking a little. ‘Gorgeous.’

Heat crawled into my cheeks. I'd never thought of myself as beautiful.

Handsome, maybe. But the raw honesty in Dayton's eyes made me almost believe him.

His smile was blinding, and then he was on me again, his mouth finding mine in a searing kiss.

His tongue swept into my mouth and tangoed with mine, and I was helpless against the onslaught of sensations.

My hands came up to clutch his shoulders, holding on for dear life as he devoured me.

When he pulled back, we were both panting.

He took a step away from me and pulled his shirt over his head, revealing his gorgeous, muscular chest. My mouth watered at the sight of his dusky pierced nipples, and I reached out to touch them before I could stop myself.

He let out a shaky breath as I rolled the barbells between my fingers, and his abs contracted under my touch.

I was so lost in exploring his body that I didn't notice him undoing my jeans until they pooled at my ankles.

I stepped out of them and kicked them aside, leaving me in just my boxer briefs.

Dayton's eyes raked over me hungrily, and I grew even harder under his gaze.

He made quick work of his own jeans, and then we were both standing there in our underwear, chests heaving with anticipation.

Dayton closed the distance between us and kissed me again, gentler this time.

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We stumbled back until my knees hit the edge of the bed, and then he lowered me gently onto the mattress, never breaking the kiss.

The weight of his body on top of mine was a delicious pressure, and I arched into him, seeking more contact.

Dayton's hands roamed my chest, fingers teasing my nipples until they peaked.

He kissed a trail down my throat to my collarbone, nipping and sucking until I writhed beneath him.

Lower and lower he went, his mouth hot and wet against my skin.

When he reached my belly button, he dipped his tongue inside, making my abs clench.

He continued his path downward until he reached the waistband of my underwear.

With a wicked grin, he hooked his fingers under the elastic and slowly pulled them down, freeing my aching erection.

It slapped against my belly, already leaking at the tip.

Dayton licked his lips and, without warning, swallowed me down to the root.

I gasped, my back bowing off the bed as I was engulfed in the wet heat of his mouth.

He hollowed his cheeks and sucked hard, his tongue swirling around the head on every upstroke.

It was all I could do not to come right then and there.

I fisted my hands in the sheets, trying to hold on, but it was a losing battle.

Just when I thought I couldn't take anymore, Dayton pulled off with an obscene pop. He crawled back up my body and kissed me deeply, letting me taste myself on his tongue. I moaned into his mouth, dizzy with desire.

'My turn,' I signed when he pulled away. 'To explore.'

He flashed me a grin and rolled onto his back, sprawling out invitingly. I took a moment to just admire him, my eyes drinking in the sight of his gorgeous body laid before me like a feast.

I rolled on top of him, straddling his hips. My fingers traced the lines of his face, down his neck to his broad shoulders. I leaned in and pressed open-mouthed kisses to his throat, reveling in the way his pulse jumped beneath my lips. Slowly, I worked my way down his chest.

His nipples were super sensitive when I played with his piercings, tugging them gently. I couldn't hear the sounds he made, but I could feel them vibrate in his chest. Plus, his face showed everything, his eyes rolling back and his mouth dropping open.

Dayton's hands fisted in my hair as I continued my journey south, my tongue dipping into his navel.

His cock strained against his underwear, a damp spot forming where the tip was leaking.

I scooted lower, then mouthed him through the fabric, relishing the way he twitched and gasped.

Finally taking pity on him, I hooked my fingers in the waistband and tugged his underwear down.

His cock sprang free, thick and hard and perfect.

I wrapped my hand around the base, giving a few experimental strokes.

Dayton's hips bucked into my touch, a low groan rumbling in his chest.

He tapped my shoulder. 'Be careful, or this will be over too soon.'

I grinned. 'Just a little taste.'

I licked a broad stripe up the underside of his shaft, swirling my tongue around the tip to gather the salty-sweet fluid leaking from the slit. Dayton's thighs trembled and his grip on my hair tightened.

His taste was musky and salty, and I couldn't get enough. I hollowed my cheeks and sucked hard, delighting in the way his thighs trembled on either side of my head.

I brought one hand up to cup his balls, rolling them gently in my palm as I continued to work his cock with my mouth. Dayton was panting now, his abs clenching and unclenching as he fought for control. Then he tugged sharply on my hair, pulling me off. 'Tease.'

I licked my lips. 'You taste too good.'

'Don't you want me to come inside you?'

Oh, he was bringing in the big guns now. Of course I did, and so I rolled off him and crawled back up, meeting his mouth for a slow, sensual kiss.

Dayton guided me onto my back, then reached over to the nightstand and retrieved a bottle of lube and a condom.

He set them on the bed beside us before settling between my spread thighs.

His hands skimmed up my sides as he leaned down to capture my mouth in another toe-curling kiss.

I surrendered to the sensations, lost in the slide of his lips and tongue against mine.

Then he settled between my legs, and I spread them wide, giving him full access.

Coating his fingers generously with the lube, he circled my entrance with one slick digit before slowly pushing inside.

I tensed at the unfamiliar intrusion, but Dayton stroked my hip soothingly with his other hand until I relaxed.

He worked his finger in and out, gradually stretching me.

It didn't hurt. I'd read that for some men, this was uncomfortable, but it wasn't. A bit strange, yes, that part I couldn't deny. But also strangely intimate and not unpleasant at all, as evidenced by my cock being as hard as it had ever been.

When Dayton slipped in a second finger alongside the first, I couldn't hold back a moan.

The stretch burned, but it also ignited sparks of pleasure that danced up my spine.

Dayton took his time, working me open with gentle, thorough strokes until I was rocking back against his hand, silently begging for more.

The stretch burned, but it also ignited sparks of pleasure that danced up my spine.

Dayton took his time, working me open with gentle, thorough strokes until I was rocking back against his hand, silently begging for more. My cock was leaking steadily now, clear drops of precum pearling at the slit. I was so hard it hurt, my balls drawn up tight against my body. “Dayton, please...”

‘Soon, baby,’ he signed one-handed. ‘I’ve got you.’

A third finger joined the first two, and I threw my head back with a gasp, my back arching off the bed. Dayton crooked his fingers just so, and stars exploded behind my eyelids as he found that magical spot inside me. I cried out, my hips bucking involuntarily.

‘Please,’ I signed, my hands shaking. ‘Need you inside me.’

Dayton’s eyes darkened with desire and he slowly withdrew his fingers. I whimpered at the loss, feeling empty and aching. But then he was rolling on the condom and slicking himself, and anticipation thrummed through my veins.

He positioned himself at my entrance, the blunt head of his cock nudging against my hole. Slowly, oh so slowly, he pushed inside, breaching the tight ring of muscle. I gasped at the stretch, my hands flying up to grip his shoulders. He stilled, letting me adjust to the intrusion.

‘Breathe, sweetheart,’ he signed, his own chest heaving with the effort of holding back. ‘Relax for me.’

I took a deep breath and consciously unclenched my muscles. Dayton sank in a little deeper, inch by torturous inch, until he was finally fully seated inside me, his hips flush against mine. We both groaned at the sensation, and I clutched at his shoulders, my blunt nails digging into his skin.

‘Okay?’ Dayton signed, his brow furrowed in concern.

‘Yes. Move, please.’

He started to thrust, shallow at first, then deeper as I loosened around him.

The drag of his cock inside me was indescribable, sparking pleasure through my entire body.

I’d never felt anything like it, this whole-body experience.

And not being able to hear made it even more intense, as if my other senses were all heightened.

I hitched my legs higher around his waist, tilting my hips to take him even deeper. His thrusts sped up, each one hitting my prostate and sending shockwaves of ecstasy through my body. I was reduced to a writhing, moaning mess beneath him, completely at his mercy.

His hips snapped, his moves more forceful, leaving my whole body shaking. He pinned me down with his body, and it was the hottest thing ever. Pleasure coiled tighter and tighter in my belly with every drive of his hips. I was close, so close, my cock throbbing between our sweat-slicked bodies.

“Dayton,” I gasped, digging my fingers into the firm globes of his ass. “I’m gonna...”

‘Let go,’ he signed, never breaking his rhythm. ‘Want to feel you.’

His words were my undoing. I came with a silent scream, my vision whiting out as ecstasy crashed over me in waves. My cock jerked and pulsed, untouched, painting my stomach and chest with ropes of pearly cum.

Wave after wave of pleasure crashed over me, and I clung to Dayton like a lifeline, anchoring myself to him.

