



# Tyler's Guarded Heart

## (Cardinal Falls #2)

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**Category:** LGBT+

**Description:** What happens when one-time turns into every day?

I learned my lesson about dating years ago. Since then, I've been perfectly happy hooking up with guys I find online or at a bar. It might not be romantic, but it works for me. Right up until my friends convinced me to try speed dating. The event was supposed to be a one-time thing, as was the hot guy I went home with after.

Graham is the exact kind of guy I could fall for if I let myself do that kind of thing. He's smart and caring, and, for some reason, he seems to genuinely like me. No matter how many times he flashes that winning smile at me, I'm sticking to my one-night-only policy.

The problem? Graham keeps popping up in my life. Even worse, I think I'm starting to fall for him.

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# Page 1

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## Chapter One

### GRAHAM

I'm not sure what I did in a past life to deserve this, but it must have been something terrible. How much penance did a man have to do to make up for past mistakes? I don't know the answer, but I hope tonight covers it.

Steph, the woman I'm covering for while she's on maternity leave, insists that speed dating is a shortcut to finding love. Or, at the very least, a way to meet some new friends while I'm in Carinal Falls. It's bullshit, but since she met her husband at one of these, she swears they're the key to finding a happy, healthy relationship.

It's somehow inspiring and sickening at the same time.

A few nights ago, I had one too many drinks and confided in her that I was looking to settle down. She had the upper hand in the conversation since she stuck to water while I went through several beers. Not that I'd been keeping it a secret, but I didn't want everyone trying to set me up.

Obviously, I'd been right to try and keep it a secret. All my loose lips got me was a ticket to a gay speed dating night at an overpriced hipster bar. Twelve dates in one hour. That means twelve conversations that start with What do you do for a living and Nice weather we've had lately . By the door, a line of people is waiting to sign in with the man holding a clipboard. As I nurse my gin and tonic from my spot at the bar, I ponder making a run for it. No one will ever know.

Except I fully expect Steph to be waiting at my desk in the morning, desperate for details. Could I fake a migraine? Food poisoning? She knows me too well to let me get away with a lie.

A bell dings, and an overly enthusiastic woman steps forward with a microphone. “Hello, singles! I’m so happy you’re joining us for tonight’s speed dating event. We’ve got a great group tonight, and I hope everyone leaves here with at least one phone number.”

Guess I’m stuck. I look around the room expectantly, catching a few eyes from other attendees.

“Everyone will sit according to the number you were given when you came in tonight.”

I glance down at my nametag. There’s a big seven drawn in the corner.

“Those with odd numbers will be on the left-hand side of the tables, and those with even numbers will be on the right. Evens will move each time this bell rings. You only have five minutes for each date, so make the most of it. After everyone has filtered through, we’ll have some time so you can mingle and exchange information. Any questions?” Silence. “Great, then please take your assigned seats.”

I look at the number on my name tag and find seat seven. A skinny, young guy sits down directly across from me and leans forward, resting his chin on his hands. “So, tell me what I need to know about... Graham.” So much worse than I imagined.

“What do you want to know?”

“Hmmm... what makes you tick?” Oh good, he’s going to talk in clichés the whole time.

“I like helping people and ensuring everyone is given a fair chance at life.” God, I sound like such an asshole.

“Good answer. I personally love creating art.”

“Are you a full-time artist?” He pouts at my question.

“No. I don’t really make any money on it. I need a sugar daddy to care for me so I can paint full-time.” Surely, five minutes have gone by at this point. I look up at the moderator. Somehow, fate is on my side, and the bell dings.

“Well, it was nice to meet you”—I look at the name tag on his chest—“Sammie.”

“You, too, Graham. Find me later if you want to have some fun.” He gives me a flirty wink and slides to the next chair, repeating his exact move to lean forward and cradle his chin in his hands. I remind myself that even if it doesn’t get better, it can’t get that much worse. Please let it not get much worse.

A dark, haired man slips into the seat across from me. He’s almost the opposite of the last guy, with thick muscles and a bushy beard.

“Hi, I’m Graham.” It’ll go faster if I put in a little effort. He shakes my hand reluctantly.

“Marcus.” His gaze goes toward the floor, and I follow it. Is he looking at something specific? I don’t see anything, so maybe he’s nervous.

“So, Marcus, tell me something about yourself that isn’t obvious by looking at you?” Did I mention how much I hate small talk?

“I don’t know if there’s much interesting about me.” He shrugs. “I like to knit.”

Okay, he had me there. I wouldn't peg this big guy as a crafter.

"What kinds of things do you like to knit?"

"Mostly hats. I donate them to places like hospitals for newborn babies or people being treated for cancer." Fine. That's incredibly sweet, and he might be exactly my kind of guy. Steph will be thrilled.

"That's amazing. I bet they appreciate them. I've never been very good at craft stuff, but I love seeing what other people create." He seems to perk up a bit when he sees I'm not making fun of him. The bell dings, and I'm sad to see him go. "Maybe I'll get to talk to you again at the end of this." I mean it, too. It's as much of a surprise to me as anyone else.

He nods and moves on to the next table. The guy who slips in after him immediately has my attention. He's wearing a well-worn leather jacket that fits him perfectly. "Tyler," he says, extending his hand toward me and flashing a big smile.

"Graham."

"Like the cracker?" Like I've never heard that one before.

"Like Graham Greene, the novelist. My mom's a literature professor, so her kids all share names with her favorite writers."

"I don't think I know his books, but now I'm curious."

"Does Tyler come from anywhere?"

"I don't think so. I think it's the only name my parents could agree on."

“Well, it suits you.”

“In what way?” He leans back and stretches his arms overhead. A flash of milky flesh appears on his stomach as his black t-shirt rides up. I lick my lips without thinking and immediately get a bit self-conscious.

“I think it’s the dark hair. It feels very Tyler-like to me.”

“Well, I can’t say I’ve ever heard that before.” It’s probably because my brain couldn’t come up with anything better. All the gears are stuck on that thin strip of skin. The blonde lady dings the bell, clearly for the purpose of fucking with me. That was not five minutes. “I hope you find me for a drink later.”

I nod.

Nod. That’s all I can manage. He slides into the next seat, and my new date shows up. The new guy starts in on his spiel, but I can’t keep my gaze off Tyler. My new date does his best to get my attention, batting his eyelashes and touching my arm. I do my best to feign interest in the discussion, but internally, I count down the minutes until I can buy Tyler a drink.

TYLER

I can feel his eyes on me. Even though I’m three dates down the table, I keep glancing back at Graham. He’s not my type. Sure, he’s gorgeous, but I go for guys who are a bit wilder. Graham’s the first person I’ve met who looks uncomfortable in a pair of jeans. Something tells me he’d prefer to be in a suit right now.

Weird .

Something about his clean-cut look is getting me going tonight. Once this

ridiculousness ends, maybe I can talk him into a blow job in the parking lot. I'd say bathroom, but this bar is a little too high-brow for that. Something tells me the staff are used to a much more boring clientele. I really don't need the cops called on me tonight.

The bell dings, and I flash the bear across from me a big smile. It doesn't make up for the bad conversation, but at least I won't come off as a total dick.

A whole hour of this? What kind of sadist plans these activities?

After another thirty minutes, the blonde woman who gave the intro speech gets back on the microphone, and it becomes clear that Extrovert Barbie thinks this is a good time.

"Now that you've had your twelve dates, we have time for some mingling. Please be sure to exchange phone numbers with anyone who sparked your interest tonight. If you didn't find that special someone, come back next time. We'll have a whole new group of eligible bachelors." I roll my eyes. How about never? "You're sure to find that perfect someone."

I think one time will be quite enough, thank you. Not because I met my soulmate tonight—I didn't—but because my appearance at this stupid event should appease my friends for at least a few months.

They think I'm not trying hard enough with the dating market. They're right. There's a complete lack of effort on my part. By design. I'm happy with my app hookups. Try explaining that to my best friend, who's disgustingly in love with his new boyfriend. He's always been big on romance, but now he's insufferable.

At least now I can check this off the list and buy myself three months of not discussing my abysmal love life. If I go on one date after this, I can probably stretch

it out to five or six months. Would a hookup count as a date?

I brush off the guy I'm sitting with— Matt? Mark? —and head for the bar. When I get the bartender's attention, I turn over one of the tickets I got at the front door in exchange for a local IPA. As soon as the glass is in my hand, I look for Graham. Out of the twelve guys I met, he's the only one I can tolerate.

Fine, maybe there was a little bit of a spark between us. Not enough to break my rules about dating, but I could still have a little fun tonight.

A streak of jealousy runs through me when I spot him talking to one of the other singles. They're too comfortable, leaning up against the wall, joking. Graham casually brushes his hand against the other guy's arm.

I hate it. I can't be jealous that he's talking to someone else when I know nothing more than his name. He's not mine. And isn't that the fucking point of this whole thing?

Fine . I shove my feelings aside and look around for anyone else who might catch my eye. The bear I spoke to a few minutes ago is nursing a drink near the edge of the room, and I sidle up to him. I can't quite remember his name, but I'm sure I'll figure it out. "Hey," I say as I lean against one of the tall tables nearby.

"Hey. How were your other dates?" He turns toward me and takes a sip of his red wine.

"Not memorable. You?" I lick my lips at... Brandon, according to the name tag I spot when he opens his arms.

"Same, I guess. It's not really my scene."



“And where exactly is your scene?” He looks like he came straight from Vermont. He’s got the big biceps and the woodsman scruff. The only thing missing is the flannel shirt.

“Somewhere a little less...” He looks around a bit, his face wrinkling up a bit.

“Pretentious?” I offer. “And not in a good way.” This place is trying way too hard to be cool. It’s like HGTV threw up in here with the mix of reclaimed wood, subway tiles, and wine bottle pendant lights. When did succulents become wall decorations?

“Yeah, that.”

I glance across the room and don’t see Graham. Or the guy he was talking to. My stomach twists. They left. Together. Guess I should’ve expected it. Graham might not be my type, but he’s a catch. I’m sure he had multiple guys begging him for his number. Some of them probably intend to use it for more than a blow job in the parking lot, which is all I was going to offer anyway.

Why do I care? It’s not like I’m here to meet my life partner. All I want is someone to get my friends off my ass. If they happen to help me relax and enjoy the evening, even better. It should not be this hard to find someone to get off with.

“Want to go somewhere a little quieter? Maybe somewhere a little more comfortable?” Brandon sets his empty glass on the bar and slides it away. I give him my best flirty smile and hope my disappointment doesn’t show through. It’s not that he’s not good-looking, he is, but I had my eye on someone else. That’s what I get for hesitating. I console myself with the fact that Graham’s probably not a one-night-stand kind of guy. His whole vibe screams picket fence, two kids, and a golden retriever. The only part of that I would even consider is the dog, but something smaller. Like a beagle.

I gulp down the rest of my beer and nod toward the door. At least I can tell my friends that their efforts weren't wasted. Go to speed dating? Check. Hook up with a gorgeous mountain man? Double check.

"Oh, are you leaving already?" Graham's unmistakable voice sends a shiver through my whole body. I turn to find him standing behind me. Very close. Damn. He's tall. I love the feeling of looking up at a guy—not hard to come by since I'm a whole five foot nine—but Graham is tall. Over six feet, by my estimate. There's something about craning my neck to take in the whole picture that makes my heart beat a little faster.

"We were about to get out of here." Brandon chimes in. I want to growl at him, but it's not polite. Not that I usually care about that kind of thing, but I'm on my best behavior tonight.

"Too bad. I wanted to buy you a drink."

How did I end up in this situation? A night of getting my friends to stop riding my ass somehow turned into choosing between two gorgeous men. I don't want to hurt either of their feelings. My heart pounds in my chest as I try to come up with something good to say. Neither of them looks like the sharing type.

"Maybe I can take a rain check instead?"

"What happened to the other guy you were talking to?" It's the only thing my stupid brain can come up with as my body drifts closer to Graham. He smells of citrus and spice. It shouldn't work, but it's strangely intoxicating. Would he find it weird if I leaned in so I could inhale more of it? Probably.

"I politely let him know that he's not my type." I gulp. Does that mean I'm his type? Brandon shrinks back against the wall, and I immediately feel bad. I'm many things,

but I'm neither a tease nor an asshole. Showing up to one of these stupid events is hard under the best of circumstances, but getting blown off when you thought you had a shot? Yeah, that's a level of suck I don't want to be responsible for.

"Yeah, a rain check sounds good." How long do I have to wait before I cash it in? Is tomorrow too soon?

"You know, I probably should skip out. I have work early tomorrow morning," Brandon says. I don't believe him, but he can probably see the tension simmering between Graham and me.

"Oh, can I give you my number? In case you have a free night in the near future." I brush my fingers over his hand when he gives me his phone to enter my number. It's literally the least I can do at this point. There's a hint of guilt simmering in my gut, but it's overwhelmed by the sheer relief I feel at not having to choose. My jaw unclenches as I put my number into Brandon's phone and send myself a quick text. He'll probably never use it, but I've been surprised before. After a quick, polite smile and goodbye, Brandon makes a beeline for the door.

"Sorry, I didn't mean to scare him off," Graham says. The smirk on his face says otherwise.

"Really? I thought you wanted to get a drink with me." I wish I had something to drink right now to keep my hands busy.

"Oh, I do. But I don't want to be a jerk in the process."

"Well, how about we get a drink, and I'll let you know if I think you're a jerk?"

A smile spreads across his face. "After you."

I head toward a couple of empty seats at the bar, Graham following close behind, one hand on my lower back. As soon as we're seated, I put my hand up to get the bartender's attention.

Graham sits next to me, shifting so he's facing me, trapping me between his thick thighs. How is that so fucking sexy? When the bartender comes by, we each order a beer, forking over the last of our drink tickets. "So, Tyler," he says once we have our drinks. "How did you end up here tonight?"

"Is that a practical question or a philosophical one?"

"Let's say it's somewhere in the middle." He clinks his glass against mine and takes a sip. I stare, mesmerized, as his tongue licks the foam clinging to his upper lip. Fuck . I can think of much better uses for his tongue.

"My friends are assholes, and they think I'm not getting out enough." He doesn't need to know that they're right.

"Ah, asshole friends are the best, aren't they?"

I nod. I love those guys, even if they are way too pushy. "Do you have asshole friends, too?"

"I do, but the asshole in question also happens to be my new boss. She thinks everyone should be as ridiculously in love and happy as she is. One of her friends runs these events, so they teamed up to force me into it."

I'm suddenly very thankful for his boss. Maybe I can send her a fruit basket or something? "So, we've both ended up here against our will."

"Though, it turns out I'm actually enjoying myself."

I nod my agreement, though I won't be sharing that part of the evening with my friends. If they ask, it was terrible, and I'm never doing it again. At least the second part is true. "Another thing we have in common." We take a few sips in silence. I hate this part. The get-to-know-you song and dance is so artificial. People should come with little cheat sheets. It'd save a lot of time and energy. "So, what else should I know about you other than the fact that you're named after a British author?"

"Not much to know, really. I'm the youngest of three children, so my older siblings like to pry into my life and pretend they're still in charge. Lucky for me, they live a couple of towns away, so the butting in is limited to phone calls and text messages. Also, I have a very grumpy cat that mooches off me but rarely makes an appearance when I have company. What about you?"

"I guess the opposite. I'm an only child and have no pets." My parents love me, but I'm not sure kids were in their plans. I just sort of... happened. Pets, on the other hand, were a hard no. They got in the way of travel plans and white furniture.

"Hmmm..." He considers the information carefully. I know I didn't offer much. I never do. I don't think a hookup needs my life story, and while Graham seems like a great guy, I'm not planning on having him stick around long enough to need more details. "Well, I think we likely have a few more things in common. Like right now, I'm really hoping you want to go back to my place and get to know each other better." He lets a hand fall to my knee. My cock immediately takes an interest in the touch. Fuck, yes, I want to get to know every inch of this man. Preferably multiple times tonight.

"Interesting. I guess we do have a few things in common." I down the last few sips of my beer and let my knee bump against his a few times. "Want to get out of here?"

## Page 2

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### Chapter Two

#### GRAHAM

I check my rearview mirror for the hundredth time. Tyler agreed to follow me back to my place from the bar, but I'm still relieved every time I see his truck behind me. Ten minutes feels so much longer tonight.

When I finally turn into my driveway and see him pull up along the curb, I let out a breath. For some reason, my heart is set on this guy.

No, not my heart. It's way too soon for anything like that. Tyler might be intriguing, but we have a lot of getting to know each other to do. My cock, however, is fully onboard. It's been longer than I'm willing to admit since I hooked up with anyone.

Tyler meets me on the porch and stands right behind me as I work to unlock the front door. Hopefully, the darkness hides the shakiness of my hands. I'm not kidding when I say it's been a while. Traveling around for work seems like fun until it's time to pack up the boxes again. It also doesn't attract the kind of person interested in more than a few fun evenings together. Not that Tyler has said anything about looking for more, but a man can dream, right?

The front door opens, and we stumble into the house. I don't even get the light on before he pushes me up against the wall and attacks my mouth. I've been thinking about this for the last two hours, and it's much better than I anticipated. This guy can kiss.

It's not just his mouth, though. He takes full control, from the way our tongues twist together to the way his body presses against mine. It doesn't matter that he's shorter than me or looks like I could throw him over my shoulder and haul him off. At this moment, he has all the power, and I'm happy to let him take over.

Maybe I'm out of practice, but I don't remember kissing being this good. I shift my weight so my cock presses against his stomach. Tyler moans into my mouth, the vibrations carrying through my entire body. Even in our rush, he takes the time to explore every inch of my mouth. I'd let him do this all night long, but eventually, I break away to catch my breath.

"Can I suck you?" Does he really need to ask? I'm not going to turn down an offer like that. At this point, he can do anything and everything he wants. I nod, unable to form words. My brain is offline. Tyler kisses me again, this time his movements more controlled and gentler.