Dayton made a low sound I felt through his body as my inner muscles clenched around him.

His hips stuttered, losing their smooth rhythm as he chased his own release.

A few more erratic thrusts, and then he was coming too, his face contorting in pleasure.

I felt his cock pulse inside me as he spilled into the condom, and I held him through it, petting his sweat-slicked back.

Dayton collapsed on top of me, his weight a comforting pressure.

We lay there for a long moment, both of us panting harshly as we tried to catch our breath.

My heart thundered and my body tingled all over with residual pleasure.

Eventually, Dayton lifted his head from where it had been nestled in the crook of my neck.

He brushed a lock of sweat-damp hair off my forehead, then leaned in to press a

tender kiss to my lips. His eyes were soft and sweet as they met mine. 'You okay?'

I nodded, a lazy smile spreading across my face. 'Perfect'

He returned my smile and leaned in to gently kiss me again before carefully pulling out.

I winced slightly at the drag of his softening cock against my sensitive rim.

He disposed of the condom, then grabbed some tissues from the bedside table to clean us both up.

Once he was done, he settled beside me and gathered me into his arms. I went willingly, tucking my head under his chin and tangling our legs together.

We lay there for a while, just basking in the afterglow. Dayton's fingers traced idle patterns on my back as my breathing gradually returned to normal. I felt boneless and satiated, every nerve ending in my body still singing with pleasure.

It was Dayton who eventually broke the silence. He shifted, propping himself up on one elbow so he could look at me. His other hand came up to cup my cheek, his thumb brushing tenderly over my cheekbone. 'That was incredible. You were incredible.'

'It was better than I ever imagined.'

And it was true. The connection, the intimacy, the sheer pleasure, had all surpassed my wildest expectations.

His answering grin was blinding. 'Yeah? I'm glad. I wanted it to be perfect for you.'

‘It was,’ I assured him. ‘Though I’m pretty sure anything with you would be perfect.’ It was sappy as hell, but it was the truth.

Dayton ducked his head, a faint blush staining his cheeks.

He was so damn gorgeous like this—hair mussed, skin flushed, eyes sparkling with satisfaction and affection.

I still couldn’t quite believe this incredible man wanted me, but I was done questioning it.

I was done questioning us. No, I had no idea what we were and if we would ever be what I couldn’t even admit to myself yet, but for now, this was enough.

We were together.

CHAPTER TWENTY-ONE

DAYTON

I felt deliciously satiated in more ways than one.

Waking up with Tameron in my arms was not only amazing, but it was rare.

Most of the time when we dozed off together, he slipped out of bed and either went home, or I found him sitting on the couch, curled up in the curve of the L with Knives purring on his chest.

I understood insomnia. We were old friends, and she often visited me when I was particularly stressed. But I hated that Tameron had to go through it.

The nights he did fall asleep in my bed, he often woke startled and disoriented and didn't always like to be touched. So that morning, when he rolled over with a slight groan and nuzzled into my neck, I basked.

I savored.

I allowed myself long, lush, glorious minutes with him gently rubbing against me.

“Morning,” he finally said, his voice a thick rasp in the back of his throat.

I waited until his eyes were clear enough, then lifted my hand. ‘Morning.’

‘Signing is great,’ he answered as he rolled back. ‘No need to open your mouth and smell morning breath.’

Bursting into laughter, I pinned him and kissed him. ‘How about now?’

He grimaced and shoved me off. ‘Gross. Bad.’

Grinning, I kissed his neck one more time, then stretched my arms above my head.

I could feel the weight of his gaze on me, slightly hungry, slightly curious.

He lifted a hand and traced one of my more vicious scars, the one on my stomach.

We’d already talked about them a little, and he didn’t seem eager to ask for more details, which I appreciated.

There was no big story about them—not really. A bad call and a stint in the hospital to combat the infections, which was the worst part of it. But I didn’t mind the way they made me look. The scars gave me character—a tactile map of the life I’d lived for so many years.

“Can I use your shower?”

It was clear by the look on his face that he wanted some time alone, so I nodded and kissed his jaw. ‘Yes. I’ll make breakfast. Hungry?’

He made a C and ran it up and down his throat three times. My stomach warmed.

‘Mistake?’

He grinned and shook his head.

I was horny for him too—and the feeling never went away. It was starting to become a problem. He was a drug, and while I'd never dealt with addiction, I was starting to see how people did. I wanted him all the time.

'Later,' I signed.

He nodded and sat up, grabbing my wrist and pressing a kiss to my palm. "Thank you," he rumbled against my skin.

I wanted to ask him for what, but I knew it was probably a bigger answer than he wanted to give me right then. He had so much to deal with, and I wouldn't be the complex thing in his life he had to work out.

I would just be...here. Whenever he wanted me. Whenever he needed me.

Simple as that.

I felt his gaze on me again as I dressed, and I tossed him a wink before heading into the kitchen. I was grateful I'd put on my boxers because Dax was lounging on the sofa on a video call with one of his oldest friends. Jamie and Dax had become pen pals years back through a school program.

He'd grown up in Kauai and Dax had gone to visit a couple of times before Jamie moved to the mainland.

He lived in SoCal now and worked as his station's only Deaf firefighter.

We didn't see him enough, especially now that he and his husband Danny were married and had two ankle-biters running around.

'Morning,' I signed, leaning over Dax's shoulder.

Jamie wagged his brows at me. 'Busy night?'

I shrugged and grinned. 'Something like that. How are you?'

He nodded his head. 'Good. Exhausted. Kids are a lot.'

'True-biz,' Dax signed with a grimace. 'No, thank you.'

I bumped him on the back of the head and signed a quick goodbye to Jamie before heading into the kitchen to see what I could semi-impress Tameron with. I was no chef, but I could do breakfast.

We had frozen biscuits and chicken tenders in the freezer.

I could make breakfast sandwiches. Not the healthiest thing, but some warm comfort food sounded good right about now.

I had no idea how Tameron would feel once he had some alone time, and I was a little worried his bi-panic was going to set in.

So far, he'd been amazing, but there was always a chance he could realize this wasn't for him. Or, at the very worst, that I wasn't for him.

I chased off that anxiety with my first sip of coffee from the half-full pot, then tossed the chicken tenders in the air fryer and the biscuits in the oven. I set the timers and took my coffee back into the living room, where Dax was closing his laptop.

'Is he here?'

I nodded as I sat in the recliner and kicked a foot up on the edge of the coffee table. 'We kind of had a moment last night.'

Dax cocked his head to the side. 'Finally realized he's in love with you?'

My ears burned so hot it felt like they were going to catch fire. 'No. He doesn't feel that way. This is no strings.'

Dax burst into loud laughter, which startled Knives off her window perch. She darted over to him and jumped on his shoulder like she thought maybe he was in distress and needed to pet her for comfort.

He scratched her with his partially wrapped fingers. 'Do you ever get tired of lying to yourself?'

I flipped him off, and he snorted. 'How I feel isn't the same as how he feels.'

'I might not be an expert in love, but I can see it when he looks at you. But he's stubborn.'

I couldn't fault him for that. I could be too, even at the best of times. 'I don't really know what to do. I don't want to push him.'

Dax sighed and eased Knives off his shoulder before leaning forward. 'You don't have to push him. Just be patient. Wait. Trust.'

I could easily do all those things. 'And what if he decides it's not me?'

'You heal,' he signed. 'Hurts, then you feel better. That's life.'

It was, I supposed. I wasn't foolish enough to think I would completely fall apart after one man. But losing Tameron would gut me in ways losing other lovers never had. The scars would be deep and painful, and I didn't think they'd ever fully heal.

‘Don’t worry,’ Dax said as he slapped his hand on his thigh and stood up with a loud grunt. ‘That won’t happen.’

I wanted to trust him. I really did. But like he said, he wasn’t an expert in love.

I wasn’t sure anyone was.

Tameron left after breakfast. We had a nice, long, slow kiss before he had to go, and he left me with a promise that he would stay in touch. He wanted to see me again. He couldn’t wait.

It was everything I wanted to hear.

I took those words with me as I headed to my parents’. My dad wanted help putting up the new fence around the chicken coop, and I had time before my long shift. I was doing a twenty-four, which wouldn’t start until six, but I knew that even if I tried to sleep, I wouldn’t be able to.

Dax’s car wasn’t in the driveway, so I figured my parents were done babying him. He was probably at the shop, which was also likely where Tameron had gone. I fought the urge to text him to find out and instead let myself into the side gate, where I could hear incredibly loud music playing.

I found my dad dancing some sort of abomination that kind of looked like an Irish jig near the pile of chain link fencing that needed to be attached to poles. He was dressed in his usual gardening clothes, except he had a black vest covered in LED lights wrapped around his torso.

I waved at him until he spotted me, and he stopped, pointing with a huge grin. ‘See-see!’ He waved his hand up and down his torso, asking me to check it out.

‘What is that?’ I grimaced at the music and pointed at the radio. ‘Loud!’

He waved me off but leaned over to hit the power button. My ears rang a bit, and I was grateful he had Deaf neighbors. ‘Gift from this new company. For club nights. Deaf raves.’

I frowned. The LED lights were neat, but it was thick and looked heavy. I didn’t see mesh-wearing, fur-booted ravers strapping that on their bodies, Deaf or not.

‘Cool.’

He puffed out his chest and nodded. ‘Might go party with the kids.’

Rolling my eyes, I walked over and helped him out of it, draping it over the table next to the radio. ‘Good luck with that. Mom will kill you.’

He scoffed. ‘She’ll come. She got one of her own.’

God, I did not want to picture my parents trying to Irish jig at a rave. Lord help everyone in the vicinity. ‘Want to get started?’

My dad eyed me. ‘You in a rush? Have someone to see?’ He stepped closer and said aloud, “Boyfriend?”

I shoved him back. ‘Stop. Not my boyfriend. We’re just friends.’

‘S-E-X friends.’

I grabbed his wrists and shook my head. ‘Never again.’

He burst into laughter and gave me a pat on the shoulder. ‘You boys thought you

were so clever, jerking off to porn we can't hear. But I always knew. I know you have sex. Don't be embarrassed.'

It didn't matter how old I was. Talking about sex with my dad would always be mortifying. 'Enough. Fence work now, please.'

He sighed and walked over, unrolling the first piece of chain link. It didn't take long to get it set up, but by the time we were done with all four sides, I'd worked up a heavy sweat. Christ, I needed to run more often.

'That was my workout for the month,' he said as he grabbed two water bottles from his cooler.

I took one down in a handful of deep swallows. 'Come to my gym. I'll hook you up with the best trainer.'

He pulled a face. 'No, thank you. I don't want to do burpees.' He fingerspelled the last word with heavy disdain. 'How is Tameron?'

Lord. He really wasn't going to let this go. 'He's fine. I think he went to the shop with Dax.'

My dad grinned. 'Already fitting in. Part of the family now.'

'He has a family.' He had more than one family—his own and Nash's. He was always welcome in ours, but I didn't want to put that pressure on him.

My dad's expression fell. 'He didn't like dinner?'

'No, no. He had a good time. He got some good ideas of things he can use at home to make it easier when he takes off his hearing aids. But he feels lost.'

My dad nodded. 'I understand. I told him what it was like.'

The two of us walked over to his Adirondack chairs, which he'd set up under the bigger magnolia tree, and we sat, feet kicked out toward each other. I enjoyed the silence for a bit. It was windy and a hint of fog was in the air, but it was warm enough to be pleasant.

Then my dad kicked my foot. 'Are you okay?'

I sighed. 'You and mom struggled to be together at first, right?'

He shrugged. 'It took me a while to really understand what it meant to be Deaf. I didn't grow up that way, so I didn't know a lot.'

I was disrespectful when I didn't mean to be.

I favored my voice. I wanted to do what was easier at the time, and I wanted her to meet me more than halfway. She didn't like that.'

No. I couldn't imagine she did.

'Would you be angry if I end up with a man who never wants to be fully part of it?'

He tilted his head to the side, then leaned forward over his thighs. 'When you were born, I cried three times. You didn't breathe right away, and I was scared. Then I held you, and you were so perfect. And then they told me you could hear.'

My gut clenched. It wasn't the first time I'd sat through the story of my parents grieving not having a Deaf child. And it was never malicious. It was never cruel.

But it always hurt. I imagined it was the same way every Deaf child born to hearing

parents felt when they had to sit through their parents' grieving process.

'I know.'

He shook his head. 'No. You don't understand. I wasn't upset you could hear. I think hearing is as beautiful as Deaf, Dayton.' He used my childhood name sign—a D tapped over his heart. 'You could hear music and laughter and the ocean with your ears. I think there's joy in that.'

There was. There was joy in experiencing the world the way he did too.

'But I was afraid again. I was afraid I would fail you. That I would be a terrible dad because I was just learning to love myself as I was. How could I teach you? But I always made you smile. You liked my voice. You liked when I hummed to you.'

I remembered that. There was little tonal inflection, but it was soothing. Every time I was sick, I would lie on his chest. He would hum and I would sleep.

'I also knew you would always feel like an outsider. Your mom and I talked about this a lot. We never had to worry about Dax or Dahlia. No one in our circle of family or friends would ever look at them like they didn't belong.

No one would ever tell them—' His fingers shook, and I knew what he was remembering. I remembered it too.

You will never belong . You will always be a guest .

I didn't want to be a guest in my own home—in my parents' lives. I didn't want to be the outsider at every single gathering.

And I wasn't always—but sometimes, I was.

‘I used to pray to go Deaf,’ I told him.

He bowed his head. ‘I know. I would love you any way you were, Dayton. I love you like this. And I want you to fall in love with the person who makes you feel like your mom makes me feel. I don’t care how they navigate the world. Just...be happy.’

I could do that. With Tameron, it would be easy, so long as he let me in. So long as he wanted to keep me. But I had never really done relationships before. Whether it was me or them, no one had stuck around long enough for me to really call it love.

So maybe I was a little bit broken. And maybe Tameron would eventually see that.

My dad tapped my ankle with his foot. ‘Talk to me.’

‘I’m in love with him, but I don’t know how he feels about me. He has a lot to deal with, and it feels unfair to drop that on him.’

‘I understand.’

‘Do I keep quiet? Keep it to myself?’

His brows furrowed in thought, then his face relaxed, and he shrugged. ‘Be patient with him.’

I was tired of hearing that. I was being patient. That wasn’t the problem. I just wanted to know how long to hold on for. How long did I keep myself on this string, waiting for Tameron to know if this was something he wanted to keep?

“Dayton,” my dad said aloud.

I looked up at him. ‘Sorry. A lot in my head.’

He stood and offered me a hand, yanking me to my feet. 'Be patient with yourself. Fall in love slowly. Savor it. Understand what forever feels like before you commit.'

I bit my lip. It sounded so...easy. So simple. Yet maybe the most complicated thing I would ever do with my life.

'How long?'

He smiled at me, then gave my cheek a pat. 'As long as it takes.'

I suppose I could do that too. After all, if anyone was worth it, it would be my Tameron.

CHAPTER TWENTY-TWO

TAMERON

For soldiers, home was almost always a complicated word.

What was home? For some, it meant their partner, their family.

Kids. For others, it was a place, like their house or apartment.

It could be parents for those who were still young.

Heck, I'd had a buddy who swore up and down he wasn't home until he was with his dog, a badass German shepherd named Gerhard.

I'd never had a clear answer to that question. I loved my parents and family, but they weren't my home anymore. My parents moved out of my childhood home shortly after I enlisted, so I had no emotional attachment to their current house.

I'd always lived on base while enlisted since that was easiest as a single guy, but I'd never thought of my place there as a home either. It had always been temporary in my mind, a stopover on a journey to...somewhere.

Then everything had blown up in my face—literally, pardon the pun—and I'd ended up here, in a strange city but with men who were my brothers.

Nash had managed to make the house he'd inherited from his grandparents into a

home for all four of us.

For the first time in my life, home had become a place.

Amid all the upheaval and the fight to transition to civilian life, it had become a refuge, the one place where I could be myself.

But while I was sitting on the couch, staring into space and being in my head as usual, Creek was packing the last of his stuff.

He'd be officially moved out by the end of today.

Bean barely spent time here anymore either.

His room was still here, but he was usually at Jarek's, except on Fridays because of movie night.

Nash was still here, of course, but it wouldn't be the same.

Creek deposited a box near the front door, then plopped down on the couch next to me. He let out a deep sigh, then removed his prosthesis and lining until he had his bare stump, which was redder than usual. "I've been walking more than I'm used to. It's a little sore."

"Need me to check it?" The bottom of his stump was hard for him to see and he often used a mirror to ensure nothing was getting too irritated or, far worse, infected.