I barely notice his hands sliding down my body until he works my jeans open. I help him pull the pants and briefs down to my knees. Thank God I thought to put on a nice pair of briefs before the event, even though I didn't expect to end up with anyone. I groan as my cock bobs free, standing up straight against my stomach. Tyler sinks to his knees, his gaze never leaving my erection. He licks his lips, and a drop of precum appears at my slit. A devilish grin crosses his face as he leans in to lap it up.

"Oh, fuck." There's no way this is going to last long. I want to take in every bit of Tyler and enjoy the way his mouth feels as he explores me for the first time. Instead, I can tell this is going to be quick and dirty. I sure hope there's a next time so I can get the chance to savor him properly.

His tongue runs over my head, lapping at precum and swirling around my sensitive tip. I can't seem to stop the pornographic sounds coming out of my mouth. He hasn't even fully taken me into his mouth, and I'm already so close. "Please." I'm not above

begging. I want to feel his mouth on me. “I want... I need...” I can’t seem to form a coherent thought between swipes of his tongue.

Either he takes pity on me or reads my mind because he sucks me down, taking my whole cock in one go. Tyler swallows, and his throat tightens around me. I slam my eyes closed, trying to hold back from thrusting into his mouth. The way he’s devouring me, I’m sure he could take it, but I love the way he’s controlling me now. My partners tend to let me lead in the bedroom. It’s nice to be on the other side.

I hope to God there will be a second and third time, though, because I want my chance to take charge of the situation. He slips a hand down to play with my balls, and I’m done. There’s no way I can keep from coming. “Gonna...” I manage to pant out, giving him the opportunity to pull away if he doesn’t want to swallow. If anything, he doubles his efforts, hollowing his cheeks and sucking me harder.

My orgasm rushes through me, and I call his name as I drop my head back against the wall. He swallows down my cum and keeps my spent cock in his mouth, running his tongue across my oversensitive tip until I shudder.

I’m barely managing to stay upright. Thankfully, the wall holds my weight as I sag against it. I haven’t come that hard in... ever. When I manage to look down, Tyler’s gazing up at me with a heated look and licking up the bits of cum clinging to the edges of his mouth.

Damn . He looks good like that. I yank him up and lick his lips before capturing his mouth in a rough kiss. It’s a huge turn-on being able to taste myself on his lips. I’m not sure I’ve ever gotten off on that before, but Tyler brings out a possessive streak in me that I don’t remember feeling before. Like the way it felt in the bar watching him almost leave with another man.

He rocks against me, his cock still hard, and I make quick work of his belt. Once I



have his pants open, I spit in my hand and shove it down his pants. I take his cock in my fist and stroke him a couple times. “What do you want?” His head falls forward against my chest, and he lets out a deep moan that makes my cock twitch even though I came less than two minutes ago.

“Fuck. Graham. Please,” Tyler says, panting. I keep stroking him, adding a twist at the top of my stroke. Next time, I want him naked—in my bed—so I can have my way with him. See how many times I can bring him to the edge and pull back before he begs me to let him come. His body starts to tremble, then he gasps, and cum spills over my fist. I stroke him through his orgasm, taking my hand away before he becomes too sensitive.

Damn, there better be a next time.

TYLER

It takes several minutes before I can stand up straight on my own. I’m pretty sure my brain shut down when I orgasmed, and I’m not sure how to get it started again. All I can do when Graham asks if I’m okay is to say, “Uh-huh.” I’m better than okay at this point. This is in my top ten best hookups. Maybe even the top three. I’ll have to think about it when the post-orgasm haze clears.

Mreow . A gray, long-haired cat stares up at me expectantly.

“Gulliver, what are you doing?” Graham asks.

“Gulliver?” I raise my eyebrow. Aren’t cats supposed to be named something cutesy? Like fluffy or blackie?

“I know it’s not the most creative. Technically, my sister named him. He ended up with me after my nephew developed a severe cat allergy.”

“I see.” The furry thing is still looking at me. I lean down and offer him my hand. He sniffs it, then takes a few steps away. “I probably smell like cum.” I don’t know why I care if the cat likes me. I’m never going to see this guy or Gulliver again.

“I’m kind of hoping the cat doesn’t know what that is.” I snort as Graham says it. To be fair, I didn’t really think about that one. “Though, I’m surprised Gulliver’s out. He usually hides when I have company over. You must be special.”

I don’t know how to respond to that, but thankfully, Gulliver bails me out by meowing angrily. Maybe I could like this cat?

“Yes, yes. I know it’s past dinner time.” Graham manages to pull his pants back up and rounds the corner. Gulliver doesn’t move. He continues staring at me with wide yellow eyes.

“Should I—” I have no idea what to do with a cat. Do you pet them? Pick them up? Provide it with a human sacrifice?

“Pspspsp. Here, Gulliver. I have your dinner.” Gulliver’s ears perk up, and he turns and runs toward Graham. I guess that answers my question. I take the opportunity to get my jeans fastened and pull myself together.

“So, I should probably get going,” I call loudly, unsure if he can even hear me. Feeding a cat must be difficult if he’s still working on it. I always assumed you just dumped some kibble in a bowl.

“Oh, do you have to?” He steps back into the entryway, still looking thoroughly debauched. And yet, he still somehow looks put together. It’s an odd look and makes me want to work a little bit harder to take him apart. No one should look this good after sex. “I was hoping you’d stay a little longer. I could get you a drink? Or a snack?”

“I’m not sure that’s a good idea.” What am I saying? I want to stay and see if I can break down that perfect appearance. But anything more than a quickie tends to become... complicated. The last thing I need in my life right now is a distraction. Or heartbreak. Everything’s finally working out my way. Work, friends, volunteering. It’s all settled. Not exciting, I know, but having it be boring after a period of too much excitement is strangely enjoyable.

Do not tell past-me .

“Why not?” He tilts his head to the side, and I let out a sigh. I don’t have an excuse. At least not a good one.

“Okay, but just for a little while. I have work early in the morning.” It’s not a complete lie. Early is subjective. Nine is early to me.

“Perfect. Me, too. It’s one of the last days with the woman I’m filling in for. She’ll be out on maternity leave starting next week.” He pauses. “Unless the baby decides to come sooner. I hope not, though. I need the orientation time.” Graham shoves his hands in his pockets and nods for me to follow him. He leads me around the corner, through the kitchen, and into the living room.

“Wow. This place is—” I can’t find the word I’m looking for.

“Bland? Yeah, it’s a corporate rental. The company decorates it in the most boring, minimalistic gray possible.” He sits down on the sofa and pats the seat next to him.

“With a short-term lease, it’s not like I had a lot of options.”

I eye the seat next to him before sitting, putting at least a foot of space between us.

“Oh, so you don’t live in Cardinal Falls?” That should reduce the chance of an awkward encounter in the next few months. For a city, sometimes it seems like a small town.

“Not permanently. I mostly do temporary contracts—filling in for people when they’re on leave or serving in interim roles until they hire a permanent person.”

“Doesn’t that get lonely? Always moving around?” I know I’m spoiled living in the same city where I went to college, with the same group of friends I’ve had for a decade. Having a routine and places that I know and love helps keep me focused. If I get bored, I can always travel.

“Sometimes, but I like meeting new people. Plus, I stay in this general region, so I can go home or visit people easily. My jobs tend to have a lot of flexibility.” He crosses his legs and shifts a little bit closer. “Though, I do find it hard to do anything resembling dating. That’s part of why I’m trying to find a permanent position now. The moving around was great for a while, but I’m ready to settle down.”

I swallow the lump in my throat. Is it hot in here? Stupid speed dating. Keyword: dating. Not hooking-up. Of course, he was there to meet the love of his life. Luckily, Gulliver is willing to rescue me a second time. He hops onto my lap and curls up into a ball. I hold my hands up, unsure what to do with my new friend. Then the little beast starts to purr.

“I’m sorry, I swear he usually hides. I figured once he got dinner, he’d make himself scarce.” Graham reaches toward Gulliver, and the purr turns into more of a growl. “I think he’s attached to you now.”

“Well, I’ll have to trust you on that.” It’s definitely too hot in here. “Is he going to be mad when I get up to leave?” This would be an excellent time to find out. I’m ready to make a beeline for the door and get to the safety of my own apartment.

“Maybe, but I guess we’ll both have to get over it.” I don’t miss his use of the word both. If I’m honest, I’m not ready to go either. As much as my flight instinct is kicking in, there’s something comfortable about being with Graham. Sitting on this

couch with Graham and Gulliver is the perfect way to spend a night. Not just tonight, either. It's easy to imagine doing this repeatedly.

And that's why it's time to go. "Well, I guess he'll have to find another bed." I gently nudge him off my lap. He looks at me incredulously before hopping down and slinking out of the room. "It really is late."

"Can I get your number? Maybe we can meet up some night when we don't have work in the morning?" He holds his phone out for me.

I stop myself from asking him why. "Sure." I put my number into his phone, stopping short of texting myself. It's easier to ignore my feelings if there's not a constant reminder in my inbox.

Graham walks me to the door. "Can I kiss you goodnight?" A guy I recently sucked until he came down my throat is asking permission to kiss me? That's the kind of romantic shit I only see in movies. Clearly, I'm dreaming. Though, as far as dreams go, this is a damn good one.

"Of course," I say because it's the only right answer. He leans in and kisses me so gently that it's barely a whisper over my lips. It's the opposite of everything we did earlier, but somehow perfect. When he pulls away, I nearly cry at the loss. How can something so soft be too much?

"Have a good night. Drive safe."

I nod as I walk out the door and back to my truck. Graham stays in the doorway, watching until I start the truck and drive down the block.

I make it all the way around the corner before I let myself look in the rearview mirror. For the first time in years, I long for a relationship.

No, not a relationship. For Graham.

## Page 3

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:28 am*

### Chapter Three

#### TYLER

I wipe the back of my hand across my brow. Despite my best efforts to avoid mixing dirt with the sweat dripping off my forehead, I can feel the grime clinging to my skin. Whatever. I only have twenty minutes left for the day. It's not like there's anyone around to comment on it, either.

I knee-walk over to the next section where I need to weed today and get to work. I'm already imagining how good the hot water will feel on my sore muscles tonight. Until last year, I'd never been one for baths. It's sitting in a bowl of dirty water. But, apparently, I'm getting old, and spending a day crawling around in the garden leaves me tight and sore in ways it didn't used to.

Plus, it has the added benefit of letting me soak off all the grime in a big pile of bubbles.

The first sprouts are pushing through the surface of the soil this week. That's the nice thing about working out in the garden. I get to see the whole life cycle of these plants. Every year, I plant the seeds, tend to the garden, and harvest the rewards from my hard work. For someone who previously couldn't keep a small cactus alive, I now have a renewed sense of purpose. It grounds me to repeat this process year in and year out, always trying to do a little bit better but knowing things like the weather are out of my control. Although, I might need to find something that doesn't require crawling around on my hands and knees for hours at a time now that I'm in my thirties. That or buy one of those ridiculous-looking kneeling pads.

Most of what we grow here at Sprouting Joy ends up as food for those in need, either through a food bank or one of our community partners. I never see that side of things; my part is done once the vegetables are harvested, but I like going home knowing that someone gets to eat that night because of the work I did. Sure, I only do this one evening a week these days, but it still feels significant. Especially when my day job doesn't help anyone unless they turn over fistfuls of money first.

"Tyler?" A pair of high heel shoes appears on the sidewalk in front of me. I don't need to look to know they belong to Steph, the executive director. She's been here for nearly a decade, and I adore her. Where most people might have seen me as a temporary misfit, Steph took the time to figure out how to make the best of my time at Sprouting Joy. She's the reason I'm still here after five years.

It's rare for her to make an appearance outside. Usually, she catches me when I arrive or waits for me to come back inside at the end of the day. The stilettos she favors, even while very pregnant, aren't built for the rough terrain in the garden. I try to look up at her, but the sun is in my eyes. I need to remember a hat or sunglasses now that the sun is setting so late. Rocking back onto my heels, I push myself up and do my best to wipe at least some of the dirt off my hands.

"I want to introduce you to someone." A man steps out from behind Steph. Fuck . I know that figure. Graham .

I was right—he looks far more comfortable in his navy blue suit than in the casual attire he wore to the bar. And damn, he wears that suit well. It must be tailored to hug him in all the right places like that. I don't know much about suits, but they certainly never fit me like that. Probably because the only one I own was bought off the clearance rack of a fast fashion store. It doesn't help that I'm imagining the way he looks under all that fabric.

Steph rubs her round belly as she smiles at me. "This is Graham Stevens. He'll be



taking over for me while I'm on maternity leave. Graham, this is Tyler. He's one of our best and most dedicated volunteers."

Oh. OH. The pieces slowly fall into place. How did I not figure this out last night? Is there a protocol for this kind of thing? Do I pretend I don't know him? The alternative is admitting that we hooked up. Steph and I get along well, but not well enough that I confide in her about my sex life. Fuck, I don't even talk to my best friends about my sex life.

"It's nice to meet you, Tyler." He extends a hand toward me.

Alright, I guess we're going with the pretend-to-be-strangers approach. As if I could forget the way his dick felt in my mouth last night. "It's great to meet you. I'll pass on the handshake, though, if you don't mind." I hold up my dirt-covered hands as proof of the issue. His pure white dress shirt should be thanking me for that one. Gloves would help, but I like the feel of the soil on my skin. It provides me with a deeper connection to the process than having fabric in the middle. There's so much I can learn about how the crops are doing through touch, from the way a leaf feels to the texture of the soil. A little dirt is a small price to pay.

"Understood. Steph has nothing but wonderful things to say about you." My face burns at the compliment. I'm suddenly pissed that my parents didn't come up with a more creative name than Tyler. If I had a more unique name, maybe Graham would've caught on sooner and could've texted me a heads-up. There are probably hundreds of Tylers in Cardinal Falls.

"Steph exaggerates." These days, I'm only here on Wednesday nights. It's not a typical shift, but Steph lets me keep it so I can volunteer while working full-time at my day job. She's always been willing to accommodate me. Finding me extra hours or creating shifts to help me out.

“I can’t give away all my secrets.” She smiles at me before turning to Graham. “Tyler here does most of the actual gardening. He knows the schedule for harvesting, so defer to him if you have any questions.”

“Whatever you do, don’t trust the kids,” I add. I’m desperate to get out of this conversation, but this information is vital. I’m not letting him fuck up my garden. “They’ll try to convince you that things are ready too soon. It’s not malicious; they get excited.” Kids love to look at the vegetables, but they’re prone to picking things before they ripen. Those last few days can be the difference between the food being great or unusable. Sometimes it’s a good learning experience, but often it’s a waste. God, I’m going to miss Steph. She might seem like the type to let people walk all over her, but I’ve seen her fight back with a fierceness she conceals most of the time. She makes sure no one touches my plants without permission.

What am I going to do without her for three months?

Fuck . What am I going to do about running into Graham weekly for three months? Do volunteers get sympathy maternity leave?

I can do this. It’s once a week. I rarely see Steph unless one of us makes an effort. If I channel some effort into not running into Graham, we should be able to get through this. Hell, I bet I can go a whole three months without running into Graham more than a couple of times. I might even be able to make this our only awkward run-in. Could I get that lucky?

GRAHAM

I know Cardinal Falls is a small city, but I had no idea it was this small. How is it that that one person I’ve hooked up with also happens to be one of the volunteers at my new job? I’m tempted to run the statistics to find out, but it won’t change anything. I’m pretty sure something in the ethics manual says no fraternizing with the

volunteers. Or maybe that only applies to paid staff?

Not that it matters. Tyler clearly has zero interest in repeating our night together. He made that clear when he nearly left a cloud of dust escaping my apartment.

“Thanks for volunteering. Steph’s been raving about your ability to keep this garden running for days.” The shock of seeing Tyler standing in front of me is slowly subsiding. His face is smudged with dirt along his cheeks and forehead. Somehow, it only makes him more attractive.

Maybe pretending not to know him wasn’t the best choice, but I panicked. Technically, Steph knows the details of that night. Well, some of the details. I had no idea she knew the guy. Somehow, I don’t think either Steph or Tyler will be amused at the situation.

Now? I don’t even know where to begin. He technically reports to me. Steph is crazy about him and how good his work is. And me? I want a few minutes alone to collect my thoughts.

“I certainly try. Though, to be honest, I think one of the other volunteers is actively trying to sabotage me.” I raise an eyebrow at him. Steph laughs, bending over and holding her belly. “I swear every week I come back and find that someone’s moved something or planted something new that doesn’t work in this soil.” He glares at Steph. “However, someone refuses to give me the information I need to solve the mystery.”

“You know I can’t give you information about other volunteers.” The rapport between the two of them is obvious, and my panic turns to guilt. Steph’s not only the person I’m filling in for; she’s an old friend. We’ve known each other for years. Not only am I lying, but I’ve forced Tyler into the same lie. For my first week, I’ve managed to find a lot of trouble.

“I’m going to start showing up randomly until I track the person down.”

“I’d be worried if I thought you had time for something like that. I know your job keeps you too busy to make good on that promise.” He turns a bright shade of red. Clearly, this garden means a lot to him. Would it be overstepping to find out who was messing with him and ask them to behave?

Barely ten minutes in, I’m already considering giving Tyler special treatment. This is why no fraternizing rules exist.

“We’ll let you get back to it. I wanted to make sure the two of you met before I go on maternity leave.” She rubs her belly again. “It’s really an any day now kind of thing, so I don’t want to leave any loose ends.”

“I’m going to miss you so much.” Tyler wipes his hands on his jeans, leaving streaks of reddish dirt on the ripped denim. They hug for a few seconds, and I see her whisper something in his ear, but I can’t make out the words.

“I’ll be back soon, so don’t think you can get away with anything. I expect to hear nothing but reports of you being on your best behavior.”

“Always.” He gives her a mock salute, and she shakes her head. “It was nice to meet you, Graham.” The way he says my name makes my cock twitch. I shift my position a bit and try not to picture the way he came with my name on his lips the other night.

“I’ll see you around.” Or not. I don’t usually see many of the volunteers at jobs like this, and I didn’t have any plans for that to change over the next several months. We can be professional. Yep, professionalism will be my middle name.

### Chapter Four

#### TYLER

Normally, I look forward to Thursday nights with my friends. They were my idea in the first place. Sorta. I'm not the most social person. Left to my own devices, I would go to work, come home, and plant myself in front of the television to play video games until I either need to sleep or go to work. Not exactly a healthy lifestyle.

Several years ago, I found myself doing exactly that. We'd all graduated from college and discovered that seeing friends on a regular basis took effort and planning. Friends I saw daily suddenly became people I texted a few times a week. At some point, I realized that I hadn't spoken to anyone about non-work-related things in weeks. I might not be a social butterfly, but I needed more than that.

With a little push from my therapist, I demanded that we all make our little group a priority. Now, at the very least, Thursday nights are reserved for my closest friends. Secretly, I think they all needed it too. Which is why, years later, these nights are still sacred. Unless I'm nearly dead or out of town, I'm at The Flaming Unicorn. And so is the rest of the crew.

Tonight, I find myself wishing I could spend the evening wallowing on the couch instead. The whole week has been a giant mindfuck, thanks to Graham. He's been on my mind since the moment I left his house. Somehow, our night together keeps playing on an endless loop inside my mind. It's annoying.

And fucking hot.

And it's freaking me out. Usually, with my hook-ups, once we both get off, I'm happy to say thank you and enjoy my escape. No need to stick around to see if we turn into something more. We won't. Why wait around for confirmation?

But Graham won't leave my mind or, apparently, my real life.

Maybe if our interaction ended with that goodbye kiss, I'd be able to let go. Sure, I'd be fantasizing about him in the shower for a few weeks, but then I could move on. But no, instead, Graham will be only a few yards away from me every week while I'm at Sprouting Joy. I'll be able to look up from my spot in the garden and see his office window. The blinds will be closed—they always are—but still. I don't think I'm strong enough to keep my mind from wandering to dirty daydreams.

My friends don't need to know any of this. They would all have lots of advice—maybe even some good—but I have no desire to bear my soul tonight. I can easily keep them talking about work or the newest video game, but I'm afraid the constant thoughts of Graham combined with a few drinks will have me opening my big mouth. Which is why I promise to limit myself to one beer.

The Flaming Unicorn has been our go-to spot since we discovered it at the end of college. It's a low-key gay bar that features local beers and pub food. They don't do any of the wild nights that other places do, like karaoke or drag nights. Instead, they stick to providing an inclusive place where people can come, chat, and enjoy the evening.

Aaron and Nathan are already sitting in our favorite booth, bent over Aaron's phone, watching a video. I give them a second and head to the table as they burst into laughter. "What's so funny?" I know the general answer, but it gets them talking and skips that part where they ask me about my day.

"Some video on Instagram . It's a stupid skit about an office job, but it's close to how

Nathan describes his coworkers.” Aaron’s the quietest of our group. He’s also whip-smart and a big softie. He’s bi but never complains about the fact that we spend all our going-out time at gay bars. I occasionally offer to be his wingman if he wants to go somewhere else, especially since he usually dates women, but he always turns me down. Probably for the best since I’d be terrible at it.

“Hey, it’s getting better,” Nathan responds defensively.

“Is it?” I ask. “Or is Colt forcing you to set some boundaries and finally take care of yourself?” Nathan slinks back into his seat. “That’s what I thought.” My best friend is a workaholic. Over the years, I’ve watched Nathan work himself into the ground for that position. I know it’s important work, but I worry about him. I’d never convinced him to take time off or cut back on his work. Apparently, all he needed was a sexy boyfriend to step in.

“Speaking of getting people to focus on things other than work.” Aaron turns in the booth to face me. “Have you gone out with that guy from speed dating again?” So much for my attempts at distraction.

I thought attending that event would buy me a few months out of the hot seat. The group chat had been thrilled when I said I met someone at the event. The going rate for spending the evening at a ridiculous bar talking to twelve different men for five minutes a piece had to be more than a week. And I went home with someone. I should get at least three months without having this same conversation.

“Nope. That was a one-time thing.”

“I thought you said he was nice,” Nathan says as he waves down the waitress walking past us.

“And hot.” Leave it to Aaron to bring up the important elements.

“He is nice. And hot.” I shrug. “It wasn’t meant to be.” No matter how much the universe might be trying to prove otherwise.

We order a few more drinks, ensuring we order for Matthias, who’s running a bit late, as usual.

“Okay, but how do you know it isn’t meant to be if you don’t give it more than one night?” Nathan asks. “I know you don’t see it going anywhere, but maybe give the guy more than five minutes to win you over.”

“Why are you so interested in my love life? Is Colt not satisfying you?” If distraction doesn’t work, maybe deflection will. They aren’t wrong. On paper, Graham’s a perfect fit, and I can’t deny that we have chemistry. But it takes more than that to make a long-term relationship work.

“Sorry.” Nathan holds his hands up in front of him. “I only want you to be happy. I would love to see you in a relationship instead of bouncing from hook up to hook up.” I know they all mean well. When Nathan was sitting here a few months ago pining over Colt, I gave him a whole lecture about getting off his ass and doing something to make the relationship work. Why shouldn’t he give me the same talk? “And, for the record, Colt keeps me very satisfied. Very.”

Ugh . The look that comes over Nathan’s face says he’s thinking about what Colt will do to him when he gets home.

“Sorry,” I mumble. “I’m being an asshole. I’m happy, though. I don’t want a relationship right now. I’m so close to finally getting that promotion at work, which means my free time is dedicated to ensuring this latest project goes smoothly.” Rumor around the office is that I’m stepping in as team lead on our next project as a trial run. I’ve been waiting for this opportunity for years; there’s no way I’m fucking it up. My office is full of folks who’ve been there since the start of the company.



They have seniority in nearly every aspect, which means getting any sort of bump is difficult. I've been begging for my chance at every opportunity, and next week, I'm finally getting it.

Matthias rushes in and drops into the last seat. Thankfully, he comes in with a crazy story about one of his clients that changes the topic and keeps everyone engaged for the rest of the evening. Our clients can be controlling and weird, but the ones who come to his family's financial management firm are truly next level.

True to my promise, I stop after a single beer. My lips are sealed as far as Graham goes. That goes for both talking about him to my friends and any partaking in any future blow jobs.

\* \* \*

## GRAHAM

I pace back and forth across my living room a few times, trying to figure out how I want to handle the situation with Tyler. Honestly? I've got nothing. I've written and deleted more text messages to him over the last few hours than I care to admit. Nothing sounds quite right. Which is also why I'm nursing my second glass of merlot.

It's not like I've been in this situation before. There's no simple way to say, I would like to see you again, but things are a little complicated .

As a last-ditch effort, I open my contacts and click on my sister Charlotte's name. It only rings once before she answers. "Hey! How's my favorite brother?"

"I thought Dan was your favorite brother?"

“He’s being a bit of an ass this week, so you’ve been bumped up. Congratulations!” I hear rustling in the background and a quiet command to one of her kids.

“Well, hopefully, this won’t push me down the list.” I love having physical distance between me and my family, but in moments like this, I miss being able to stop by and have the comfort of in-person support. It’s stupid, but we were tight-knit growing up. As the baby of the family, my siblings always protected me—sometimes a little too much. It didn’t help that I didn’t have a real growth spurt until high school or that I was gay. Teens could be cruel to anyone who didn’t fit the mold. I never got seriously bullied, but that’s because the two of them made sure people didn’t mess with me. Even once they were out of the house, they had friends checking up on me. At the time, it was annoying. In retrospect, I can see how fiercely they cared.

“Uh-oh. Tell me, what’s up?”

I give her a rundown of the situation, skipping over some of the more intimate details. We’re close, but not that close.

“Wow, you really know how to pick ‘em, don’t you?”

“I knew I should’ve called Dan instead.” We both know that’s a joke. Dan is smart when it comes to numbers and computers. Relationships? Not so much. Thankfully, his wife keeps him in line and puts up with his shit.

“Don’t do that. I’m being a smartass. Have you talked to Tyler about it?”

I groan. “I keep trying to text him, but I can’t find the right words.” Or any words.

“Well, that’s a big part of your problem right there. You need to talk to him. Not text him. This is the kind of thing that requires a real conversation. Preferably face-to-face.” Maybe I should have called Dan instead. The best advice she has is talk to him

? “What’s with you kids these days and refusing to actually speak to each other?”

I roll my eyes and thank God she can’t see me. She’s obviously right. So far, we haven’t managed to do much besides introduce ourselves and get off. A full conversation seems like a lot to ask.

“Fine. Any good suggestions on how to start that conversation?”

“Hi, I really enjoyed having your dick in my ass, but now I feel like you’re being a dick to me?”

I choke on a sip of wine. “Jesus, Charlotte. When did you start using that language?” I’m not on board with her picturing me in sexual situations. My siblings get into my business way too often, but I’d worked hard to make sure they didn’t get any salacious details. A few of my exes hadn’t been quite so dedicated to privacy. Okay, so mostly Jeremy. He thought bragging about our private life at the table was a good time. Even when I begged him not to, a few drinks and a little prodding from my siblings got him to open up.

Family, am I right?

“Around the time you were in diapers. Remember, I’m quite a bit senior to you.” No one ever lets me forget that I’m the baby in the family. I swear they all still picture me as a teenager getting sent to detention after school. Charlotte might be the oldest, but she does her best to treat me like an adult. It’s probably because there are nearly sixteen years between the two of us. By the time I was a toddler, she was off at college and only saw me on weekends and holidays.

“Is senior your way of saying that you’re old?”

“You’re right. Dan’s my favorite.”

“I love you, too.”

“Let me know how it goes, okay? I know you just got out there, and you aren’t sure if you’re staying in Cardinal Falls, but I really would like to see you find someone. We all would.” Charlotte’s voice gets soft.

“I know. Mom and Dad bring it up every chance they get.” It’s not like I’m wasting away waiting for someone to scoop me up. Would I like to find someone to spend my life with? Of course. But it needs to be the right person, and after going through a whole bunch of the wrong people, I’m in no hurry.

“Not like that. I know they push since you’re the last single one. You’ve always wanted to settle down, yet somehow you only date assholes.”

“They weren’t all assholes.”

“They were, but that’s not the point.” Charlotte snorts. I’m sure she’s picturing Jeremy in her head. It’s hard to argue with that assessment. He took the cake in terms of bad behavior. “I want you to be happy, baby bro.”

“Yeah, yeah. Thanks, big sis.”

“Anytime. Text me an update after you talk to him, okay?”

I agree and hang up the phone. Talk to Tyler. In person. Seems easy enough, but the question is whether I can manage to get him in the same room without him darting away. I can’t say he looked thrilled to see me at Sprouting Joy, though that’s my fault for panicking and pretending not to know him. Talking with a big helping of groveling. After that? Maybe a second date.

### Chapter Five

#### TYLER

“I’m a professional,” I say into the mirror. “I am a professional.”

I swear I don’t usually buy into all that positive self-talk crap. It feels like the kind of bullshit sold on the internet right next to the cheap crystals that claim to detox your liver. If other people feel like it helps, then they’re welcome to it. I’m more of a grit-your-teeth-and-power-through-it kinda guy.

Except, right now, I need to go into my boss’s office and ask for a favor. A big one. And not so much a favor, but a transfer to a different project. It’s not unheard of for people to ask for that kind of thing, but those are typically higher-ranking employees. I don’t have a lot of seniority here despite having been with the company for almost a decade. It’s not perfect, but I know how to work the system. After eight years, I’ve cracked the code so that I can get my work done, get the right amount of appreciation, and be out of here on time every night.

This new client is my chance to prove I deserve a promotion. Asking for a change to a different project before it even starts doesn’t send the message that I’m the right pick for the job, but there’s no way I can be the lead on this project. Or even the guy who gets coffee.

Everything was perfect until the paperwork for the new assignment arrived in my email this morning. I finished up my most recent project last week, knowing there was a big project coming in this week. There’s rarely much downtime between

projects. A few days to clear out my inbox, submit the final paperwork, and refocus is typical. I needed those few days to relax after the final push of late nights and looming deadlines to deliver a working website to our client.

I get excited at the prospect of starting something new. I guess that's why this line of work is perfect for me. I specialize in a combination of web and graphic design. With each new project, I get to learn about a new business, help them assemble a project, and then move on to the next thing.

Except this morning, I opened the packet to read through the information on our new client and discovered it was none other than Sprouting Joy.

Nope. No way.

A week ago, I would've jumped at the opportunity. I already know the place, which gives me a leg up. But this means spending even more time with Graham. And not the kind where I hide outside and pretend he doesn't exist. No, this means spending hours together in conference rooms and on video calls. I had no intention of spending any more time with him. That's how I prefer my hookups. One and done. No repeat performance.

Even if the first time was mind-blowing.

Especially if the first time was mind-blowing.

I knock on my boss's door and wait for a response. "Yeah?"

"Hey, you got a minute?"

"I can give you five." He chuckles at his own words, and I do my best to smile. Lewis Spiers is not that funny, but it helps my career to pretend he is. If a few laughs here

and there is what it takes to earn myself a raise and title bump, I'm happy to pretend that he's the king of comedy.

"I was hoping you could move me off the Sprouting Joy project and put me on something else." I take a seat across from him and give him my best professional smile.

"Is there a problem? I thought this would be a perfect fit for you." He moves his wire-rim glasses to the top of his head and leans in.

"Not so much a problem, as a request." I shove my hands under my legs to keep from fidgeting. I need him to believe this is a run-of-the-mill request, not something personal.

"A request?" He raises his eyebrow at me.

"Maybe a conflict of interest. See, I've been a volunteer there for a long time. I can't be objective about them like I usually am for clients." There. That sounds reasonable.

"That's why I put you on this. I think they need a personal touch and someone who understands their needs. You're the perfect person for this."

"Oh." All the arguments disappear from my mind.

"Was there something else? When they reached out a few months ago, the director said she heard about us through you. I thought you'd be thrilled to be working with them."

"I guess not." Fucking Steph. She must've set all this up before she went out on leave. If I didn't know better, I'd think she was fucking with me. Maybe she was fucking with me and Graham? She couldn't know, though. Right? All of this was in

motion before Graham and I even met.

“Great, then I look forward to seeing your work on this. If it goes well, I think a promotion to team lead will be in your future.” I swallow hard enough that Lewis probably heard it from the other side of the desk. “You’ve got a good team here and a great project. The director of Spouting Joy will be here later today for a launch meeting.”

“I can’t wait.” I try to keep my tone positive, but even I hear the sarcasm dripping from the statement.

I leave the office and head back to my desk. So much for being able to stay out of Graham’s way. Whatever I did to the universe to deserve this, I take it all back.

## GRAHAM

Undertake a massive new project while the executive director is on maternity leave? Sure, why the hell not? Maybe because it’s ridiculous for me, a temporary person, to be put in charge of something so long-term? Or maybe because I don’t know a damn thing about website design? I know they need a new website, but does it need to be done right now?

I take a sip from the water bottle one of the assistants brought me and leaf through the promotional pamphlets. I hate to say it, but the work is impressive and will be attractive to potential donors. At least they already did the legwork of vetting and hiring a company. Hopefully, they aren’t expecting much from me. I know next to nothing about design, websites, or any of the other buzzwords that get thrown around. My plan is to nod along with whatever they say and hope the final product looks good. It’s possible Steph will be back before we get around to final approvals.

I check my watch. I’m here early, so I expect to wait a while before anyone sees me.



That's what I get for being chronically early. At least they put me in the conference room instead of making me wait in the lobby. Except now, I'm sitting alone around a huge glass table, waiting for everyone else to arrive.

The door opens, and a whole gaggle of folks enter. Does it really take that many people to create a website? I don't have time to ponder that question before I spot Tyler among the crowd. He's hiding near the back of the group. I don't know why he thinks that will work. There's nowhere to hide once everyone is seated. It's cute when I think about it. Though, I'm not sure what I did to make him so uncomfortable.

Okay, so I can think of a few things. It can't be because we hooked up, can it? He seemed at ease in the bar and when we went to my place. Maybe because I lied to Steph when she introduced us?

Neither of those things seems probable. Uncomfortable, sure, but not enough to cause him to look so pale and small?

Fuck, maybe he isn't out at work. Does he think I would give him away?

I shake the thoughts from my head and try to focus on the task at hand. I'm here for one reason only—to get this new website built. If that includes Tyler, so be it. I really should've sent that text message, though.

"Thanks so much for taking time out of your day to meet with us. I know you're probably busy, but we like to meet the client in person first to ensure that we're all on the same page before we get started." One of the men in a suit leads off, pulling a slide deck up on the monitor at the head of the table.

"Of course. We're excited to get this project underway, so anything I can do to help make this process as smooth as possible." I try to keep my attention on the front of the room, but it's hard. Tyler is in my peripheral vision, arms crossed over his chest

as he slouches in his chair. “I’m only part of Sprouting Joy on a temporary basis, but I have a good sense of the goals for the new design.” It’s only a slight exaggeration. Steph only gave me a few details before she went into labor and left me to deal with the mess.

“Excellent.” The man sits at the head of the table and leans back in his chair, obviously practiced in running these meetings. “We can go around the table and do brief introductions if that’s okay with you.” I nod. I hate this part of any meeting, but I’ve long given up on trying to talk people out of it. It’s awkward, and I’ll never remember any of their names anyway. Well, except for Tyler. “I’m Brian, the project manager.”

I listen as they go around, giving me their names and telling me a little about their role. Honestly, I’m not sure what the difference is between a web designer and a graphic designer or any of the other titles they throw out, but something tells me I shouldn’t get them confused. My technological capabilities start and end with the ability to create spreadsheets and send emails. I should be better at it, given that I grew up with computers, but I much prefer to have a book that I can curl up with instead. A real one, not some virtual replica.

I perk up a bit when we get to Tyler. Despite feeling like our lives are intertwined at this point, I know next to nothing about him.

He shifts in his seat when they get to him. “Um, I’m Tyler Mossman. I’m the lead web developer.” He hesitates. “I’m excited to be working on this project.” It’s almost convincing.

“Tyler will be your point person over the next few months for anything related to the project,” Brian adds.