"Nah, Heath did this morning. I just need a little rest, but that was the last box, so I'm good."

The last box. That was it then. My chest tightened.

“You okay?” he asked with uncharacteristic sensitivity.

I shrugged. “I’m fine.”

Creek bumped my shoulder. “Do you want me to let you get away with that bullshit or call you out on it?”

I snorted. “Look who’s channeling Nash.”

He sat a little taller, grinning widely. “Yeah, I pulled that one off, didn’t I?”

“Sure did.”

Then his grin faded. “But I do mean it. We both know you’re not fine.”

I rubbed my face just so I could hide for a few seconds. “I don’t know what I am.”

“I’m sorry for moving out.”

“You shouldn’t be. I’m happy for you. Heath is amazing, and you guys are ridiculously perfect for each other.”

He sighed. “I know, but I feel awful for leaving you.”

“Don’t. You’re moving on, as you should. It’s not your fault I’m still stuck here.”

As much as I tried, I couldn’t keep out the bitterness that had crept into my tone.

“Yeah, that’s gotta suck.”

Thank fuck Creek was at least honest with me and didn’t try to convince me I wasn’t.

“It does. A lot.”

“Hence my guilt for moving out.” He scratched his chin. “It wasn’t an easy decision, you know. Heath and I argued over it for a long time. I wasn’t sure if you were ready yet.”

Emotions surged inside me at the thought that he’d worried over me. “That means a lot, man. Thank you. But I want you to move on. I want you to be happy. Bean too.”

Creek slowly shook his head. “Jesus fuck, that man hit the jackpot with Jarek. Guy has the patience of a saint.”

“Bean’s worth it,” I said, my loyalty to Bean demanding nothing else.

“Course he is, but how many men would’ve taken the time and effort to find that out?”

“True that.”

As if on cue, Bean sauntered through the front door, his face lighting up when he spotted us. “Oh perfect, you’re not gone yet. I brought food.”

He held up a shopping tote.

Creek immediately shot up straight. “Home-cooked food? That you made?”

“Seafood pasta, and yes. I messed up an order and made the wrong thing, so Zayd told me to take it home.”

There was another man with a lot of patience. I gave Bean’s boss loads of credit for hiring a man with such substantial memory issues. Not many businesses would’ve

made that decision, but Zayd had, and Bean loved his job as a cook.

“I could eat,” I said.

Creek nodded, then cocked his head. “Nash won’t be home until the morning. He’s on a night shift.”

We all looked at each other, then grinned. “Couch,” we said in unison.

Nash was strict about eating at the dinner table, which was fair enough since it was his house. But when he wasn’t home, we often ate on the couch, feeling like rebellious teenagers.

“You stay,” I told Creek, who really shouldn’t be on his feet anytime soon. “I’ll grab plates and stuff.”

“I’ll heat up the pasta,” Bean said.

A few minutes later, we all sat with a plate of steaming pasta in our hands. Smart as he was, Bean had heated the pasta, not the individual plates, so they weren’t too hot for us to hold. And god, it smelled amazing.

“How was work?” Creek asked Bean. We always asked him because repetition helped him remember things better. And because we couldn’t count on him to voluntarily tell us anything out of the ordinary because, half the time, he had no recollection.

“Good. I tried out a new recipe with salt-crusted snapper as a special of the day, and it sold out.”

I blinked. Had he really recounted that without checking his little black book for

details? That was highly unusual. Creek's eyes met mine, showing the same surprise.

"That's awesome. You should make it for us sometime," I said. Then I remembered, and my stomach sank. "I mean, whenever we get together. Since you won't be here anymore to cook regularly."

Jesus, that had come out as an actual whine. I really needed to get a grip on myself.

"I'm sorry," Bean said softly. "I know this is hard for you."

How could something be irritating yet heartwarming at the same time? I loved that they were worried about me and it meant the world to me, but at the same time, it annoyed the fuck out of me that they felt they had to. As if I were fragile. Vulnerable. As if I needed...

As if I needed help.

But I did need help, didn't I? I couldn't do this alone. I needed to lean on others, as I'd been told repeatedly. That included Creek and Bean, which meant that...

Fuuuuuuck.

I took a deep breath, putting my plate on the coffee table.

"It is hard for me. It's not even about missing you guys, though you know I will.

But I feel like I'm losing my home, the one place where I could be myself.

I'm so happy for you both and want you to live your lives, but I don't know what to do, how to feel at home anywhere anymore.

I guess that..." My voice cracked, but I pushed through it.

"I thought this house was my home, but it wasn't.

It was you. Nash and you two. You were my home, and now that's gone. "

My throat was so tight I could barely swallow. Fuck it, I couldn't do this. I was about to lose it and didn't want to do that to them. "Excuse me," I said, getting up, but Creek's iron grip around my wrist pulled me right back down.

"Don't go," Creek said, surprisingly gently compared to the strength with which he held me. "Please."

"I can't do this," I said between clenched teeth. "I refuse to lose it in front of you guys."

"Why?" Bean asked softly. "We want to be here for you."

"Because it'll only make you feel more guilty, and I don't want to do that to you."

Bean firmly shook his head. "You're not responsible for our emotions or even our reactions. You have a right to be sad or even angry. We know you're not begrudging us our happiness. You can be happy for us while grieving at the same time."

Damn, when had he gotten so wise? Nash had said almost the exact same thing. Maybe they had both learned more from him than I had realized.

"I also think you're wrong," Creek said, letting go of my wrist as if he knew I had given up on trying to escape this conversation.

I frowned. "Wrong about what?"

“About only being able to be yourself with us. I don’t think that’s true.”

“What do you mean?”

“I don’t think you’re fully yourself with us. There’s always a part of you that you’re shielding...like you tried to do just now. You never show us your deepest emotions. The superficial ones, sure, but not the underlying ones.”

What the fuck was he talking about? “I have no idea what you mean.”

“You never get angry with us for forgetting that you can’t hear us if we look the other way when we talk. Or when we mumble. Or when we forget to turn the subtitles on.”

I shook my head furiously. “That’s on me. I have no right to be angry with you when you’re not doing it on purpose. It’s my problem that I can’t hear well. Not yours.”

“Why not? I’ve yelled at you guys plenty of times when you’ve left shit on the stairs, making it harder for me to navigate them, to name one example.”

My insides grew cold. “Yeah, but that’s...different.”

It was different, right? It wasn’t the same thing because...why, exactly?

“It’s not. If we are, as you say, your home, why can’t you be yourself with us? Why can’t you show us that anger, that annoyance, that frustration? You’re always adapting to us instead of the other way around, and it’s not right.”

I’d never heard Creek spout such wisdom, and inside me, pride and admiration battled with anger and frustration. Because he was right, dammit all to hell. He was absolutely, one hundred percent right, and I hated it.

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I buried my face in my hands, needing a moment to compose myself.

He was right. On some level, I'd been afraid that if I showed them everything, if I asked them to adapt the way I needed them to, that it would prove to be too much.

That I would be too much. That they'd reject me, make me the outsider.

I was the outsider. Despite their disabilities, Creek and Bean fit in. I didn't.

And how could I consider them my home if I never showed them all of me? God, my head hurt from all that thinking, but I had to figure this out. It mattered.

"If you're not my home, then..." Then what was? Who was? Wasn't there any place I felt truly at ease, anyone I could be wholly myself with? Wasn't there anywhere I didn't feel like an outsider?

It struck me as if someone had lit a light in a dark tunnel, as if the clouds that had covered the sun suddenly drifted away, revealing this brightness in all its glory.

How had I been this blind?

"I'm in love with Dayton," I said slowly, my voice filled with wonder. "Jesus, Mary, and Joseph... I'm in love with Dayton."

When I looked up, I found Bean watching me with teary eyes while Creek was looking downright smug, the son of a bitch. "You knew," I accused him. "You knew I was in love with him."

Creek rolled his eyes. “Of course I did. We all did. We were just waiting for you to figure it out.”

Lord help me. Dayton was it. Dayton was my home. He was the only person I could be myself with, who accepted all my faults and shortcomings, all my limitations and sensitivities. Voice on or off, in English or ASL, he was there for me.

“I have to go.”

Creek and Bean shared a look, then laughed.

“Go,” Bean said. “He’s waiting for you.”

He was. And he probably had been for a while now. Because amid all the revelations that sparked inside me like fireworks lighting up the sky, I knew one thing with absolute certainty.