I find Tyler’s gaze as the meeting resumes with a discussion of the process and

timelines. I need to pay attention to this, but I can't seem to look away. Apparently, neither can he. Would he go on a second date with me? Is it a second date if the first date wasn't specifically a date? I know we left things very open, but since we can't seem to avoid each other, it makes sense to get to know each other a little better. See? Very rational. All I have to do is get Tyler to see the logic in my argument.

Except now things are even more complicated, I remind myself. He's a volunteer for the non-profit that I run—temporarily—and I'm now his client. Are there rules about that kind of thing? It's not the kind of hypothetical I can pose to someone without raising a lot of red flags. No one ever believes the whole asking for a friend thing.

I turn my head when I hear a throat clear. The whole room stares at me, waiting for the answer to a question I didn't hear. "Sorry about that. Not enough coffee yet today. Can you repeat that?"

"We wanted to know if it would be okay to set up a time for us to come tour your facility? It helps us better understand the client's physical space and ensure that the online vision we're creating matches what your customers will see in real life. We can also use that time to consider any photos or other assets we might need."

"That's fine. If you call the office, we can find a good time for you to come when it's quiet so I can give you the full tour. Though Tyler—" The blood drains from his face when I say his name, his deep brown eyes wide and pleading.

"What about Tyler?" Brian turns to stare at him.

"Nothing. I was making sure he would get to be there for the tour since it seems like he'll be doing a lot of the work." The lead guy looks between the two of us for a moment, his lips pressed together tightly. I do my best to maintain a neutral expression. Something's off, but I can't figure out what.

“Of course. He’d be part of the group to do the on-site visit.” I breathe a sigh of relief and give him my best version of a fake grin.

“Great,” I say. Tyler sinks back into his seat but still looks like he might throw up. Why anyone would be embarrassed to be one of our volunteers is beyond my understanding. Didn’t companies encourage community service? If he wasn’t out, there’s nothing about our organization that would tip them off to that. We feed people and help them learn how to eat healthy. Doesn’t exactly scream gay.

“We’ll call and get that on the books. In the meantime, if you could start thinking about what we discussed in terms of style and important elements, that would be great.”

I try to smile. I wasn’t listening during that part of the conversation. Maybe I can get Tyler to fill in some of the blanks for me later. He’s nearly hiding under the table, though, so probably not. I’ll figure it out. I always do. Maybe one of the interns can help me with this. They’re usually better with the tech stuff anyway. They’d probably be thrilled to be part of the project.

Brian leads me out of the office, chatting the whole way about how excited he is to have our business and work on the account. When we reach the front door, I take one more glance down the hall. Tyler’s leaning against a wall, laughing at something his coworker says. At least he no longer looks like he’d rather be anywhere else in the world. I can’t figure him out, and I hate leaving a mystery unsolved.

## Page 6

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:28 am*

### Chapter Six

#### TYLER

After the stress of the previous week, I deserved to spend two days doing absolutely nothing. And that's exactly how I spent the weekend. If I wasn't in bed, I was on the couch, switching back and forth between Netflix and Skyrim . Not exactly glamorous, but it did the trick to clear my head. When I woke up on Monday morning, I felt ready to face the week ahead.

I've got my usual volunteer slot on Wednesday and then the team visit on Thursday. Chances are high that I'll run into Graham on at least one of those days, but I've come to terms with it. We're two consenting adults who hooked up. No reason we can't be completely professional.

Which is why when I arrive at Sprouting Joy on Wednesday, I shove my backpack in my locker and head straight to the garden. Would I normally spend a few more minutes inside, getting organized and checking in with folks? Maybe, but Steph's officially on maternity leave, and she's the only person I usually talk to. Not because I need instructions for the day but because I enjoy her company. My chest tightens a bit at the thought of being without her for so long. I can call her if I really need her, but I want her to have time with her husband and new baby. The last thing she needs is me dumping all my issues on her when she's trying to care for an infant.

But for the last several years, she's been a confidant for me. The guys are my best friends, but sometimes I need to talk to someone who hasn't known me for over a decade. Someone who sees me for who I am today, not who I used to be. Steph came

into my life at a low point when I didn't know how to move forward. Or even if I could. Where others might have seen a criminal and lost cause, she gave me a chance.

Since she's away, there's no need to dawdle. At least that's the story I'm sticking to. It has nothing to do with avoiding a certain temporary director. Nope, none at all.

The gardens are a lot of work to maintain, especially now that I'm only here once a week, but the routine brings me a sense of calm that I don't get anywhere else. If someone told a twenty-year-old version of myself that I'd get a better sense of purpose caring for a bunch of plants than I do from a video game, I would've laughed in their face.

I get to work harvesting the radishes and carrots that are ready. Normally, one of the school camp groups that comes through would do this since the kids love digging in the dirt. Many of them have never seen how vegetables look before they're in the grocery store and are in awe of the process. But there aren't any field trips scheduled for the next two weeks, and leaving them practically guarantees the critters will steal them. Fucking rabbits will eat everything if we don't keep putting up fences and other barriers. No matter what I do, they figure out a way in, but at least it stumps them for a week or two.

"Hey, Tyler?" I look up to find Maggie, one of the other volunteers. She typically sits at the front desk, so seeing her out here is a bit of a surprise.

"What can I do for you, Maggie?" I sit back on my heels and smile at her. It took me a long time to break through her shyness. Our shifts have overlapped for a few years, and I finally won her over with my corny jokes and cookies.

"You know the interim guy? Graham?" I nod. Yeah, I know exactly who Graham is. "He wants you to stop by his office at the end of your shift."

“I don’t finish up until seven tonight.” Wrapping up early to speak to Graham is not on my priority list. I’m planning to be right here until I’m ready to get in my car and go home, even if it’ll be starting to get a little dark by then.

“He knows. He says he’ll still be here.”

Well, fuck.

“Okay, will you still be around?” Thinking about being left alone with Graham opens a pit in my stomach. There’s something about him that disarms me and puts me on edge at the same time. I suppose I should work out what those feelings mean, but something tells me I won’t have an answer in the next ninety minutes.

“No, I’m leaving in fifteen.” She digs her toe into the dirt. “Is everything okay? You’re not in trouble or anything, are you?” Great, now we’re pulling more people into our chaos. Maybe we do need to talk... just to figure out how we go forward from here. Then we can both get over the whole thing and stop acting like a couple of teenagers.

“Everything’s great. Nothing to worry about.” I pretend to inspect one of the tomato plants right next to me, afraid my face will give me away. Maggie might be shy, but she’s perceptive. “Really. Have a good night, and I’ll see you next week.” I punctuate the last sentence, hoping it reassures her, though it’s as much for her as it is for myself.

I get back to work, and even though time seems to move slowly, I finally finish the harvesting and weeding a few minutes after seven. My insides are still in knots. He can’t fire me, can he? I had no idea who he was when we hooked up. Surely, neither of us can be held responsible for that. I’m not sure what the rules are about staff and volunteers dating or if it applies to temporary employees. They probably covered it in my orientation, but that was years ago. Even if they did, I wouldn’t have been paying

attention. I don't need to volunteer here, but I love it. Losing it would break my heart.

I get the tools put up and make my way inside. It's eerily quiet at this hour, with the staff and volunteers gone home. The front desk is empty when I stop off in the bathroom to scrub up the best I can. My clothes are still covered in dirt, but at least my hands and face are clean. That's as good as it gets until I can get home and do a more thorough cleaning in the tub.

My heart races as I make my way down the dark hall to Steph's office—though I guess it's Graham's office now. Light seeps out from the partly open door. After a few deep breaths, my heart feels like it's slowed down to a normal rate. I've been in there dozens of times over the years. This time isn't any different.

If I say it enough times, maybe I'll start to believe it.

After a few more deep, centering breaths, I knock on the door.

"Come on in."

I push the door to the corner office open. Graham is sitting behind the oversized mahogany desk, staring at the computer screen. He looks as good as I remember. Maybe better. His gray suit jacket hangs over the back of his chair, and he's rolled the sleeves up on his salmon-pink shirt, revealing his muscular forearms. Is it possible to have a forearm fetish? Because I think I might be developing one.

"Maggie said you wanted to talk to me." Right, I'm here for one thing only, and it has nothing to do with his forearms. Or any other part of his body.

"Yes, come on in and take a seat."

GRAHAM



I've been waiting around for the last hour, hoping Tyler didn't manage to sneak out without me noticing.

"Oh, uh... my clothes are kind of dirty." Tyler gestures toward his muddy jeans. There's something about this look—raw and dirty—that turns me on.

"Don't worry about it. I think a non-profit that specializes in gardening can deal with a little bit of dirt on the chairs." He eyes the seat suspiciously. This place is anything but fancy. Sure, the office is nice enough, but everything has a bit of a soil or fertilizer smell to it. It's expected, but it's taking a little getting used to. The first day, I thought it was because a field trip was potting in the classroom. Nope, it's a constant thing around here. I grab one of the old reusable shopping bags sitting in the corner and set it over the seat. "Here, we'll put this on the chair if it makes you feel better."

Tyler hesitates but settles on the edge of the chair. The bag crinkles as he wiggles in the seat and his leg bounces up and down. It takes all my self-control not to reach out and still his knee.

"There's no need to be nervous. I wanted an opportunity to clear the air between us before you're here Thursday with your team. I don't want to make you uncomfortable." I lean up against the corner of the desk. I don't want to go back to the other side and make it feel like I'm his boss, but I also don't like the feeling of looming over him.

"You don't." I raise my eyebrow at him. "Fine, you make me a little uncomfortable." He rests his hand on his leg, stopping the bouncing.

"I won't say anything about us, and if you like, we can continue pretending like we met at the introductory meeting." Reminding myself that we don't know each other very well, I want to be clear that I'm willing to keep his secrets.

“Thanks. This is a big opportunity for me, and I don’t want to fuck it up.”

“I know how hard it is to have to hide your true self, so if you ever want to talk about it, I’m around. I’m sure our personal relationship won’t ever come up. Even if it did, I wouldn’t do anything to out you.” I lower my voice. Everyone should be gone by now, but I never know if someone might come back to pick something up or have extended their shift.

Tyler scoffs. “I’m not in the closet. All my co-workers know I’m gay.” It’s my turn to look confused. “They don’t know I volunteer here, though, or I guess they didn’t know until recently. Most of them probably still don’t, but I told my boss when I asked to come off the project. I don’t think he cares enough to gossip, but you never know.”

Okay. That’s not quite how I expected this conversation to go. “You requested to be removed from our website?” I’m not sure why my brain zeros in on that piece of information. Why would anyone hide their involvement with Sprouting Joy? “I don’t know exactly what happened, but I thought we had a good time that night. Was it so bad that you’re literally trying to be as far away from me as possible?” I replay that evening in my mind for what might be the thousandth time. Nothing jumps out to me as being out of the ordinary. Well, except for the mind-blowing blow job he gave me.

“Fuck, no. The opposite.”

I run my hand over my face, trying to make sense of the conversation. “You’re trying to be as close to me as possible? Because if that’s the goal, you might need to work on your tactics.” Tyler’s head falls, and I rethink the way I’m approaching this conversation. “Maybe you can try explaining it to me again.” My legs start to tingle from the position, so I commit to sitting on the edge of the desk instead of leaning. So far, this conversation isn’t playing out the way I expected. I need to get control again if we’re going to figure out our issues before Thursday.

“I really enjoyed the night we had together.” He clears his throat as though he’s working up to something. “I don’t do repeats, though, and being in the same space as you makes that difficult.”

“Do you think I can’t control myself around you?” Tyler is objectively good-looking, and I won’t lie and say I haven’t thought about pushing him up against the wall and having my way with him. But if anything, our last two meetings should prove I won’t do anything without his permission.

“No, I think I might be unable to control myself.” His voice is barely a whisper. “It’s easier without the temptation.”

Well, that’s a nice bit of an ego boost. It’s also a relief to know I didn’t do something ridiculous to put him off that first night.

Now, what do I do with this information? He said he didn’t do repeats with his hookups, but it sounds like he might be second-guessing those rules. I wouldn’t be opposed to spending a little more time together, even if we’re in a professionally nebulous space. From the moment we met, I felt a connection. One I’d like to explore a little more. A date that lasts longer than five minutes would be a nice start. I keep meaning to look up the specific policies around that but haven’t yet done so. Probably because I’m afraid of what I’ll find. “Am I tempting you?”

He inhales sharply but doesn’t respond. I’m more than happy to wait while he sorts through his thoughts.

“Fuck.” It’s not the response I’m expecting. He drops his elbows to his knees and cradles his head. I had this whole conversation planned out earlier, but now we’re way off script. Tyler looks like I kicked his puppy, which isn’t the mood I’m going for here.

I drop to my knees in front of the chair and place my hands gently on his arms. I wait, half expecting him to shrug away from my touch. When he doesn't, I let my fingers move gently over the fabric of his long-sleeved shirt.

"Tyler." I keep my voice soft and low. "Did I do something wrong?"

His head snaps up, and his soft blue eyes are glassy as he stares at me. "No, absolutely not. It's just me. I don't know how to behave around you."

"Well, that seems like a mutual problem." Given the last week of awkward introductions and pretending not to know each other. Twice. "I know you said you don't do repeats, but the two of us are bound to keep being thrown in the same room together. At least for the next three months. We owe it to ourselves to at least figure out how to do that without things being so weird." And, if it means I get to spend a little more time with him, then lucky me. Maybe next time I'm on my knees in front of him, it'll be for something more fun.

"I don't—" He bites his lip as he cuts off whatever he's going to say. "It's complicated."

"Why is it complicated?" I wait several beats for an answer. When it doesn't seem like one's coming, I try again. "I would really like to take you out on a date so we can get to know each other better." These feelings don't seem to be going anywhere, so I might as well see where they lead. I really do need to check on the policies related to dating a volunteer. For that matter, Tyler probably needs to check the policies related to dating a client.

Tyler shakes his head from side to side and sighs. "I don't date."

"Okay, what if we went out as friends so we could talk." I can be patient.

“I’ll think about it.”

I start to try to convince him, then think better of it. Pushing him is likely to end up with a firm no . The long game might be the better way to think about this right now. I can focus instead on getting to know him and breaking through his hard exterior.

Maybe with the help of Gulliver. Somehow, that cat made more headway than I did.

“Okay. Why don’t you head home and get cleaned up?” I’ve already kept him well past his scheduled end time. “We’ll figure out a time to talk later. Somewhere besides the office.” I’ll turn his doubts into a yes. I’m sure of it. I’m just not sure how.

## Page 7

*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:28 am*

### Chapter Seven

#### TYLER

I pull my Chevy into the parking lot at Sprouting Joy and stare at the old brick building. Being here typically calms me, but today, my stomach is in knots. I couldn't bring myself to eat my usual cereal for breakfast, so I substituted three cups of coffee. Four, including the travel mug I have in the center console. My stomach gurgles. Yeah, I'm going to regret that decision.

I close my eyes and try to focus on my breathing. In for four. Hold for four. Out for four.

Usually, this stupid exercise forces my body to calm the fuck down. Today, my nerves are fighting back.

I switch to counting my breaths, but my mind won't stay focused. Somewhere between one and ten, I keep losing track and starting over. The conversation yesterday with Graham made me feel better and worse simultaneously, something I didn't think possible. I honestly thought ignoring the whole situation would make it go away.

I know, stupid plan. In my defense, it seemed like it might work. No hook-up has ever gotten so far under my skin that a few weeks couldn't shake them free. Does that mean Graham isn't a hook-up? And if so, what does that make him?

Fuck, I forgot to count again.

If I pass out, maybe I can go home?

My colleagues begin pulling into the lot, signaling that the tour is about to start. Several of them wave to me as they collect their things and make their way to the front door. While the main building is an old brick structure with very little character, the front alcove is modern and light, with plenty of big windows and glass doors. Thanks to some generous donors, I can watch everyone congregating and chatting. At the far end, I swear I spot Graham in his perfectly fitted suit greeting the team. My team.

I check my watch. Two minutes till eight. It's now or never.

I wish I could pick never.

Without that option, I work my way inside and pray to any god who will listen that this tour goes by quickly and with minimal interaction.

A tour doesn't require the director, right? It'd be a waste of his time when literally anyone else could do it.

As usual, I'm wrong. In the lobby, I find Graham deep in conversation with Brian. He's technically the project manager, which to him means he's in charge of the whole fucking universe. It really means he's in charge of sending emails reminding us of deadlines. Us being the people who actually do the work. I don't know what's so funny, but Graham bends over, laughing like he heard the best joke of his life.

I haven't heard that laugh since our first night together. And not like this. A sudden urge to punch Brian comes over me.

I swallow hard and push the thought out of my head. If Graham wants to hang out and laugh at Brian's jokes, then he's welcome to. None of my goddamn business.

“Do we have everyone?” Brian looks around, pointing at each of us and quietly counting. “Yep, I think that’s the whole crew. If it’s okay with you, Graham, I think we can get started.”

My eyes roll back so hard they might be stuck in my head. When did we start referring to clients by their first name?

And when did I start caring so fucking much?

“Sure thing,” Graham replies. “I want to thank you all for coming over to see the site. Sprouting Joy doesn’t have a lot of space, but what we do have, we make good use of it. I know I’m only holding down the fort temporarily, but I can tell how much passion everyone here has for the work being done. This place is largely volunteer-driven, meaning there are only five full-time and three part-time employees here. Keep that in mind as Sarah tells you all about our work. Most of it’s done by the over one hundred volunteers that work with us.”

I try not to make eye contact with him when he mentions volunteers, but when I do glance in his direction, he’s looking off toward the other side of the room. My gut twists. It’s like I’m not even here.

“Some folks, like Sarah here, give us a lot of their time and are here weekly or even daily. Others are only around for special events. Either way, they’re the lifeblood of an organization like this.”

Sarah beams as he talks about the volunteers, clearly thrilled to have so much of his attention. I’m not blind. Graham’s a fucking catch. I’m sure many of the volunteers—of any gender—are looking forward to receiving the same kind of praise. I hold back another eye roll, reminding myself I’m at work.

Sarah catches my eye, and I look away. I didn’t mean to stare. When I glance back,



she's eyeing me with a hint of recognition.