Dayton loved me too.

I drove on autopilot, as if in a dream. The traffic was as bad as always, but somehow, it didn’t matter because Dayton would be there. He always had been. I’d been pushing him away from the get-go, but he’d been like a rock, stable and unmoving.

Funnily enough, I wasn’t even nervous. I had nothing to stress about. I was about to tell the man I loved that he was my home, my everything, which was nothing to fear, only something to look forward to.

Because he loved me too. Now that my eyes had been opened, I could see it in a million different ways. Small things and big things. In his touch, his looks, his everything except his words.

He'd been waiting for me, and that thought filled me with such gratitude that it took my breath away. The patience of a saint, we'd said of Jarek. Well, Dayton had to rank right below Jarek then.

When he opened the door, he looked stunned to see me. "Tameron? Is everything okay?"

I simply stepped forward, curled my hands around his cheeks, and kissed him with all the pent-up emotion inside me. Our lips met, our tongues slid, and our mouths became one to the point where I wasn't sure where I ended and he began.

And when I finally came up for breath, I looked deep into those warm brown eyes and said, "I love you. I'm sorry it took me this long to see it, but I'm so in love with you..."

His eyes widened, and then his face broke open in a smile so wide, it had to hurt. "Tam, sweetheart... I love you too."

"I know." Maybe not the most romantic answer, but whatever. It was the truth. "You've loved me for a while now."

His eyes grew moist. "I have."

"I'm sorry I didn't see it."

"You weren't ready."

Of course he would understand. He always had. "I wasn't...but I am now."

He slowly closed the front door, which had been open that whole time. "What happened?"

“Can we...?” I gestured at his bedroom.

“Yeah. Want something to drink?”

I shook my head. “No. Just want you.”

His eyes became wet all over again. “Sorry,” he said, wiping at them. “But I’ve waited a long time to hear you say these things, and now that you are, it’s kinda emotional.”

Obviously, I had to kiss him again, though this time, it was a much slower kiss, a gentle, tender one. It would be all too easy to keep kissing and let desire take over, but there were words that needed to be said. So reluctantly, I broke off the kiss.

We installed ourselves on his bed, facing each other. As much as I would love to be in his arms, it made it harder to hear him, so this would have to do.

“What happened?” he asked again.

“Creek is officially moving out today.”

His face softened. “I know. Nash texted me.”

Of course he had. “So you could check in on me?”

“Mmm, but I think he also wanted me to check in on him. It’s not easy for him either.”

No, it wouldn’t be. “You’re a good friend. You told me you were really good at being a friend, and you weren’t lying. But that’s not all you want to be to me.”

“No.”

I took both his hands, feeling a tenderness inside me unlike anything I’d ever experienced. I’d never thought of myself as sappy, but that was sure as fuck how I felt now. “I don’t wanna be just friends either. Or friends with benefits.”

He swallowed. “What do you want?”

“Everything...as long as it’s with you. It’s a long story, and I will tell you all about it some other time, but I had a revelation today, an epiphany.

I realized you’re my home. You’re the only one I can truly be myself with.

I never have to fear you rejecting me because you won’t.

You love me the way I am, with or without hearing, grumpy or not, with all my stubbornness. ”

My voice only wavered a little right near the end.

Even if I hadn’t known already, the way he looked at me now would’ve given his feelings away. I’d never seen such pure love in his eyes, which made me feel like the luckiest man on the planet.

“I do. You’re not perfect, Tam, but neither am I. We’re perfect for each other.”

I leaned my forehead against his. “We are. We really are.”

“I would’ve waited for you forever,” he whispered, melting my heart.

“Thank you. I’ll spend the rest of my life making it worth the wait.”

CHAPTER TWENTY-THREE

DAYTON

There was something to be said about being able to tell Tameron how I felt.

Not just those three words, though hearing them from him was something I'd started to doubt would ever happen.

But knowing I could be myself—that falling for him wouldn't send him running—gave me a peace I'd lacked since realizing I wanted him.

Weeks ago, I was the man staring across the gym floor at him, quietly pining for someone I thought couldn't stand me. Now, he was lying in my arms with his cheek pressed to my chest, our small kitten curled between us, watching a cooking competition show with the sound off and the captions on.

Home, I thought to myself. Tameron had explained that home was what he'd been searching for and that Bean and Creek had helped him realize he wasn't lacking a home. He was just looking in all the wrong places.

I never thought I could be that for someone. And it wasn't due to lack of support or love. I had an amazing family I wanted to be near. I had two siblings who were my best friends and parents who loved me and would love any partner I walked through their front door.

But this was different. Tameron was different.

Because he was mine.

I stroked a touch over the crown of his head, and he tilted his gaze toward me, his eyes crinkled at the edges with his smile.

Swallowing heavily, still not used to this, I lifted my free hand and dropped my middle and ring finger toward my palm. 'I love you.'

His lips parted on the edge of a very soft sigh. "I love you too." His own hand, resting on my stomach, formed the same sign, pressing it into my skin.

I basked. There was no other word for the feeling in my chest. I sat in a place of utter and genuine contentment, and I never wanted this to end.

Then his hand started to creep south, and okay...maybe putting an end to the cuddle session had some merit. My abs jumped slightly under his touch, and I felt the curve of his smile against my pec as he carefully slipped the tips of his fingers under the waistband of my sweats.

"Yes?" he asked.

I grazed a touch behind his ear to make sure his hearing aids were still on, then said, "Yes. Please."

He moved his hand beneath the soft fabric, then let out a small laugh. "Commando, eh?"

"I didn't know you were coming over."

Pressing up on one elbow, he stared at me, brows raised. "You wear your fancy boxers for me?"

“I was trying to impress you,” I told him with a grin, cupping his jaw.

It was meant to be a joke, but Tameron looked...flattered. His eyes widened a fraction and his pupils dilated, cheeks tinged pink. He dragged his tongue over his lower lip, then said, “I’m probably pretty easy to impress.”

I blinked, then grabbed him, whipping him around so he was pinned beneath me. He was breathing harder, but he most definitely was not afraid. “You are the furthest thing from easy.”

Tameron swallowed heavily. “I know I’m hard to?—”

“No.” Pressing a finger to his lips, I shook my head. “That’s not what I meant, and you know it. You made me work for you, Tam. Your attention, your affection, your love.” He looked upset again, so I leaned in and pressed a soft kiss to the corner of his mouth. “I was honored.”

Biting his lower lip, I could see him working through something, and I sat quietly while he did it. It would never be an easy road with him. Maybe someday in the future, the two of us would just exist together—confident and carefree. But I would never not be willing to fight for him.

“Thank you.”

I grinned. I’d expected him to argue, but right now, I wanted his compliance.

“Let me show you how much?” he said softly.

My brows flew up. “Oh yeah?”

He lifted a fist. ‘Yes. Please. Bedroom?’

Easing myself off him, I offered a hand and he took it, heaving himself to his feet. He didn't let me go once he was steady. Instead, he tugged me against him, using his strength to keep me pressed against his body while he leaned in and took the kiss I'd been wanting to give him for hours now.

I groaned into it as his tongue tangled with mine. His free hand gripped my hip, pressing his fingers in deep, and he rocked himself into me so I could feel how hard he was.

How much he wanted me.

"Bedroom," I growled, ripping myself out of the kiss.

He looked dazed for a second, then grinned. "I've been doing some reading. Some...studying. I learned something new, and I want to show you."

Well shit. I was definitely not going to say no to that.

He kept my hand tight in his as he led the way to the bedroom, pausing when he got to the doorway. "Uh...is Dax?—"

I pressed up against his back. "I don't know if he's coming home tonight. He won't hear us, though, remember? We can put a sock on the door if you want."

"Oh my god, no. I don't want him to know what we get up to!"

I laughed hard and spun him, pressing him against the doorframe. "I'm sorry to say, my love, but he knows."

Tameron's eyes went wide and he reached up, touching my bottom lip with the tips of his fingers. "Say that again."

“He knows?”

Tameron shook his head. “The—the other thing.”

The other—ah. Yes, that. I took a breath, then leaned in close. “My love.”

He shuddered, then surged into a kiss, taking my mouth desperate and needy.

Wrapping my arms around his waist, I pressed my body against his, letting him take what he needed until he was satisfied.

We stood there for long, lush minutes, tongues dancing together until we had to break away to breathe.

“What were we doing?”