Well, fuck. Most of the volunteers around the office during the day aren't here when I come in the evening. I even checked the sign-up sheet ahead of time to be sure no one I knew well would be in today. Especially in different clothing, I didn't expect anyone to recognize me. Slacks and a button-up aren't exactly a superhero-level disguise, but it's a far cry from the dirty jeans and tee that I wear in the garden.

But back when I was racking up as many hours as possible, I volunteered at a lot of special events. I cut back recently to focus on work and my social life. Sarah's been here for years, though, and our paths have crossed more than a few times. She's easy to pick out with her long blonde waves and a flower tucked behind her ear.

I hold my breath and pretend to be fascinated by the photos on the wall. There's one of a bunch of kids gathered around a cooktop, watching a chef prepare some sort of soup. By the time I look away, I could pass one of those memory tests about the photo.

"I do hope you enjoy the tour. If you have any questions after the fact, please let me or Sarah know." Graham smiles and gives Brian a friendly shoulder tap before heading down the hall toward his office. The same one I sat in last night, thinking about all the ways I could lay Graham out on that desk and make him moan.

Sarah smiles and asks us to follow her in the opposite direction, toward the classrooms and other event spaces.

My brain screams for me to go in the other direction, follow Graham back to his office, and demand he stay on the tour with us. I know how crazy it sounds, especially when I was hoping not to see him at all not fifteen minutes ago, but logic isn't my strong suit at the moment.

“You coming?” Sam, one of my coworkers, asks, pulling me from my thoughts.

“Yeah, taking in the whole vibe.” Vibe ? I really must be losing my mind.

“Cool, don’t get lost.”

I chuckle at the comment, and Brian shoots me an odd look. I wave him off and head toward the rest of the group.

The tour is as dull as can be. It’s a bunch of offices and classrooms. When it’s not full of kids or senior citizens taking classes or working on something, it’s not much to look at. The spark is missing. When the place is full, laughter reverberates through the building, spilling out into every corridor.

I bite my tongue to keep from interrupting Sarah a few times. Especially when we’re in the garden, and she mixes up the names of the different plants. Thinking the beans are peas is forgivable. Not knowing the difference between cabbage and lettuce should be a crime. I’ll need to speak with Steph about getting some refresher education for the volunteers.

Thinking about Steph makes my throat tighten. I got an email that she and baby Sebastian are doing great, but I didn’t expect to hear anything else until she got back from leave. I wonder what she would say about my current predicament. We weren’t exactly friends, but more than acquaintances. Someone needed to invent better words to describe someone who’s a friend/boss/mentor hybrid.

Maybe the work clothes are a disguise. One that lets me walk among different groups of people, never giving away my true self. As we walk around, I feel like I have some sort of secret identity that only I know about.

Fine, Graham also knows about it. Until recently, it felt like two parts of my life that I

kept separate. Originally, because I had to, but then because it was easier. Keeping everyone in their nice little boxes worked well for me. Different versions for different people.

Now? It feels like I'm splitting in two. The Tyler who goes to work and hangs out with my friends and the Tyler who volunteers here. And apparently, sleeps with his boss. Well, volunteer boss. Graham is somehow under the skin of both versions. Do superheroes ever feel this way? With two completely separate lives and friends, never letting them come together? Until Graham slammed into both versions, I didn't know how lonely it could be living in one and pretending the other didn't exist.

The actual tour concludes with little fanfare. We end up back in the lobby, and Sarah asks if there are any questions.

"This has been so amazing. Thank you for being a wonderful tour guide," Brian gushes, making Sarah's face turn bright pink.

"My pleasure. I think Graham wants to meet with you again before you leave. Let me go grab him from his office."

"What do you think?" Brian asks, acknowledging me for the first time since the tour began. "Did you get everything you need?"

"Oh, yeah. I think this gives us enough to at least do the initial work. Then we can get some feedback and go from there." The rest of the group nods in agreement.

"You know..." Sam drops his voice to a whisper as he leans toward me. "You're the boss on this project. Or at least the lead. Don't let Brian take over."

My first week in the role, and I'm already fucking it up. I should've asked more questions or at least asserted my role during the tour. But it risks showing my hand. I

know way too much about Sprouting Joy for someone who supposedly didn't know they existed until last week.

“Sorry, but Graham got called into a meeting, so he won't be able to say goodbye. He said you're welcome to email him any follow-up questions,” Sarah says. She flashes Brian a big smile. He's clearly disappointed in not having a final chance to suck up this morning.

We give our final thanks to Sarah before heading back out into the parking lot. I squint against the bright sunshine as I climb into my truck and drive toward the office. It takes a few blocks before I can name the feeling that's settled like a rock in my gut.

Disappointment.

Disappointed that Graham didn't come back out. Even if I would've hidden from him, I still wanted to be in the same room with him again.

Not sure what to do with that realization, I turn up the radio and tap my thumbs on the steering wheel, focusing on the beat rather than the thoughts running through my mind.

It works, and by the time I get to the office, I'm more clear-headed. At least until I grab my phone and see a text notification from Graham.

Graham

I'd still like to take you out on a date.

\* \* \*

## GRAHAM

“So, how’s everything at the office going?” Steph asks as she sinks into the couch. She looks better than anyone who had a baby three weeks ago should, even in her oversized sweatshirt and joggers.

“Nope. Absolutely not. I’m here to talk about you and the baby, not to let you sneak in work time while you’re on maternity leave.” I planned to let Steph and her husband have more time alone with baby Sebastian before I interfered in their lives, but she begged me to come over. Something about needing to talk to an adult about something other than the baby. It’s always been hard to say no to her, but sending me a picture of her pouting while snuggling with her new baby in her arms made it impossible. So, as soon as I finished at the office, I drove over here to chat. And meet Sebastian.

“Fine, we can talk about me first, then you can give me an update.” I snort and shake my head. We’ll see about that. “The baby’s good. I love being a mother. It’s hard, but I’m enjoying the time off to bond and recover. Your turn.”

Good lord. If she didn’t take a breath soon, the woman would pass out.

Typical Steph. She’s always been a workaholic, though meeting her husband toned down that side of her. Two can play that game. “Well, my siblings are good. Though they’re begging to stay with me for a night or two to enjoy the city. Possibly making me the babysitter so they can enjoy a night out.” I love my nieces and nephews, but watching them for an extended period of time leaves me exhausted. “I’m holding off as long as I can. If I make enough excuses, I’ll move on before we find an agreeable date.” My chest tightens at the thought. Moving on, possibly to another place, has always been the plan. Temporary jobs, homes, and friends, so there are no loose ends when I pack up and leave for the next city.

For once, the idea doesn't fill me with joy and anticipation. Instead, there's an aching in my chest that I can't pinpoint.

"You know that's not what I want to hear." Steph jabs me in the side with her finger.

"Ouch." I rub the spot on my chest. "That hurts, you know."

"Oh my god, you're so whiny." It's nice to be close to Steph. We've known each other for a long time, but it's rare that I get to see her in person. It's one of the big reasons I took this position. Even if I don't get much time, I want to soak in every second.

"Fine, the office is good. No thanks to you leaving me with a massive website project to oversee." Only for Steph would I even agree to such a massive undertaking. Usually, the jobs are day-to-day management, some special events, and maybe a board meeting. Big projects like a website or construction? It's not worth the risk.

She winces. "Sorry about that. We booked it so long ago that I totally forgot about it. Seriously... my maternity leave wasn't even scheduled yet."

"I'm not sure I believe you, but it's going okay." I pause to consider whether I should mention Tyler. I don't like keeping secrets, especially from Steph. It's not only my secret, though. When I'm gone, Tyler will see Steph every week. I don't want to mess anything up for him.

"Good. And the volunteers are all okay?" She looks like she wants to add something to that question, but she stays silent.

"Is there a reason they wouldn't be?"

Steph worries her bottom lip between her teeth but doesn't answer. Instead, she asks,

“How about your personal life? Any dates with your mystery man from speed dating?”

Jesus. From one forbidden topic to the next. “No, I’m still trying to see him again, but it hasn’t worked out yet.” At least that part isn’t a lie—just a whole bunch of omissions.

“Well, what about someone else? Anyone catch your eye lately?” I appreciate the way Steph always leaves her language open when she inquires. Even though I’m bisexual, I rarely date women. When she set up the speed-dating night, she tried to sign me up for one night with men and another with women. When I protested, she shrugged and told me it would double my chances.

A sharp cry comes through the baby monitor. Sebastian has great timing. “Hold that thought. I’ll grab him and be right back.”

Steph hoists herself off the couch and disappears toward the back of the house. I hear her through the baby monitor, cooing and soothing her baby.

I take the opportunity to sit back on the couch and take in the space. There’s such a vast difference between this and the short-term rentals I stay in. Not only the décor but the feeling. This is clearly a home. While they keep it tidy, there are stacks of baby presents against the wall, pillows and blankets on the couch, and a bunch of family photos on the bookshelves. My rental has none of that. Baby things aside, my places are typically sterile. No signs of life or of me. Steph’s place is a home. Not just a place to come back to at the end of a work day or somewhere to set up the laptop on Saturday mornings.

I swallow my feelings when Steph reappears with Sebastian in her arms, one hand holding a bottle. “Someone was hungry, but he wanted to meet you.”

Sebastian's chubby cheeks are tear-stained and red from crying, but he's adorable. I love babies at this age, with their little fingers and big cheeks. Steph and I both stay quiet for a few moments, watching as Sebastian sucks down the majority of his bottle.

"Can I hold him?" I ask after he finishes.

"Of course, use the hand sanitizer on the side table first." Steph pulls the bottle away and shifts Sebastian onto her shoulder. "Let me burp him first, or you'll end up with spit up all over your suit."

I pump probably too much of the sanitizer into my palm and rub my hands together until it dries.

Once Steph is done patting Sebastian's back, she hands over the baby, ensuring I get my hands in the right position to support his head.

He's so tiny and light. I pull Sebastian closer, ensuring he's at no risk of breaking free. "He's the sweetest thing," I say, looking into the bluest eyes possible.

"We think so. He's pretty special, though he'd be even more special if he'd let us get more than two hours of sleep."

"I think you've got a bit before that happens." I don't mention that my nephew is five and still hasn't slept through an entire night. Steph doesn't need those stories right now. She'll have plenty of her own in no time.

"Now, where were we?"

I hoped she would forget our previous conversation in her sleep-deprived state. It's on the tip of my tongue to tell her the whole story and ask for advice. Things are... complicated though. I think Tyler would be upset if he found out I said anything to



Steph, and there's no way to share the details without giving away his identity.

I decide to distract Steph instead. "Do you really want to continue to hear about my boring personal life, or would you rather take the opportunity to shower and take a nap?"

Steph's face lights up. "Really?"

"Of course, but you'll owe me." Getting a few minutes to hold Sebastian is all the payment I require. She doesn't need to know that, though.

"Anything you want. You can have my firstborn child." Steph's face softens as she turns her gaze toward Sebastian. "Or maybe you can have the next one."

"Go, before I change my mind." She takes that as her cue and steps back.

"He just ate, so he should be good for a while. There are diapers by the changing table in his room. It's the first door on the right. Anything else you need is probably in his room, as well." With a final glance toward her baby, she heads down the hall. "If you need me, holler."

"We'll be fine," I yell back. I turn my attention back toward Sebastian. "Won't we, handsome?" He seems unconvinced, but I think an hour together will be enough to change his mind.

"Now, maybe you can give me some advice about my love life?" Sebastian makes a gurgling sound. "That's what I thought. See, I really like Tyler. He's gorgeous, but that's not why I like him." Sebastian fusses until I bounce him in my arms a few times. "Okay, it's not the only reason. There's something about him that draws me in. I'm pretty sure he's attracted to me, too, so I'm having trouble figuring out the issue. Do you think it's because I'm his sort-of boss?" Sebastian snuffles a bit. "That seems

wrong to me, too, but I'm having trouble coming up with a better explanation. Thoughts?" Sebastian burps, and I grab one of the cloths I saw Steph using to dab at the corners of his mouth. "You're probably right. I'll keep trying. If you have any suggestions, let me know."

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*Source Creation Date: July 16, 2025, 7:28 am*

### Chapter Eight

#### TYLER

I don't have to volunteer at Sprouting Joy. I'd miss my little patch of earth, but at least it would solve the current problem.

Which is apparently me, sitting in my truck, convincing myself not to call in sick to work today. With each moment that passes, I become increasingly concerned that Graham will pull into the parking lot to find me here. As bad as it is to spend the morning in a conference room with him, it'll be even worse for him to find me sitting here. Still. After thirty minutes.

I could rent a plot in one of those community gardens. The kind where a bunch of people grow flowers, vegetables, or herbs. It's a waste, though. I'm not interested in growing my own food, and flowers don't do much for me. Maybe I could donate the produce somewhere?

Before I can search for the answer, I realize it won't make a difference. There's still the small matter that I—well, my company—is designing Sprouting Joy's new website. Even if I quit volunteering, I'd still see Graham at work. I can't quit my job because of a hook-up.

My head hurts trying to sort through all of this as I stare at the text message that started this downward spiral.

Graham

I'd still like to take you out on a date.

Fuck . How does he make a simple date sound so appealing? The thing is, I can't remember the last time I went on anything that could be considered a real date. Maybe right after college? So... fuck, has it been nearly seven years? That can't be right.

Yet, as I search my brain for memories, that's exactly it. I met Jasper at a coffee shop where we fought over the last chocolate croissant. We ended up splitting it, spending an hour talking at one of the tables. After that, we dated for six months before he called the whole thing off. My last and longest relationship.

Since then, it's been hookups with guys I either met on an app or at a bar. I don't think those count as dates—especially the times I don't use my real name. It makes it easier to slip away after a few hours and not worry about follow-up messages.

This feeling—staring at the message I've been ignoring for two weeks—is exactly why.

Or, I guess, pretending to ignore. Not a single minute goes by that I'm not thinking about a response, vacillating between taking him up on the offer or shooting him down. I wake up in the middle of the night, fretting over not responding to him. I need to say something... anything... but I can't get my mind and fingers to do the work.

That's not the only problem, either. He knows I'm not sick in bed or dead in a ditch somewhere. I've sent him at least five emails in the last twenty-four hours, all strictly professional, of course. Usually, I can use work to hide from my real-world problems. Now, my problems follow me around like a lost puppy.

I keep picturing him reading my emails, sitting at the big mahogany desk in his

office, wearing a tailored suit that hugs every inch of his body. As I do, the same fantasy keeps popping into my mind. One where he's on the phone with a major donor explaining plans for the upcoming fiscal year, encouraging them to up their pledge from the previous year. That's not the good part, though. The part I like is where I'm kneeling under the desk, hidden from view, slowly sucking his cock. Teasing, really. Enough to keep him on edge through the phone call, but not enough to make him come. I'd save that until he hung up so that I could really enjoy it.

In my mind, I can hear all the gasps and whimpers he'd make when I hit a sensitive spot. Even while trying to stay quiet and focused, he wouldn't be able to hold back every little noise. I already have a pretty good idea of what he likes, but with enough time, I know I could find a hundred ways to make him beg.

Fuck, now I'm hard. Again . That happens a lot lately. At least the arousal pushes some of my anxiety down. I try focusing on much more boring things instead. Budget concerns. Programming. Favorite characters in the latest Final Fantasy game. It helps, but by the time I make my way into the office, I'm still forced to keep my messenger bag in front of me to keep anyone from spotting my hard-on.

\* \* \*

An hour later, I make my way to the conference room. I've done nothing this morning except stare at Graham's text. A lot of good it's done me. I still don't have a response.

He's going to be sitting across from me in a few minutes, watching as I pick up my phone and computer to look at other things, fully aware that I'm ignoring him. The thought makes me lightheaded, and I put a hand against the wall outside the conference room to steady myself.

You're fine.

I take a few deep breaths before I overhear Brian asking someone where I am. I slink into the conference room and find an empty seat near the head of the table. I hate being on display, but it's expected now that I'm running a portion of the team. The equipment is already set up, so I pull up some of the test sites we've been working on over the last week. None of them are even close to done, but the goal is to get some initial feedback and make sure we're on the right track. It takes a bit of imagination to look at these half-built pieces and envision what they'll look like when they're done. It's why we insist on this part being in-person. That way, we can talk through what they're seeing and capture the feedback without letting a client's mind run wild alone in a room.

I always worry at this stage that the client is going to think they made a big mistake hiring us. Or rather me. I know it's a team effort, but the feedback feels like a personal attack. That feeling is tripled today. Of course I want Sprouting Joy to have the best site possible, but what I really want is for Graham to be impressed with my work. With me.

Oh God. Is this what it's like to have feelings for someone? It's terrible.

I don't get the chance to answer that question. Graham walks into the office wearing a royal blue suit, crisp white button-up, and a big smile. The whole team adores him and flocks over to greet him and get him seated. He's been nothing but a model client since day one. I find myself annoyed with them all swooning over him. Sure, he's a nice guy, but do they really need to fawn over him? He's capable of getting his own fucking cup of coffee.

Fine, we give out free coffee to everyone. It's the way they ask him.

Graham nods at me as he sits across the table from me and pulls out his laptop. I shrink in my seat, afraid to meet his gaze. Seriously? Why can't I respond to a stupid text message?

The answer doesn't come to me, so I open my laptop and pull up the wireframes for the website. I jot down some notes of things I want to be sure to mention during the presentation. A few times, I let myself peek over my computer screen to spy on Graham. He's consistently busy typing something. What could be so important?

A ding bellows through my computer speaker, and I fumble for the mute button. Graham gives a soft snort at my dismay. At least someone's having a good time. Maybe my office chair will fall into a sinkhole, and I can get away from this embarrassment.

I look at my messaging app and see I have one new message. From Graham.

Graham: I like that shirt on you.

I shrink further into my seat. Any more and I'll be under the table. So much for making a good impression on my colleagues.

Yes, I'm wearing the new baby blue shirt I bought last week. I didn't put it on specifically for Graham. Though, maybe somewhere in the back of my brain I wanted to look extra nice today. It's a client meeting. I might get away with black jeans and polo shirts a lot of the time here, but I still knew how to play by the rules. Especially with a promotion on the line.

Graham: So your messaging app does work. I was starting to wonder.

Fuck . There's literally no escape. Unless a sinkhole appears in this conference room in the next five seconds, I'm royally fucked.

Nope, no sinkhole. Or any other catastrophes for that matter. There are never tornado sirens when you need them.

Brian calls the meeting to order, which gives me something to focus on other than the cursor on my screen.

“Graham, we’re so happy you could join us today to review some of the work we’ve been doing on the website. The plan is for us to give you an idea of what we’ve done and where we’re going.” I hate the way Brian says Graham . He puts too much emphasis on the last syllable, drawing out the h and making it sound breathy. “At this point, anything and everything is changeable. If you don’t like something or feel it isn’t on brand for Sprouting Joy, now’s the time to speak up.” He pauses, and Graham smiles weakly. “Keep in mind that this is all rough. The final product will, of course, be much more polished.” It’s the same speech we give everyone.

“Of course. I’m looking forward to seeing where we are.”

Brian launches into his whole spiel, reviewing the goals and timeline for the project, taking every opportunity he can to praise Graham and Sprouting Joy. Honestly, this part is where I usually tune out. Instead, I’m glued to my screen. I want to write something back, but I don’t know what to say. In a moment of panic, I type the first thing that comes into my head.

Hi

GRAHAM

Hi might not be the emotion-filled response I was hoping for, but I was definitely going to take it as a win. Especially since I can tell by Tyler’s face that those two letters took a lot out of him.

Hi.

Let’s try this again. I like that shirt on you.



Tyler tends toward dark colors, which suit him, but the light blue brings out his eyes and softens his whole demeanor. I suspect that's why he doesn't wear them very often.

Tyler

Thanks. I like your suit

I'd be happy to wear it on our date

Am I playing dirty? Maybe, but the situation calls for it. A blush spreads across Tyler's face, the red continuing until it disappears beneath his collar. I wish I could take his clothes off and see just how far down it goes.

"Graham, any thoughts before we get started?" Brian turns toward me, an expectant look on his face.

I clear my throat. "Nothing right now. I want to take everything in before I make any judgments." I have no idea where we are in this presentation, but hopefully, that was the right thing to say. Years of board meetings have taught me how to bullshit my way through any discussion.

"Great, well, I'll let Tyler jump in and walk you through the initial designs."

Tyler straightens up a bit in his chair. It looks as though a burst of confidence jolts through his system. "Okay, so my team has put together a few concepts that we think could work. Keep in mind that there are a lot of placeholders here, so you won't see the images or text that will appear in the final product. Think of these as the skeletons. Once we have an idea of what you like from these, we can start building the full pages and add in the functionality that we've discussed." He turns toward me, making eye contact for the first time since that day in my office.

I nod and motion for him to continue. “I’ll try to look at them with a lot of imagination, but you might need to help me. I tend to do better with numbers than with anything creative.” Give me enough spreadsheets and Gantt charts, and I could rule the world.

Tyler’s Adam’s apple bobs as he swallows. “Great, then let’s dive in.”

I get lost in Tyler’s voice and the way he describes the various versions of the webpages that he pulls up on the screen. He wasn’t joking about them being basic. It takes more than a bit of make-believe to picture the finished product. It’s clear to anyone that he’s passionate about his work. I can look at a site and know if I like it, but I can never explain why. Honestly, most of them look the same. Tyler never makes his opinion known but lists the pros and cons of each one very clearly, often citing sources for which ones have the biggest impact on visitors. I’m not sure research has ever sounded quite so intoxicating.

It’s the way he’s gone from being shy and unsure to being a competent professional. More than that, the confidence that I saw the first night at the wine bar is back.

“Any thoughts or questions?” Tyler turns to me.

“Which one would you choose?”

“I—”

“It’s really up to you,” Brian interjects. “We don’t tell the client which one to choose.” He shoots Tyler a glare that’s so intense that I almost burst out laughing. We’re building a website, not doing surgery.

“I know, but I’d like to hear his opinion. I think he has a good understanding of our goals. Plus, this is the first time I’m attempting to build something like this, but your

team here has done it hundreds of times. We've hired you for your expertise, so I would at least like to hear it before I decide."

Brian stares at me, mouth open. He starts to say something a few times before giving up. "Tyler?"

Tyler turns to me with an expression that's nothing but professional, except a slight twinkle in his eye. Maybe I'm imagining it, but I don't think I am. "None of them are a bad choice. I want to say that first. They're all built with Sprouting Joy's mission and needs in mind."

"But?" I gesture for him to continue.

"I think the second option gives you the most flexibility long term. It's got all the pieces you need right now without being over the top or having a bunch of features you won't need. That said, if you need them later, it'll be easy enough to add them in."

I swear he's holding his breath, waiting for my response. "I agree. I like that one best. It looks very clean and easy to use. Most of the people who come to us don't have a lot of computer skills, so it's nice to have something easy to use and very clear."

Tyler's shoulders drop, and I can hear the breath he lets out.

Brian clears his throat and slaps his hands down on the table. "Well, then it sounds like we have a decision, Graham." He emphasizes my name in a way that hurts my ears. Actual physical pain. I don't think anyone has said my name that harshly since I was a teenager. "Our team will get to work on the next stages."

Brian goes through some last details, emphasizing the timeline and repeatedly offering to be available for any questions I might have. I nod along, assuring him that

I'll reach out. If I deliberately leave out the part where I'll direct all my questions to Tyler, no one can blame me.

The meeting concludes without much fanfare, and I shake hands with everyone around the table. Tyler sticks around after everyone else, slowly packing up his stuff and fidgeting with cords that I suspect don't require the level of attention he's currently providing them.

"So," I say.

At the same time as he says, "Look, Graham..."

We both smile at each other for a moment. "Why don't you start?" I gesture toward him.

"I really like you, but I can't go on a date with you." He stares at the computer cord in his hand, wrapping it and rewinding it around his palm.

"Can I ask why?" I sort through all our interactions. I don't think I've done anything so off-putting that someone wouldn't agree to a single meal.

"I just... I can't go on a date with you." His voice is so quiet I can barely hear him over the projector fan.

"Is it because of the website project?" He shakes his head no. "Because I'm sort of your boss at Sprouting Joy?" The room is empty, but I keep my voice low in case anyone walks by.

"No, I... can't."

That seems to be the best answer I'm going to get right now. "Okay." I'm not ready

to give up, but it's hard to keep chasing after someone who seems hell-bent on slipping away.

I take my bag and head out toward my car. Tyler might have said no before, but I'd been sure with a little bit of convincing, he'd be willing to change his mind. Not because I'm such a catch but because I think he feels the same way I do. We shared something special that night. More than sex, though that part was amazing, but some other connection. Something rare and hard to get. I wanted to capture that feeling, nurture it a bit, and see if we could get something to grow.

That moment I thought we had? Maybe I imagined it.

### Chapter Nine

#### GRAHAM

This whole document is useless. It's like no one ever thought to come up with a policy about whether the interim director could date a volunteer who also worked at a contracted company. It's an oddly specific situation, but still. A little foresight goes a long way.

I've been searching through these materials for the last several hours, trying to get an idea of whether dating Tyler would get either of us into hot water. I knew I wanted Tyler—though convincing him of that is still a work in progress—but neither of us could afford to risk our reputation. Worst case scenario, we wait until my contract is up. Then any potential conflicts of interest would disappear.

Though I might disappear, too. I've put out feelers around the city, trying to find another opportunity. No bites yet, but it was still early. I have two more months before this position ends. If I can find something else in Cardinal Falls, then starting a relationship with Tyler would be much easier.

All of that hanging on a possibility that might not even exist. First, I needed to figure out the administrative side of dating Tyler. Then, I can work on convincing him.

I don't think I've ever chased after someone the way I am with Tyler. The spark I felt the first time we met hasn't gone away. His eyes pull at something in me that I can't ignore. There's something about the deep blue color, a mischievous quality that hides the sadness I can see lurking.

I check the clock and realize it's nearing the end of the workday. More importantly, the end of Wednesday's workday. That means Tyler is in the garden right now. I don't bother to think through a plan before I grab my suit jacket from the back of the door and head outside.

The air is cool, shifting overnight to hint at the coming autumn. It's my favorite time of the year, watching the leaves slowly change color and fall from the trees. I love the fact that this part of the country gets a full four seasons, even if sometimes the winter feels never-ending. The few weeks where the trees are a perfect mix of yellows, oranges, and reds make having to shovel sidewalks for three months worthwhile.

I pause before I reach the patch of the garden where Tyler's working. His back is to me, and I take the opportunity to watch quietly as he rearranges a few piles of dirt. Once satisfied, he sits back on his heels and admires his work.

"There. Now behave for me."

The laugh I can't hold back jolts Tyler from his little bubble. He swivels to face me, his face running through a range of emotions before settling into something neutral.

"What are you doing out here?" he asks.

"Can't I check to see how you're doing?"

Tyler opens his mouth a few times, seemingly searching for the right response. "Of course you can. I didn't mean that you couldn't. People usually don't."

"Well, I'm still getting to know how things work around here." And figuring out how to convince a feisty volunteer to let me get to know him better is at the top of my list.

"I'm almost done for the day." He looks up at the sky, which is streaked with pink

and orange as the sun starts to set. The dim light reflects off his face, making his features even more noticeable. Gorgeous is the only word I can think of to describe him. “It’s getting dark.” At the words, he shivers. It’s not that cold outside, but with the sun setting and the light breeze, his t-shirt isn’t doing much to keep him warm.

“Here, take my coat.” I pull off my outer layer and offer it to him.

“You must be joking.” He doesn’t bother to get off his knees. The ground must be cold and wet after the rain we had last night. I make a mental note to buy some of those foam pads I see people using in their home gardens. They’d likely help both with comfort and warmth. “I’m a complete mess after being out here.” The image of him on his knees in my entryway flickers through my mind. Maybe the pad could serve two purposes?

“So?”

“You want me to put on your nice suit coat? I’ll ruin it.” He waves his hands around at the garden.

“You won’t ruin it.” I chuckle, but by the look on his face, that’s the wrong response. His whole body tenses. “Yes, it’ll get dirty, but I can get it dry-cleaned. It won’t be the first time. Or the last.”

“Thanks, but no.” He pushes himself up and brushes off his knees, though it does very little. Even in black pants, the dirt is clearly visible. “I’m heading inside anyway.”

At least he’ll warm up that way.

We walk inside together, Tyler leading the way. Once safely indoors, he heads straight for the volunteer lockers. I’m suddenly unsure about the right way to handle



the situation. I intended to ask him out again, reassuring him that there was nothing on the Sprouting Joy side preventing the two of us from being together. That didn't mean his job didn't have some sort of requirement that he'd need to work around, but at least we could put all the issues out on the table. Talk through them and come to some sort of agreement.

Now, though, I wasn't so sure. Tyler's body language is sad and resigned. Different from the shyness that I saw in our previous encounters.

Maybe I'd missed the opportunity. Maybe the opportunity was never there. Either way, I can take a hint.

"Did you have a good shift?" I ask instead, leaning against the wall. I can still smell the earthy scent of the garden on him.

"Yeah, a lot of stuff will be ready to harvest soon. Fall's the busy season."

"Makes sense, I guess. Does that mean you're here more?" I try to hide my excitement at the idea, but my voice betrays me. I shove my hands in my pants pockets, watching as Tyler rifles through his messenger bag.

"Nah, a lot of it's done by some of the volunteer educators during school field trips. The kids have fun with it. Even if they do tend to make a mess of the place." He shakes his head, but his smile betrays his soft spot for the children.

That little smile is the first flicker of joy I've seen on his face in a while. I'm not sure what my move here is, but I need to think about it some more. Pushing isn't getting me anywhere. Maybe it's time to back off.

"Okay, have a good night. I'll email you about the website tomorrow." There's a lot more I want to say. I want to ask him back to my office so we can keep chatting. I

want to beg him to give me a chance. Maybe another day. Today, it feels like too much. Whatever's holding Tyler back doesn't seem to be changing. At least not quickly. I've got time. At least another two months to stay in his orbit and hopefully change his mind.

## TYLER

Grabbing my stuff from my locker and getting in my truck feels weird. Like I'm going through the motions or something. My body is doing all the right things, but there's a deep feeling that something's off. I should be used to that by now. Everything has felt slightly off since I met Graham. Like the whole world shifted slightly.

The drive home is blessedly fast. I'm still cold, wet, and dirty from being outside. The only thing that keeps me from going insane out there on nights like this is the thought of getting home and taking a long, hot bath.

There were a lot of things to like about my fancy apartment building, but the big tubs are the best part. Perfect for soaking after long days, spending an hour reading or getting lost in my thoughts.

I park in my assigned spot in the underground garage and haul my bag to the elevator. It's a short wait before the doors open, and I'm heading up to the eighth floor. As soon as I'm safely inside my apartment, I strip down to my boxers. It's a routine I developed after the first few months at Sprouting Joy. My clothes are usually covered in soil, fertilizer, and bits of plants. It's easier if I strip it all off at the front door and put things directly into the washing machine. No one wants all of that on the floors.

After dealing with the clothes, I turn on the hot water and add some Epsom salts to the tub. Matthias made fun of me when he found them in my bathroom a year ago, but I managed to bring him around. Not only do they make it smell nicer, but they're

great on muscles. He won't admit it, but I've seen the package he thinks he's hiding in his bathroom.

While I wait for the tub to fill, I grab a beer from the fridge and grab a set of flannel pants from my dresser. This is the first night this year where the cold has gotten to me. I didn't even think about it when I started my shift, so I didn't bother with the extra layers I usually wear in the fall. Next week, I'll have to remember my sweatshirt. Though, with my luck, the weather will swing and be back in the eighties again.

I climb into the tub, hopping between feet initially while my skin adjusts to the hot water. Do I make it too hot? Probably. I prefer the temperature just shy of being cooked alive. When it feels more tolerable, I sink into the water. After a few more minutes, I turn off the tap and lean back, letting my head rest on the edge of the tub. I close my eyes and imagine the stress of the day being washed away.

Things between me and Graham are... weird. That's the only word I can use to describe the situation.

Him asking me out.

Me saying no.

Except, he didn't ask me out. My eyes open as the realization crashes through me. I was going to say no, but he was supposed to ask me.

Suddenly, it's hard to breathe. I rub the spot on my sternum where my chest aches, pressing my knuckles roughly against my wet skin. I don't know why I thought Graham would ask me again. I've turned him down multiple times. It's good manners to stop asking.

Good manners. Respecting boundaries. Being a decent human being. Those are all good things. Commendable even.

So why does it fucking hurt so much?

### Chapter Ten

#### TYLER

“What are you doing here?” Nathan stands in my doorway, holding a six-pack of my favorite pilsner. Usually, I’d be thrilled, but I had big plans to do absolutely nothing today. Alone.

“I thought we’d catch up, maybe play some Tony Hawk ?” I roll my eyes as he pushes past me. “Relive the good ol’ days in the dorm.” I snort. That’s not quite how I would describe it. We got along well enough, no thanks to the too-small room and noisy hallway. Our peak roommate time started when we moved into an off-campus apartment building. With separate rooms.

“Please, come in. My home is your home,” I say as sarcastically as possible. It doesn’t matter because Nathan’s already making himself comfortable in my kitchen. He pulls two bottles from the pack and then puts the rest in the fridge. Before I can even shut my front door, he starts rifling through my pantry.

“Do you have any of those chips I like?”

“You know I don’t grocery shop with you specifically in mind, right?”

My words lose their meaning when he pulls out a bag of salt and vinegar chips. He knows I hate them but keep them on hand for when he comes over. After years of living together, buying his favorites is embedded in my neural pathways. Even though we haven’t been roommates in years, I can’t keep myself from making sure

they're available in case he drops by.

Which he clearly feels free to do.

“Seriously? You invite yourself over to play my video games and eat my food?”

Nathan sets the drinks down on the coffee table and flops down on the couch. “Can’t I miss my best friend? We haven’t hung out in ages.”

“You literally saw me two days ago.” I sat right next to him the whole time we were at The Flaming Unicorn with Aaron and Matthias. We shared a fucking plate of nachos. Is that not enough?

“That was the regular Thursday night. We haven’t hung out, just the two of us in months.” I snort but think better of mentioning that the reason for that’s likely his new boyfriend. Though, it’s not so new anymore. “I know, that’s my fault, but I’m here today, and we have plenty of time and beer.” It is a bit his fault, but I don’t blame him for that. If I had a hunky boyfriend at home, I’d prefer to spend all my time there, as well. Besides, the two of them had a hard time keeping their hands to themselves. Not a problem, but I don’t need to see it.

More than I already have.

“You call three beers a piece plenty?”

“As though you don’t have more stashed around here.” Again, the fact that we used to live together bites me in the ass. He knows I always have a good collection, even if I’m not always willing to share.

“Fine, you can stay,” I say as I sink down on the couch next to him, reaching toward the side table to grab the controllers. “But I get to be Rodney Mullen.” Nathan groans

but doesn't argue with me.

We sit in silence as we play. As annoyed as I am at the sudden change in plans, this silence between us is comfortable. Nathan has been my best friend since I walked into our dorm room on the first day of freshman year. We might be very different people, but something about us fits together just right. Not romantically—thank fuck—but in every other way.

“So, how are you?” He breaks the silence during a break while the screen is loading.

“Fine.” It's a trap. I can sense it.

“No, really, how are you?” He puts the controller on the table and picks up his beer bottle. It's nearly empty, but he still takes a sip. I mirror his movements, swapping my controller for beer.

“Fine. Really .” I pick at the label on the bottle. “Why?” I knew his motives for coming over went beyond chips and video games.

“Because you've been distracted lately, and it seems like maybe something's going on.”

“I haven't been distracted?” It comes out as more of a question than a statement. As soon as I hear myself say it, I wish I could take the words back. I can see the concern wash over Nathan's face.

“Really? I've only seen you on Thursday nights, and before you say anything, I know I've been a bit absorbed in my own relationship, but you haven't even suggested we hang out recently. Your texts are shorter, and you rarely reply to the group chat unless someone specifically mentions you.” Nathan sets his empty bottle on the coffee table and turns to me, tucking his foot up under him. “And you haven't

mentioned a single hookup in over a month.”