I chuckled and nuzzled the side of his neck. “You were going to show me what you learned.”

“Right. Yes.” He tugged me past the door, then slammed it. His hand hesitated, and then he flicked the lock before turning to face me. “He won’t try to come in, right?”

I grimaced. “Baby, no. Dax might enjoy stomping on boundaries, but he doesn’t want to see his big brother getting railed by his friend.”

Tameron stared, then burst into laughter. “Right, yeah. That makes sense.” He closed the distance between us, but instead of kissing me again, he held me at arm’s length, staring me up and down.

I felt a bit like I was on display. Normally, I didn’t mind. It happened a lot. I was a battalion chief and a fitness instructor. It was my job to command attention. And I

certainly didn't mind here, but this was a very different type of observation.

Tameron looked at me like a starving man in front of a free buffet. "Will you undress?"

I curled my fingers into the waistband of my sweats. "Do you want me to spice it up? Do a little tease?"

His breath caught in his chest. "Mm." I could tell his hum was entirely involuntary. He probably couldn't even hear himself make it. He cleared his throat after a second. "Maybe next time. I don't want to get distracted."

I had no idea what he was planning, but I was all for it. With a single tug, I had my sweats on the floor, my cock jutting out heavy and fat with all the blood that had rushed south to fill it. I cupped my balls in my hand, then stroked myself as he watched.

"Uh..." He blinked a few times. "Stop that."

I let go immediately, and he made another startled noise.

"Shirt," he said.

I peeled it away and dropped it on the floor.

He wet his lips with a round swipe of his tongue. "You, uh...you like following orders?"

I didn't. Not normally. "When they come from you, I think maybe I might."

His breath trembled on his exhale, and then he stepped closer. "We can play around

with that idea later, yeah.”

I ran a finger down the front of his shirt. There was something to be said about standing there entirely naked and vulnerable for Tameron while he was not only fully clothed but feeling a bit bossy. Who knew that was a thing for me?

But then again, I’d also never really been in love before.

Looked like Tameron wasn’t the only man who would be having firsts in this relationship, and somehow, that made me feel better.

“How do you want me?” I asked in the heavy silence.

“On the bed, face down, knees under you.”

“Ass up?”

He grinned even as his face flushed. “Yes.”

I had a feeling I knew where this was going. We’d done plenty—fingers, face fucking, and shooting my load deep inside him as I watched him fall apart. But there were other places we could put our mouths, and I knew that was probably what he had planned.

My stomach clenched, my dick kicking in anticipation as I turned away from him and set one knee on the bed. Then I paused and twisted slightly. ‘Naked-you also?’

His cheek went concave as he bit them from the inside, and then he nodded. ‘Yes. Can I...?’ He hesitated. It was clear he was still working on his dirty talk lexicon.

‘Fuck me?’ That one he knew.

His ears went bright red, but his jaw tightened in determination, and he nodded. 'Please. After,' he added.

I tried not to smile. 'Yes. Anything you want.'

"That might be a dangerous promise," he warned me aloud.

Turning, I gripped him by the hips and dragged him up against me. "Anything," I said, my voice low, deep, and pointed, "you want."

He sucked in a breath, then kissed me quickly but firmly before pushing me away. "Knees. Um...please," he added.

I grinned. I couldn't help it. Turning away, I pressed both hands to the mattress and then crawled toward the pillows and hugged one to my chest. I spread my knees slightly, then leaned forward until my spine found a comfortable spot to relax.

"Good," I heard him murmur. "Fuck, you look so good."

I wasn't sure if he'd intended for me to hear that, so I stayed silent. I could hear him rustling in the drawer, felt a few things drop to the bed, and then the unmistakable sound of him undressing.

His jeans hit the floor with a heavy thud, then his shirt. A moment passed that felt like a short eternity, and then his hands pressed to my hips. They were rough and warm as he slid them down the outsides of my thighs, and my stomach jumped as he fit himself into the space I'd left with my feet.

"You're gorgeous," he said, this time louder.

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I had no idea what to say to that. I knew I was good-looking. I never had trouble hooking up. That wasn't what people tended to avoid about me. It was, well, everything else. Everything that made me who I am.

Everything that Tameron, apparently, had fallen in love with. That was what mattered.

But I did enjoy the fact that he found me good-looking. "Thank you."

He rewarded my answer with a kiss to the base of my spine, but instead of lifting off me after that, he dragged his lips lower. He kissed over my hip—the right first, then the left. His fingers dug into the globes of my ass and he jiggled them slightly, then tugged them apart.

Cool air hit me, making my breath catch, and then there was stillness.

I could tell he was looking, and I let him.

He could do this for as long as he wanted.

A tentative finger brushed down the crack, circling the hole before grazing downward.

His palm caught my balls and he cupped them, rolling them gently just the way I liked.

"So beautiful," he murmured.

I said nothing, but my hips shifted restlessly. I was starting to feel desperate for more. And a beat later, I thought maybe I would have to beg.

Just as my lips parted and I took a breath to make sure I was loud enough for him to hear me, his lips touched my skin. He kissed the right cheek of my ass, then moved closer and closer to where I wanted to feel him most.

“Please,” I grunted loudly when he pressed his lips against my hole.

The pressure was gone, and I cast a look behind my shoulder. Tameron was looking right at me. “What was that?”

“Me begging,” I told him.

He laughed. “Oh. Sorry, I couldn’t hear you.”

“I know. Just...please, baby. I need your mouth. Need to feel you.”

He sucked in a breath, then nodded and dug his fingers into my ass, spreading it wide.

I only had time to take in a single inhale before he dove down, and suddenly, his tongue was inside me.

Letting out a soft cry, I buried my face in the pillow as he fucked my hole deeper, faster, one hand reaching between my legs to grip my dick.

He didn’t stroke me, which was the only reason I didn’t shoot my load into the sheets below me. He gripped the base hard as he tongue-fucked me, and it was only when I saw white that he let go.

“Oh fuck,” I managed to get out.

He kissed over my ass cheeks, down the crack, then dipped his head low to draw my balls past his lips.

He was tender with me to the point that it made my gut ache and my legs lose strength.

When he pulled away, I was entirely pliant, my body moving with his strong hands as he put me on my back, my legs still spread, thighs pressed to his hips.

“Hello,” he murmured.

I swallowed but couldn’t form words, so I lifted a hand to my forehead. ‘Hello.’

He grinned, leaned in, then pulled back. “Sorry. I probably shouldn’t kiss you after I?—”

Gripping him by the back of his head, I tugged him all the way against me and kissed him furiously. “I don’t care. I don’t care,” I murmured against his lips.

He pulled back, his brows furrowed. “Again?”

“I don’t care,” I repeated carefully. “Tameron, I love you.”

“I guess I should eat your ass more often, huh?”

With a growl, I gripped his hair and held him fast. “You know that’s not why.”

His face softened. “I know. Day—baby. My love,” he said quietly. “I know.”

I kissed him again as his hand shifted to the side, reaching for something. Lube and a condom. I heard the snick of the cap, then felt his fingers back at my entrance. He

pressed against it, probing a little. Testing. Waiting for permission.

“Do it.”

He let out his breath in a single exhale, then pushed two fingers inside me. I opened for him—easy and willing. He looked down at his hard cock, which was sitting right against mine, and thrust against me.

My chest went warm, my dick throbbing, spilling precum all over my lower stomach.

“Feels good inside you,” he said. “Different.”

I knew what he meant. Different from what he’d done before. Different from everything he knew. Better, but not because I was a man. Better because I was in love with him.

And he was in love with me.

“I want to feel you,” I said, gripping his hips. “Please.”

He nodded, his expression almost frantic as he struggled to open the condom wrapper.

I took over for him, my hands marginally steadier than his own, and I got the condom rolled over his thick erection.

He spread lube all over himself, then looked me directly in the eye as he positioned himself against me.

“Tam—”

“I love you,” he said, then thrust forward and entered me with a single, glorious slide.

My ass spasmed around him as I took his entire length, my vision going foggy again. My head hit the pillows as my hips lifted, and when he pulled out to slam into me again, I met his thrust with my own.

He grunted hard and loud, his arms trembling as he supported his own weight.

I wrapped my legs around his waist to hold him closer, his thrusts now furious nudges deep inside me.

Shifting my hips, I got him at the right angle so that when he pushed inside again, his dick grazed my prostate and the room lit up.

“Oh. Fuck, fuck, baby,” I gasped. I rolled my hips into his, both of us picking up speed as he fucked me into actual oblivion.