Well, when he put it like that. I didn’t realize he’d even been paying that much attention. This is the upside of him knowing me so well. It’s also the downside. Basically, it’s complicated. “Maybe I’m not telling you about my dates.”

“Tyler, we’ve been friends for our entire adult life.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?” I jump up and head toward the kitchen, grateful to have a moment of distraction while I fetch us new beers. When I return, I hand him one of the bottles and take a seat in the armchair, needing to have a bit of physical distance between us. “Just because we’ve been friends a long time doesn’t mean that I tell you about every man I take to bed.”

“No, it doesn’t.” The silence hangs between us. “But you get like this sometimes. Moody and a bit distant. I know you don’t really like to talk about your feelings, but I know something’s off.”

“What do you mean that I get moody?”

Nathan rolls his eyes and leans forward, resting his elbows on his thighs. “That would be the part you get stuck on. Look, it’s not a judgment on you. If you don’t want to tell me what’s going on, that’s fine. I’ll keep kicking your ass at Trick Attack.” He pauses and gives me one of his intense looks, the kind that makes me feel like he’s trying to stare into my soul. “But if you want to tell me what’s up, I’m here to listen.”

“You have not been kicking my ass.” I scoff, kicking my foot so that it hits his leg. Not enough to hurt, but enough for him to notice. If anything, I’m way better at racking up points on tricks than Nathan.

“We’ll see about that.”



We pick our controllers up and go back to our game. Eventually, our beers are empty again, and we're both tired of playing.

"I should probably get home. I told Colt I'd be back in time for dinner."

I walk Nathan to the door. I hate how much comfort it brings me to have him in my space. There's no way I would want to have a roommate again, but it always made me feel good to come home to him at the end of a long day. Knowing that someone would be there, even if we didn't talk.

"Can I ask you a question?"

Nathan stops tying his shoe to look up at me. "Anything. Though no promises I'll have an answer."

"How did you know Colt would be worth it? I mean, he broke your heart once. What made you think he wouldn't do it again?" I play with the sleeve of my coat hanging on the wall by the front door.

"I guess I didn't really know that things would work out." He pauses and thinks for a few seconds. "But I figured I would rather know the answer to whether we could make it work than spend the rest of my life wondering what-if." Nathan goes back to tying his shoes.

I don't say anything, afraid anything would give away my thoughts. Though, apparently, I'm already a lot more transparent than I thought.

"I know I promised you no lectures, but if you have someone you think might be the one for you, then you should go for it. It might not work out, but if it does..." He gets that same stupid faraway look on his face that he always gets when he talks about Colt.

“You don’t even know this imaginary person.” I push back, giving him space to finish getting his coat on.

“Yeah, but if you like him, then he must be okay.” Nathan reaches for the doorknob. “See you Thursday?”

As soon as he’s gone, I return to my couch. I flip through Netflix , looking for something to watch before settling on rewatching The Office . Even with the background noise of the TV, the place feels surprisingly empty.

\* \* \*

## GRAHAM

“Uh-huh,” I’m not really listening to what my sister Charlotte is saying, which makes me a bad brother. In my defense, she’s been talking for nearly forty minutes. The same length of time it’s taken me to drive home from the grocery store, haul the bags into my place, and put most of them away. Right now, my phone is propped up on the counter, and she’s on speakerphone so I can get some chores taken care of while she tells me about my nieces.

I adore them, really, but sometimes it’s a lot. She calls when she gets lonely, which is often since her husband travels for work. Normally, I don’t mind it, but everything’s a bit on my nerves lately.

“Are you even paying attention?”

“Of course I am.” Shit. I go with a standby, hoping it’ll let me off the hook. “The kids are driving you crazy.” I don’t know what she was saying, but at least seventy percent of her conversations are about how my nieces are wrecking the house or refusing to eat the food she cooks. Somehow, she ended up with two girls, and my brother Dan

ended up with two boys. I think it's payback for their own rowdy childhoods, but I'd never say that aloud.

"Really, Graham?" I stand up straight and stare at the phone screen. Something about that voice still puts me on high alert. It's the same one she used when she used to babysit me. Twenty years later, it still makes my spine stiffen.

"Um, I might have missed the last thing." Or the last ten minutes. Who's counting?

"What's going on in your head? I swear it's like talking to a wall these days when I call you. Is this still about the guy from speed dating?" Charlotte knows she caught me red-handed.

On cue, Gulliver appears in the kitchen, glaring at me the way only a cat can. I sigh and check the clock. It's still thirty minutes until he gets dinner. He saunters over and sits down in front of his empty bowl.

"No, Charlotte. It's because you've been yammering on for almost an hour about absolutely nothing."

Silence.

Gulliver gives me a dirty look and walks away. I swear the cat knows when I'm being mean to his former owner. No matter how long he lives with me, he's still loyal to her. I take a deep breath and close my eyes.

"I'm sorry. It's been a long week. I shouldn't take it out on you, though." I grab the phone and abandon my half-full grocery bags. I can deal with them later. At least the perishables are all put away. The rest of it can wait until after we finish our conversation. Or tomorrow. "I'm listening." I grab one of the cans of soda from the fridge. It's still room temperature since I just got it put away, but it'll do.

“Why don’t you tell me what’s going through your mind? You don’t usually get snippy with me. That’s what I have Dan for.” I groan. Dan’s usually the surly one who’s always in some sort of mood. I guess that’s the price of being the middle child.

“Nothing’s going on.” That’s exactly what the problem is—a big nothing. I wander into the living room and sit down on the couch. “I’m trying to sort through some things.” My gaze goes to the spot where Tyler sat that first night. If I squint, I can almost imagine him with me again, fidgeting in his seat, Gulliver curled up on his lap.

“Well, I’m excellent at sorting.”

I start to tell her that I’ll figure it out myself, then think better of it. I can’t talk to Steph about the situation, and my other friends would likely tell me to move on, find someone at a club, and get laid. What the hell? It can’t hurt to get a second opinion.

Gulliver jumps up and curls up next to me, avoiding any actual contact. Just close enough that if I move, it’ll wake him. That way, he knows it’s time to ask for food again.

I spend the next few minutes laying out the whole situation with Tyler, detailing everything that’s happened since we last talked.

“So, now he’s ghosting you?” she asks when I finally come up for air.

“Not exactly. I see him almost every week and email about work stuff regularly. He’s...” The word I want doesn’t come to me.

“Hesitant?”

“Yeah, but I can’t figure out why.” If it was because of work policies, that would be one thing. Or if I thought he really wasn’t interested. “It feels like he wants to say yes

but keeps saying no instead.”

“You never did go after the easy ones, did you?” Leave it to my sister to force the hard truths on me.

“You know, I can still hang up the phone.” Gulliver lifts his head and stares at me. How does this cat always know? It sounds crazy, but I swear he understands every word I say.

“Listen, I don’t have any great pieces of advice. Tyler’s walls are up, so you’ve got a couple of choices here.” She pauses, likely for dramatic effect. “First, you can decide it’s not worth it and walk away.”

“And if I don’t like that plan?”

“Then you keep working on breaking his walls down, showing up for him, and proving that you’re worth it.” She pauses, and I hear the girls in the background arguing about something. “Cause you are , Graham. He’d be lucky to have you.”

I can’t help but groan. That’s what I’ve been doing, but the process seems so slow that we’ll both be retired by the time I finish. Honestly, I don’t want to wait that long before we have a repeat of that first night. Every time I’m around him, I want to pull him close and run my hands over his whole body. There’s so much of him that I didn’t get to explore. That first night had been frantic and desperate. I want to take my time exploring every inch of his body. Take the time to lay him out properly on my bed, naked, for hours while I nip and suck at every inch of exposed skin. “That’s not as helpful as you think.”

“Baby brother, trust me when I say that if he’s the right guy, he’ll come around.”

“And what makes you the expert on this?”

“I got Seth to come around, right?” She and her husband had known each other since preschool, but they didn’t start dating until they were almost thirty. She swears she always knew he was her future husband; it just took her twenty-five years to convince him.

Waiting twenty-five years doesn’t appeal to me. Patience is not my middle name.

A high-pitched scream followed by cries breaks through the line. “Ugh, Mom-duty calls. The girls are fighting. Again.”

I shake my head, thankful that she’s the one dealing with that. “Go. Call me back if you want to talk about your thing.” I still feel like a bad brother for zoning out on her earlier.

I don’t get an answer, only a few more shrieks in the background before the line goes dead. Gulliver takes that as his opportunity to get up and make his way back to the kitchen. It only takes a few seconds before he’s meowing at me. Loudly. It must be dinnertime.

After a few minutes, I convince myself to get up and go feed the cat and deal with the remaining groceries.

Once Gulliver is content, or at least as content as a cat gets, I get to work on the remaining items in my grocery bags. I’m stacking the final can when my phone buzzes in my pocket. I pull it out, expecting a picture of my nieces acting like perfect angels, pretending the whole screaming match never occurred. Instead, it’s a message from Tyler.

Tyler

Yes to the date thing.

I guess waiting does pay off.

If the offer still stands

If not, nevermind

I laugh and pick up my phone before he talks himself out of the date.

How's Monday night?

### Chapter Eleven

#### GRAHAM

Tyler's going on a date with me.

It only took a month, multiple attempts, and some magic to get him to agree. I shouldn't be this excited, especially with how hard he made me work, but I can't shake the feeling that we could be something special if given the chance.

I know, cart before horse. Yet, every cell in my body screams that Tyler's special. It's impossible to ignore how often he crosses my mind or how I feel when he's in the same room. He makes the whole room a little brighter, making it impossible for me to look away. Anytime I'm near him, my fingers itch to reach out and touch him. It's not about the sex, though. Okay, it's a little about sex, but it's more than that. There's a spark between us that ignited during those five minutes of speed dating, and it's been burning slowly since. Something tells me if we ever got it together, it would turn into a scorching fire, burning hot and bright.

Maybe I'm a sappy romantic. If so, it's my mother's fault for reading me so many romance novels before bed. Nothing explicit. Mostly classics. Jane Eyre. Pride and Prejudice. I think I first realized I was bi when I wanted both Mr. Darcy and Elizabeth Bennet.

I pull up in front of the address Tyler texted me. It's one of those fancy apartment buildings with a doorman in the lobby. I double-check the address. Not that I don't think he could live somewhere like this, but it seems off for his style. I expected



somewhere... hipper? This place feels too corporate.

I'm about to text to ask about getting into the building when he exits the front door. He looks over his shoulder and says something to the man behind the lobby desk. I can't see Tyler's face, but the other man laughs before waving Tyler off.

"Hey," Tyler says as he climbs in my car. He's wearing dark-wash jeans and the leather jacket I love.

"Hey. Are you all set?" I glance over to make sure he's settled and has his seatbelt on.

"Yeah. Am I dressed okay? I didn't know what to wear."

I purposefully didn't tell him where we're going. I want it to be a bit of a surprise. It took me a long time to come up with an idea that isn't dinner and a movie. Instead, I found something that allows us to be occupied while getting to know one another. If the conversation stalls, we can focus on the activity. Plus, I get the feeling that having something tactile to focus on will help Tyler relax.

"You look perfect." I pull into traffic and head toward the outskirts of the city. It's not a long drive, only about twenty minutes, but it seems to stretch out forever. The silence between us lingers, and the longer it's quiet, the harder it is to say something. Everything that pops into my head feels awkward and boring, unworthy of breaking the silence.

"So, um, how was your day?" Tyler asks as we turn onto one of the major roads, finally free of the endless one-ways in his neighborhood and downtown.

"Not too bad. A few school groups came through, which means I spent the day talking to them rather than staring at my computer screen." I didn't miss the

spreadsheets at all. My email, on the other hand, would need a lot of attention tomorrow.

“Do you like doing that? Talking to the kids?”

“I love it. I’m still learning about the organization, but getting the kids interested in the work we do is fun. They love seeing the garden and the way vegetables look before they end up in the grocery store.” He looks away when I say it. If I could see his face, I’m sure it would be bright red.

“I probably hadn’t either before I started volunteering. Maybe in a book or something. My family never had a big enough backyard to garden.”

“We always had a small patch in the backyard when I was a kid, but my mom mostly used it for flowers. A few years, we managed to grow strawberries though.” The tulips are still her pride and joy every year. She spends half the spring fretting over whether they’ll emerge too early and get caught in a late-spring frost.

“Is this Hoppy Friends?” Tyler asks before I can turn into the parking lot.

“You’ve been here?” The brewery has good reviews. I’d seen their beers on tap in various restaurants around town but never tried one.

“Once, a few years ago, when they first opened.” I’m a little disappointed it isn’t a new place for him, but I still have a few surprises up my sleeve. “They have great beer. I always get their pilsner when it’s available at restaurants.” The disappointment lifts. If nothing else, he appreciates my taste in beer.

Or at least the taste of the people holding the event tonight.

Walking inside, we’re immediately met by an overeager hostess with a clipboard.

“Are you guys here for the terrarium class?”

Tyler’s head snaps toward me, and I can’t help but grin.

“Yeah, it’s under Graham Stevens.”

“Perfect.” The hostess crosses our names off the list and shoves the clipboard under her arm. “Here are your drink tickets. You get two free drinks each as part of the course. Feel free to grab a beer from the bar and head to the room at the back.” She points across the space toward a set of propped-open double doors. “You can take any spot that’s open at one of the tables. The instructor will come around to answer any questions before the class starts. You’ve got about ten minutes.”

“Thank you,” I say, taking the tickets from her and nodding toward the bar. Tyler follows me to the counter, where we turn in two tickets for drinks. A pilsner for him and a stout for me.

The back room is filled with plants and supplies, but only a few people. We slip into a couple of spots at the end of one of the tables.

“Are we making terrariums?” He picks up the sheet of paper on the table and skims the directions. “Making? Planting?”

“Well, we’re here for their terrarium class.” I bump my knee against his, wanting to keep some physical contact between us. A few seconds pass as I wait to see if he’ll pull away from my touch. When he doesn’t, I let out a breath and relax enough to take a few sips of my stout.

It’ll be a miracle if my terrarium makes it to the end of the week. The only plants that thrive under my care are made of wood or silk. The only reason Gulliver is surviving is because he screams if I don’t feed him. Unless the terrarium figures out how to

beg, it's probably done for. The way Tyler studies the handout and inspects the materials makes me think I picked the right activity. Thank God for the pop-up ad I saw on the Cardinal Falls webpage. Who knew stuff like this even existed?

We sip our beers and postulate about what the instructor will have us doing this evening while we wait. A few other people stroll in, taking empty seats and making themselves comfortable.

"Alright, we're going to get started with tonight's event." A tall man claps his hands together in the center of the room, pulling everyone's attention. He's wearing baggy pants that look like they belong in a yoga class and a Hoppy Friends Brewery t-shirt. "Thanks for joining us. As you know, you'll each be making your own terrarium this evening. At night's end, you'll be able to take your creation home along with a set of fool-proof care instructions."

Tyler glances my way and smiles nervously. When he turns back to look at our instructor, his thigh presses more firmly against mine.

"My name's Chad. If you have any questions while we work through tonight's project, please feel free to ask. I'm here to help you get the most out of the experience." Chad makes eye contact around the room with anyone looking at him. The whole spiel is a bit over-the-top scripted. I'm hoping that once the first directions are done, Chad will be quiet and let us work in peace. "Now, the first bit of this has a lot of instructions and setup, but once we get into the more creative pieces, you'll have much more freedom. Before we get too far in, why doesn't everyone grab a vessel." He points toward a table against the wall covered in glass bowls and jars. "Think about where you're going to put this in your home. Some are bigger or wider and may be hard to fit in smaller spaces. While grabbing your container, feel free to stop at the bar so you have a full beer in front of you before we start."

Tyler leaps from his seat before anyone else and rushes to get the first pick of the

containers. I shake my head in amusement. I never would've guessed he had all that excitement bottled up inside.

He grabs the largest bowl off the table without so much as a glance at the other options. It's big enough to play host to an aquarium full of fish instead of a few plants. When he turns back, he gives me a sheepish look. Whatever's going through his mind doesn't stop him from returning his prize to the table, clutching it like a football.

"Sorry, I saw this one earlier and wanted to make sure I got it." He sets it down in front of him and adjusts it a few times until it is centered in front of his seat.

"Want to pick one out for me?" I know nothing about plants other than they need sunlight and water. Even knowing that, I still mess it up every time. Probably for the best with how often I move around.

"Are you sure?"

"I think you can do a much better job picking the best one."

"I don't think there's a best one." He gives his container a quick look. "I would pick one with a big opening. That will make it easier to work in tonight instead of having to be gentle when you're putting things inside."

I hum my understanding and make my way over to the choices, sensing Tyler isn't up for choosing mine for me. Only a handful of options remain, but I find a small teardrop-shaped vase that will be small enough to move around easily but big enough to work in tonight. Maybe taking his advice will win me a few brownie points.

When I return to the table, Tyler inspects my choice and gives me a nod. I beam with his approval. So far, the night is off to a great start.

“Okay, looks like everyone’s got their container. We’re going to start by getting the rocks and soil situated. Go ahead and put a few scoops of the big rocks you see on the table into the bottom of your terrarium.” Chad walks over to our table and holds up the rocks to demonstrate. “These will help with drainage in your terrarium. You want probably about an inch at the bottom. You can get away with less if you have a tiny container.”

The room quiets except for the sound of the stones clinking against glass as everyone focuses on following directions and arranging the bottoms of our vessels. As we start to finish, Chad talks us through the next step—cutting out a mesh disk to go on top of the stones to separate the layers and then putting in our potting mix.

Honestly, I have no idea what he’s saying most of the time. There’s a lot of information about making sure the layers don’t run together. None of it makes any sense to me. I thought we’d put a few seeds in a pot with dirt and call it a day.

I wouldn’t say that to Tyler. The sheer focus on his face is incredible as he soaks up every word of Chad’s directions and carefully sets up the layers in his terrarium. I’ve seen him at work and in the garden, but it’s always in meetings or discussions with others. As he works on his project, the world around him fades away. He may even have forgotten that we are, in fact, on a date.