I was so close. God, I was so close. I was going to come, and he hadn’t even touched me yet.

“Day—I can’t...I’m too?”

“Yes,” I told him. I forced my vision to focus on his face, drinking in his wild eyes and parted lips as if I needed the sight of him to breathe. “Do it. I’m going to come. Take me with you.”

His hips moved rabbit-fast, frantic, his sharp moans punctuated by heavy breaths. I lost myself in the rhythm of it, the sensation of him pounding into me, and suddenly, I felt the spark.

The heat raced from the base of my spine, exploding under my skin—white-hot

fireworks of pleasure. My dick throbbed, kicking hard, and just as I sucked in a breath, it exploded. I lost all strength, my body loose except for my abs, which tightened as I let go.

Hot ropes shot between us as his thrusts turned ragged, losing all rhythm. He pressed his hips hard against my ass, nudging deep inside me, the throbbing of his own dick hitting my prostate and making me see sparks as my body attempted to calm.

It took a short forever for me to get enough energy to wrap my arms around him, and the moment I did, he collapsed into the mess I'd left on my stomach.

His head lifted and we attempted to kiss, but it was mostly just parted lips and shared breath. He was warm all over, trembling slightly as he gave me all of his weight, and when I realized I couldn't breathe, I turned us both onto our sides.

His cock slipped out of me with a wet squelch, and he quickly reached between us to hold the condom in place. When we settled, he pulled it off, tied the end, and dropped it over the side of the bed with a wet slap.

"That was..." he said after a long, long beat of silence.

I laughed softly, burying the sound against his neck. I could feel his pulse still hammering, and I laid a kiss there. "Yes."

We basked forever, feeling our heated skin cool under the gentle breeze of the ceiling fan. Home, I realized. There were so many ways to feel that feeling, and this was one of them.

"Still love me?"

I leaned back, startled by the question. "Did you think I would feel differently after

the best sex of my life?”

He stared for a second. “Was it?”

“The best sex of my life?” He nodded. “There are no words,” I told him. “But it wasn’t the amazing fucking you gave me.”

He burst into laughter. “Oh my god.”

I grinned and brushed a few locks of hair off his sweaty forehead. “I mean it, Tam. Your cock is amazing. I mean, Christ, the things it can do. But this feeling in my chest is because it’s you. I’m so fucking in love with you that it’s a little scary.”

His smile faded, but he still looked happy. “I know what you mean. I didn’t know I could feel this way and it scares the absolute piss out of me because if you ever decided to leave?—”

“I won’t.” I had no business making that promise because I wasn’t clairvoyant. I had no idea what the future held. But in that moment, I knew for sure he was my forever.

He swallowed thickly. “Me neither. But it would destroy me if it happened. If I lost you.”

Ah. There was that. My job was dangerous, and while there were far riskier professions, I understood Tameron’s fear.

“I’m always careful,” I told him.

He took a breath. “I know. But so were the people I served with. Then, one mistake changed a lot of lives. And took some too.”

I held him close. “I will do everything in my power to make sure I come home to this every night. And if you ever need extra reassurance, I will give it to you. It will never annoy me. Never.”

He pulled back and raised a single brow. “It might.”

Cupping his jaw, I shook my head. “No, Tam. It won’t.”

He stared at me for a long second, then his shoulders relaxed. “You actually mean that, don’t you?”

‘Yes,’ I signed. ‘I do.’

He bit his lip. ‘This will never annoy you either.’ He tapped his ear.

I laughed. “Not in the way you think. I might get a little annoyed when you leave the blender running or the water on?—”

He flushed, and I could tell he’d done that before.

“—or when the TV is too loud. But I will never be annoyed by you.”

He let out the breath he was holding. “Okay. I believe you.”

I wasn’t sure he did. Not yet. We had a long way to go. We had years to build up the trust he was hesitant to give, and we had years for me to have real faith that I deserved something this good. But the point was, we had those years.

Him and I.

This was it. He was mine, and I was his.

And we were home.

TAMERON

“Welcome to our home!”

Bean straight-up beamed as he gestured for us to come in. He blinked a few times as Dayton walked past him, his telltale sign that he was trying to remember a name.

I bent to hug him. “Dayton,” I whispered.

He hugged me back. “Thank you.”

“Anytime.”

I meant it. Helping Bean remember had become part of our routine.

We’d all learned to pick up on the signals that he was lost, and one of us would step in and help him.

And we usually attempted to be subtle about it.

No need to constantly remind the guy he needed help, right?

It had to be frustrating enough for him as it was.

“Your home is lovely,” Dayton said as he handed Jarek our housewarming gift, a cute little cactus that even Bean couldn’t kill if he forgot to water it for a few weeks.

It had been Dayton's idea, and I loved him for it. The man was unfailingly thoughtful. Wasn't it funny how something that had annoyed me mere months ago now made my heart swell with warmth and this strange, still unfamiliar tenderness? Love really did change people. Even me.

"Thank you," Jarek said. "Most of the renovating work was done by my brother, so if you ever need someone for that type of thing, make sure to reach out to him."

"Oh, that's good to know. We've been thinking about redoing our kitchen," Dayton said with a look at me.

Yup, there was now an official "we" and "our," and I still wasn't used to it. Every time Dayton used it so casually, my heart skipped a beat.

I hadn't officially moved in with him, but somehow, most of my clothes had found their way into his bedroom, and I spent far more time at Dayton's than I did back with Nash. I cleared my throat. "Yeah, erm, we could do that. I mean, if Dax agrees."

The house was Dayton's, and technically, his brother paid him rent. And by technically, I meant he didn't because Dayton said he didn't need the money and wanted Dax to focus on building his business. The man was a goddamn saint...and he was mine.

Creek and Heath's arrival was the distraction I needed to compose myself again.

I'd been unusually emotional the last few weeks, ever since officially entering a relationship with Dayton.

That part, I didn't care for at all. It was like being with him had changed some core setting inside me, and now I suddenly got all teary-eyed at baby animal videos.

Like, what the actual fuck? Not one of the side effects of being in love that I was

particularly thrilled about.

“I brought my brother,” Creek said. “Hope you don’t mind, but he was sitting around by himself, moping.”

“I was not moping.” Forest sounded indignant. “I do not nor have I ever moped.”

“It’s a pleasure to meet you,” Jarek said, as always the peacemaker. He extended his hand, but Forest was already hugging him. Bemused, Jarek returned the hug of that little ball of sunshine.

When it was my turn, I just went directly for the embrace. Forest gently patted my back. “Happy to see you again, Tameron.”

“You too.”

Forest let go and turned his eyes to Dayton. “Oh, hello.”

Dayton grinned at the unmistakable flirtiness in that tone. “I’m Dayton, Tameron’s boyfriend.”

Forest’s eyes widened. “You’re not straight?” he asked me.

“Apparently not.”

“And you couldn’t have discovered that the last time I visited?”

I snorted. He was such a riot, that one. No filter at all and unapologetically gay. “You can file your complaint with Heath. If he’d picked The Mummy sooner as the video to watch, I might’ve.”

Forest let out a dramatic sigh. “Amateurs. Anyway, it’s a pleasure to meet you,

Dayton. I hope you know you picked one of the good ones.”

What? Hadn't he meant to say I'd picked a good one because Dayton was hot as fuck?

But Dayton wrapped his arm around me and pressed a kiss to my hair. “I sure do. He's a treasure, this one.”

A treasure? Me? In what universe? But Forest and Dayton shared a look that made me keep quiet, as if they knew something I didn't.

“Hey, guys, sorry for being late,” Nash said as he walked in. “My shift was...” He came to a full stop. “Forest. I wasn't expecting... I thought you were... It's good to see you.”

And then he extended his hand to Forest, as if the kid were a stranger he'd never met. Granted, they'd only met once, but Forest had spent a few days with us, so it wasn't like they hadn't interacted.

What the hell was up with him? I'd never seen him that flustered. Maybe he'd had a bad call? He'd been on shift, so who knew what had happened.

Luckily, Forest plain ignored the hand, the same way he'd done with Jarek, and hugged him. It was a bit of a comical sight because he was so much shorter than Nash, barely reaching his shoulder, and I smiled. If Nash was in a mood because of a bad day, Forest would be able to pull him out of it.

“Dinner is served,” Bean announced, and we all found our spots along their spacious dinner table that seated eight.

“Gorgeous table,” Heath commented, running his hand along the wood. I had to agree with him. It was made out of solid wood and had clean lines and heavy, sturdy legs.

No frills, but somehow still elegant.

And now I was waxing poetic about a dinner table? Somebody slap me. Gently though.

“Jordan made it,” Bean said. “My coworker. He does it as a hobby.”

“We had a hard time finding a table that was big enough, let alone one we liked. Most tables seat four or six.” Jarek shot a loving look at Bean. “But we wanted to ensure you all had a spot when you came over for dinner.”

Aw, that was sweet of him. He was such a good guy.

“On the menu tonight is a new recipe,” Bean announced. “Grilled fish with a cauliflower-and-potato gratin.”

Bean’s cooking improved each week, and I loved seeing him flourish. He loved his job, and last week, Eddie’s Bar had gotten a super favorable review in a local magazine, which had drawn in a lot of new customers who’d come specifically for Bean’s cooking. I’d been so proud of him.

Also, cauliflower? How strangely fitting. “I love cauliflower,” I said, and Nash sent me a wink. The man knew exactly what I meant.

“How are the wedding plans coming along?” Dayton asked.

“Good. It’s gonna be a super small event,” Bean said. “Twenty people in total. I don’t do well in crowds, and we don’t have extended family we need to invite, so it’s gonna be small.”

“Intimate,” Jarek said, reaching for Bean’s hand and lacing their fingers together. “Just with the people we love. And my best friend has procured a special license so

she can marry us.”

“That way, nobody will sound the alarm when I forget his name halfway through the ceremony,” Bean joked, then laughed. “Which, as you all know, is not outside the realm of possibilities.”

No shit. When Bean was stressed, his memory issues were a lot worse.

“I love small weddings,” Forest said with a wistful sigh. “They’re so much more personal. Who wants to waste time exchanging polite chit-chat with a second cousin you haven’t seen in ten years instead of dancing with the people you love?”

Creek ruffled his brother’s hair affectionately. “You always were a romantic.”

Getting married. Now there was a concept I hadn’t even considered before, but suddenly, the idea of being dressed up in a nice suit and looking into Dayton’s gorgeous eyes while promising him forever didn’t seem so far-fetched.

Oh, don’t get me wrong. I wasn’t ready for that anytime soon. But I was open to the idea, and that in itself was a shocker.

“Well, who knows? You may find your Prince Charming in the city of love,” Heath said to Forest.

“How are you liking it here so far?” Dayton asked. “Must be quite a change of pace from small-town Texas.”

“Gosh, yes. Very different. I only arrived two days ago, so I can’t say much yet, but it seems like it’ll be a good fit for me.”

“Where are you staying?” I asked.

He turned his head away from me as he answered, so I didn't catch what he said. Should I say something? I didn't want to make him feel bad, especially in front of everyone else. On the other hand, Dayton had been encouraging me to speak up more and remind others to take my disability into account.

I looked sideways, and of course, Dayton was watching me. He must've picked up on my emotions, as usual. He put a finger at the bottom of his lip and flicked it toward Forest. Tell him.

I took a deep breath. Fuck, I hated this. "Could you repeat that, Forest? It's hard for me to hear you when you look away from me."

Forest whipped his head around. "Oh gosh, I'm so sorry. Of course. If I forget again, please remind me, okay?"

Thank fuck, he was so nice about it. If he'd snapped at me or had acted embarrassed, I wasn't sure if I would've had the nerve to do it again. "I will. Thank you."

"I was saying that for now, I'm staying with Heath and my brother while I search for a room to rent. It's hard finding something in my price range where I'll also feel safe."

"This city has grown ridiculously expensive," Heath said. "It's a shame because a lot of folks who grew up here can't afford it anymore."

Dayton nodded. "I got lucky with the house I bought. The previous owner died, and his kids wanted it sold quickly without having to do anything to fix it up. I made a cash offer without inspection, which was a risk, but it paid off."

Nash cleared his throat. "If you want, you can stay with me. In Creek's room, I mean.

Like, rent it. It's available, and now that Bean has moved out too and Tameron is

mostly with Dayton, it's just me, so...

Not that you need to feel sorry for me because I'm sad or anything.

Well, I am because I will miss them, but not angry sad.

I'm happy for them. But there's room for you. If you want."

Oh. My. God. I'd joked about this once, but it looked like I had been on target. Nash wasn't bumbling because he'd had a bad shift. He was all flustered and rambling because of Forest.

Forest made him nervous.

Hell yes. I was here for this. My revenge on Nash would be so, so sweet.

"That sounds like the perfect solution," I said, my tone sugary. "Though I have to warn you that Nash runs a tight ship. You can't leave your shoes lying around in the hallway, for example."

"That was because Creek might stumble over them and break his neck...or lose other, slightly more important, body parts," Nash countered.

"And he'll set up a schedule for doing chores, like the dishes," Bean chimed in, winking at me. Apparently, he'd seen it too.

Nash grumbled. "If I hadn't, you guys wouldn't have lifted a finger, and I'd have ended up doing it all myself."

"Dinner is at six on the dot," I added. "And you take turns cooking."

Bean nodded. "And no dissing his grandmother's recipes. He's sensitive in that area."

Nash's cheeks grew red. "You guys make me sound like a tyrant."

I scratched my chin, pretending to consider it. "A tyrant? Nah. More like a true Top."

A loud choking sound made me turn my head. Forest's face was turning red as he furiously coughed. It took him a little while to catch his breath. "Sorry, something went down the wrong way," he said, still sounding hoarse.

I grinned, knowing exactly what had made Forest choke on his food. "Not that kind of top. We're not allowed to speculate there. It's the Army nickname for his rank. We call him Top."

Nash buried his face in his hands. "There are days when I wonder why I even bother with you guys."

Bean patted his shoulder. "Because you love us."

"Not right now," Nash said with a sigh. "Not right now."

Creek had watched the whole exchange with growing confusion. "I'm missing something."

Heath bumped his shoulder. "No, honey, it's fine. I'll explain later."

I doubted he would since Creek seemed rather protective of his little brother, but that was between him and Heath. No way was I getting in the middle of that.

"I don't want you to feel pressured to offer, Nash," Forest said softly when silence had descended. "I didn't mean to put you on the spot."

"You didn't. I meant it. The house is too big for me by myself."

Forest studied him as if he wasn't sure what to think. I couldn't help myself. "Nash wouldn't offer if he didn't mean it."

"Oh." Forest took one more look at Nash, then nodded. "In that case, I will gladly take you up on the offer."

"Good. Good." Nash looked away, focusing on me. "How's ASL going?"

He was the absolute worst at changing the topic, but whatever. I could extend him a hand. "Good. I passed my last test with flying colors, thanks to practicing a lot with Dayton and Dax."

It had made a world of difference to spend more time voice-off. Dayton truly didn't seem to mind, and with Dax, I had no choice. I'd picked up a ton of new signs and expressions, and my teacher had actually complimented me. Spontaneously.

"And I have a job," I said. Everyone turned to look at me.

"Dax has offered me a part-time position in his shop. I'm gonna specialize in restoring old cars.

Multiple people have reached out to him, looking for someone like that.

The job comes with the requirement that I take some official mechanic classes.

I've already signed up for those. Figured I'd better take them while I still have some hearing left. "

"That's wonderful," Bean said. "But it does sound like a lot. You're still continuing with ASL, too, right?"

I nodded. "Yes, but less intensively. And with Dax, my hours are flexible, so if I'm

having a bad day with my equilibrium and am unable to drive, he understands.”

“Sounds like you hit the jackpot there,” Nash commented.

Another wave of soft fuzziness came over me, this deep tenderness, and I put my head on Dayton’s shoulder. “I sure did.”

“Awww....” Bean and Creek said at the same time.

Nash’s mouth curled into a smile that was sweet yet sad at the same time. “Seems like my work with you guys is done.”

“The baby birds have flown the nest,” Creek said, slapping Nash on the shoulder. “So now it’s time for you to focus on you.”

Nash focusing on himself? Oh, I didn’t think so. That would mean finding a new project to obsess over, a new lost cause who needed his help. And I had an inkling who that would be. But you know what? I’d let him figure that out on his own.

I would focus on my own life. My own happiness. My own man, the one sitting right next to me.

And so I leaned in for a kiss. A soft, sweet, sensual kiss. And if it lasted a little longer than appropriate in a public setting?

I was sheer out of fucks.

Thank you for reading!