I watch him work on his terrarium. His tongue sticking out of the side of his mouth when he focuses on getting something just right, fills me with warm, fuzzy feelings. For the last month, I’ve been unsure if pursuing Tyler was the right thing to do. Those doubts drift away as we work alongside each other. Even if my creation looks like something a toddler threw together at preschool, I’ll be reminded of this night every time I look at it.

TYLER

Tonight is surprisingly fun.

Not that I didn't think a date with Graham would be fun, but dates usually end up being stuffy. Or at least that's how I remember them. Dinners filled with awkward conversations. Movies with uncomfortable handholding over a popcorn bucket.

Tonight is genuinely fun. Even if Chad is a bit of a douche. As soon as the group of girls here for a bachelorette function started flirting with him, he aimed his full attention toward their table.

That's fine. I can likely do it better myself. When Chad gives permission for us to go after the moss and plants, I jump at the opportunity to grab what I want.

"Would you grab plants for me?" Graham asks. His little terrarium is shaping up well. It's taken sitting on my hands a few times not to grab it and make corrections. He'll never know, but I think I should get credit for that. "Whatever's easiest to care for, and I can grab us another round of beers while you do that."

"Okay, I'll take another pilsner." I tip my glass back to finish the last sip and hand my empty glass over to Graham.

"I'll be right back." As he leaves the room, I can't tear my gaze away from his ass. He might fill out his suit pants nicely, but that ass is meant for tight jeans. It's a shame he rarely wears them. Maybe I can change that.

When he's gone, I quickly pick out moss and succulents for each of us. The info sheets on the table have information about each of the varieties, including care instructions, as well as a few suggestions for things that go well together.

Looking over the table full of greenery, I try to imagine what would look best in Graham's home. The last time I was there, my focus wasn't exactly on the décor.

I pick out what I want, mostly moss that's hearty enough to withstand being ignored and a couple of plants. There are also figurines, bigger rocks, and other add-ins. I spy several that I want for my own terrarium and grab those, plus a few I think Graham will like. I want his to be a surprise, so I pocket the figurines for a little later.

When everything I want is piled on a tray, I carry it back over to the table. Graham arrives at almost the same time with my beer in one hand and a bottle of water in the other.

"Did you save me any plants?" he asks as he slides my glass over to me. The massive pile of greenery in front of me doesn't look like I plan to share. Maybe I overdid it? I could still put some back. Or offer it to others who are nearby? Pretend I grabbed a big plate for the whole table? "Or are we sharing that pile?"

"Sharing. If you like any of them." I make sure to tack that last part on in case he doesn't like my choices.

"They all look like plants to me."

"You really can't see a difference between them?" I raise my eyebrow as he throws a leg over the bench and sits beside me. Is it my imagination, or is he sitting closer this time? He's already kept some contact with me all evening, and I'm hyperaware of every place he touches.

"I guess I would describe this one as... fluffy?"

I snort. "That's the mood moss. It's straightforward to care for and will work well to cover the soil." He picks up some of it and offers it to me. "Fine, it's a little fluffy." What's this man doing to me?

We work side-by-side, situating the moss and other plants in their new homes.



Graham doesn't have much space to work, but it looks pretty good by the time he's done. I brush the last bits of stray soil off the leaves of my plants with a paintbrush to clean everything up.

"There."

"Well, I think you won tonight's activity," Graham says, grabbing my terrarium and turning it so he can get a better view.

"I wasn't aware that this was a contest." I reach into my pocket and pull out the figures I'd been saving. "In that case, you should know I've been holding out on you." I open my hand to reveal a blue T-rex, a purple astronaut, and a green army guy. "Pick one. Or two."

"Which one do you think goes best?" Graham asks. This seems to be a pattern. He's constantly checking with me to see what I want first. He planned this incredible night, though, so he should get the first choice. Besides, I can always pick up extra figurines later. If they don't have any more on the table, I can find a store that has what I want.

"I think you should pick whichever ones speak to you."

"None of them appear to be talking, but I'll take the T-rex. This seems like the perfect jungle environment for him." He plucks the dinosaur from my hand and inserts it in his terrarium. I don't have the heart to tell him that he's created a dry habitat instead of a jungle. His poor T-rex will be living in a desert.

I grab a spray bottle from the table and mist both our terrariums. "You'll have to do this every so often. Maybe once a week to start. Once everything's established, you can get away with once a month, but only if the soil is dry." He nods, but I doubt he's heard a word I said. I've barely listened to a word I've said. His hand is on my thigh and dangerously close to my cock. "Um, you should use filtered water. Not tap."

“Check. Spray the terrarium daily with tap water.” His face gives him away, as always. I can’t find a good response. Not when all my concentration is going toward not letting my dick get hard. “How about we get out of here?”

“Yes, please.”

### Chapter Twelve

TYLER

I wanted to hate tonight.

It'd be a lot easier if I'd had a terrible time. But, no. Graham planned a perfect date. Plants and good beer? He already knows the way to my heart. I got to relax and not overthink anything. My hands and mind were too busy crafting my terrarium.

Now that we're back in the confines of his car, my brain kicks into overdrive. When we were inside, he kept a hand or a thigh against me. As much as I hate to admit it, the touch grounded me. Now, he's got both hands on the steering wheel, and the fucking console puts too much distance between us. I can't even play with my new plants since they're stashed in the trunk for the drive. That leaves me twiddling my thumbs—literally—in the front seat, trying to think of something interesting to talk about.

The silence is killing me. The least he could do is turn the radio on to fill the space. "So, how are you liking Sprouting Joy?" It's a stupid question, one he's answered several times already, but the best I can do right now.

"I love it there. I don't know much about the plants, but the staff and volunteers are all wonderful. I'll be a little sad when Steph returns."

"Have you spoken to her?" I hold my breath, waiting for the response. I adore Steph, but she's known me a long time. Not that I think she'd spill my secrets, but Graham

isn't just anyone. Maybe she thinks he needs to know the details of how I ended up volunteering there. Then again, he took me out on a date. If he knew my volunteer hours had originally been court-appointed, he'd have rescinded the offer.

"I stopped by last week to say hi and meet the baby. I'm trying to give them space while they adjust to being a family of three. Though, you know Steph, she has a hard time taking her foot off the gas with work." He drums his fingers against the steering wheel. "I didn't mention anything about us, if you were worried."

I'm a bit relieved. At least that didn't open the door for her to give him my details. She's wonderful about me being at Sprouting Joy, but I'm not sure she'd be as happy to hear I was dating her friend.

Dating . That's what we're doing, right? I'm not sure if there are rules around that. At my work or his. That's a new layer of anxiety for me to add to the growing pile. It must pose some conflict of interest. I can't think of any way to use this for personal benefit, but I'm sure someone can. God forbid the two of us become the reason for the rules. The Graham-Tyler Rule does have a certain ring to it, though.

His car turns onto my street, and I suck in a breath. I want Graham to come upstairs so I can strip him out of those clothes. I haven't seen him naked yet, and I would love to get a better look at what he's hiding under those suits. This is also the part where my dates tend to derail. Quick hookups, no problem. But when there are actual feelings involved? Much more complicated. There are very few guys who will date a side long-term. Trust me, I've had plenty of men say those exact words to my face.

"Do you think Gulliver will be upset if you stay out a little longer?" I'm feeling brave, so I'm willing to try and hope I don't regret this in the morning.

"I fed him before I left, so he won't care where I am until it's time for breakfast." Gulliver seems like the type to want to cuddle up in bed, but what do I know about

cats?

“Would you be interested in another drink? I don’t have quite the selection that the brewery has, but I have a few options in the fridge.” That’s a bit of an understatement. I probably have at least as many options as the brewery, but the full truth tends to make me sound like an alcoholic instead of a beer connoisseur.

“I’m sure I can find something to my taste.” He gives me a quick glance before turning his gaze back to the road. I swear I see his tongue dart out of his mouth, and I really hope he’s hoping to taste more than beer tonight.

My stomach tightens. Fuck . Maybe I should have spent a little more time cleaning up and less time picking out an outfit.

He starts to pull up to the curb outside the apartment building. “You can drive a little further and pull into the garage.” Graham doesn’t say anything but steers the car in the direction I pointed. When he gets to the gate, I punch a few buttons into an app on my phone, and the gate opens. A few seconds later, we pull into one of the guest parking spots near the elevator.

“Fancy,” he says as he shuts off the car.

I shrug. It is. I don’t make a habit of telling people that I have money, but the building tends to clue people in. I’m not hiding it. I don’t like to talk about finances. Only Matthias knows the details, and that’s because he’s my financial advisor. Some of it comes from work, but a lot of it’s from the inheritance I got when my grandfather died.

I make sure to grab my terrarium from the trunk before we head inside.

“Have you lived here a while?”

“The last five years or so. It’s convenient. Close to work and downtown. I walk to work if the weather’s nice.” I love clearing my head on the way to and from work. The walk creates distance and allows me to let go of the day before relaxing better. Most of the time, I stick my earbuds in but don’t listen to anything. It keeps other people from talking to me and drowns out some of the city noise but leaves me to focus on my thoughts.

When the elevator opens, I click the button for the eighth floor. I look over at Graham, and he stares back at me. The space isn’t large, but it somehow feels too big and too small simultaneously. “Do you think Gulliver’s happy living in Cardinal Falls?” Apparently, the cat is the only safe topic my mind can come up with. Graham’s going to think I’m only dating him to get to his pet.

“I’m pretty sure he can be happy anywhere as long as there are windows with sunlight and plenty of food.” Graham takes a step toward me and smiles. And, oh god, why is this elevator so slow? “I swear you get along with him better than anyone else. Are you sure you aren’t a cat person?”

“Maybe Gulliver’s special?” This is why dating is hard. Hookups are easy. There are agreed-upon rules. Tonight is a free-for-all. Are we supposed to continue this ridiculous cat small talk? Make out?

“I think the opposite might be true. Gulliver seems quite taken with you. And so is his owner.” Graham leans in before I can process the statement and brushes his lips against mine. The kiss only lasts a second before he pulls away. It’s the most innocent kiss I can imagine, but my whole body is on fire. Thank fuck the elevator chooses that moment to stop.

I clear my throat and lead Graham down the hall toward my apartment. After getting the door open, I wave him toward the couch. “What can I get you?”

“I’ll let you pick. Just nothing too hoppy.” He doesn’t immediately sit down on the couch. Instead, he walks over to my bookcase and starts looking through the various titles and knick-knacks that line the shelves.

“Where do all these little figurines come from?” He picks one up and holds it between his thumb and forefinger.

“Oh, um, a little bit of everywhere. When I travel, I like to find something to bring back as a reminder of the trip. I try to pick ones that are about the same size and generally match the rest.” In some places, that was easier than in others.

“Do you travel a lot?”

“Some.” It’s not an answer, but I don’t want to discuss my personal life. I open the fridge and let the cool air wash over me. The door blocks my view of Graham and gives me a much-needed opportunity to reset. “Do you want a wheat beer or a stout?”

“Either is fine.” Okay, not helpful. “Do you have a favorite place?” Graham asks, apparently not letting the topic go.

“If I had to pick, London.”

“Really, how come?” He puts the little koala figurine down and searches the others for a second before picking up one of the British soldiers.

“I guess I like the history.” I grin, thinking about my trip last year. I spent nearly the whole weekend in museums, getting lost in the people and stories from centuries ago. If work hadn’t gotten in the way, I could’ve spent another week wandering through the corridors and reading the placards. “And beer.” I pass him the stout.

“I’ve never been, but it’s on my list.” He takes a first sip and hums his approval. “Is

this local?" He puts down my little soldier and settles on the couch.

"Semi. The brewery's about ninety minutes from here. They've got a great tap room that looks out over a river."

"Maybe you can take me some time," Graham says. That sounds like a second date. Or maybe some future number. Instead of responding, I take a long drink of my beer. "Tyler?"

"Yeah?" I perch on the edge of the armchair. I swear I'm not usually this much of a crazy person. But now that he's here, I can't figure out where I'm supposed to put my hands. Or how close I should get. It's easier when it's just sex. Everyone knows their role without having to worry about these details.

"Do you want me to leave?" Graham's face is tight, and his eyes are full of concern. Fuck, I'm screwing this up.

GRAHAM

"What?" Tyler slides into the chair he's been leaning against. "No, of course not."

"You seem really uncomfortable." The date had been going so well, but as soon as we left the brewery, things felt more forced. I'm not sure where things went wrong, but it's clear that Tyler's a ball of nervous energy. Maybe we should have gone to my place instead. Maybe I shouldn't have kissed him in the elevator. Maybe I should have kissed him more.

"I'm not used to dating," he mumbles.

Okay, that I can work with. "Well, I'm happy to be your teacher." I keep my voice light, not wanting to come off as sarcastic. "We don't have to do anything tonight. I



can go, and we can go on another date later this week. I can stay, and we can talk and get to know each other. It's your choice." I make sure the second date sounds like a sure thing, even though I won't be surprised if he kicks me out and blocks my number.

"What if I want to do something else?" His voice is barely a whisper but sends a tingle down my spine.

"I think we can make that happen." I've wanted Tyler in my arms all night long. The need to maintain public decency got in the way of doing anything more than a hand on his thigh. Though it may have inched a bit high by the end of the class. "You'll need to get a bit closer to me to make that work." I motion toward the empty spot next to me on the couch. "I'd also like to get to know you better. Maybe talk a bit?"

"What would we talk about?" He moves to a spot on the couch—a full foot away from me. It's closer, though, so I'll take it. I'm a patient man. Tyler can have all the time he wants. As eager as I am to taste him, I want him to lead, to show me what he's comfortable with tonight. Even if that means I don't get more than the chaste kiss in the elevator.

"Why don't you start by telling me more about your travels? Are they mostly for work?" I nearly spill my beer when he barks out a laugh. "It wasn't meant to be a funny question."

"No, I'm sorry." He takes a few deep breaths. "A bit surprised that you think my job involves any travel, let alone somewhere overseas. The best I've managed was two nights in Chicago for a conference."

"Chicago's a great city."

"Fuck. Are you from there? I didn't mean it's a bad place." Tentatively, I put a hand

on Tyler's shoulder. He doesn't immediately shrug me off, so that's a start.

"Relax, I'm giving you a hard time. I'm from nearby here, remember?" Tyler leans into my touch, his cheek grazing my hand. "So then you must travel for fun?"

"Yeah, my parents fly off somewhere at least once a year, and they still let me tag along." He bites his bottom lip.

"That sounds like fun." A trip like that with my family would be a nightmare. Love them to death, but the whole clan can barely manage to make it to the same restaurant for dinner. An international trip is out of the question. "Between my two siblings, their significant others, and their children, anything with my family is sheer chaos." And as the youngest and the only single one, I get the worst accommodations. "We usually meet up in smaller groups, but every year, we go to this campsite near Lake Stonewater at the beginning of summer." Everyone has their own space, and the kids have plenty of room to run wild.

"I've never been camping."

"Well, we rent cabins, so it isn't really camping. We used to set up tents at the campsites when we were younger." Tyler's face drops at my response, so I add, "Maybe we could go camping together sometime?"

"With your family?" His voice is so high it's nearly shrill. I put my beer down on a coaster and inch a little closer. Honestly, I have the same reaction every spring when we start making plans. Spending that much time in close quarters with them is not easy. It's much easier to appreciate them from a distance.

"That's one option, but I thought we could go alone. It would be a lot quieter." My idea of romance does not involve my nieces and nephew crawling into bed with us first thing in the morning. "And more private."

“What camping activities require privacy?” Tyler untucks his leg and leans in a little closer. My dick can think of about forty different options right now. I shift in my seat, trying not to make my hard-on obvious. I meant it when I said we could just talk the whole evening.

“Hmmm... you might have to come camping with me to find out.”

Tyler sets his beer down next to mine and closes all but the last inch between us. “Any chance you could give me a preview? So that I know what I’m signing up for.”

I cup his face, my thumb brushing against his stubble. Tyler presses against my touch, nuzzling into my hand. It’s all I can do to start slow, kissing him gently. Even in the softness, he sets my whole body on fire. He tastes like coffee and caramel, the remnants of his beer lingering on his lips. When I stroke his jaw, he opens for me, his tongue slipping into my mouth.

This isn’t like the kisses we shared last time. Those were foreplay, kisses meant to lead up to something more. These are the main event. I could die happy like this, my lips pressing against Tyler’s, our tongues tangling together. When a moan slips out of my mouth, he slides a hand behind my head, threading his fingers through my hair, and pulls me in closer. It’s a small move, his hand somehow gentle and forceful at the same time.

Despite the heat and intensity between us, I’m in no hurry to speed things along. If we did nothing but kiss all night, I’d go to bed a happy man. Fine, I’d go to sleep a happy man after I got myself off. Still, very happy.

When was the last time I did nothing but kiss? Probably high school. Fuck . What has Tyler done to me?

While I might be content to stick to kissing, it’s becoming evident that Tyler has

other plans tonight. He nudges at my shoulder and encourages me to lie back on the couch. As soon as I comply, he covers me with his body, never pulling away. He presses himself against me, his hard cock pressing into my hip. He's not heavy, but the sensation of him pinning me down, using me to get off, is heady.

Maybe it's the beers or a lack of oxygen, but my head is starting to spin. I break the kiss so I can get a little bit of air, even though I'm sure it won't help. It's being in Tyler's orbit that throws me off-center.

I shift my focus to Tyler's neck, kissing bits of skin and finding all the places that force a sharp inhale of breath. God, I bet there are dozens of places I could lick and suck that would make him moan and writhe. It becomes my sole focus to find each and every one and to figure out how to make him feel good. I tug at his collar, trying to get access to his collarbone.

"Can I take this off?" I ask, my hands already reaching for the hem.

"Yeah." His voice wobbles, and I stop.

"I don't have to," I whisper as I pepper kisses behind his ear.

Instead of answering, Tyler yanks his shirt over his head. I follow his lead and unbutton my shirt. It gets caught behind me when I try to pull it off, and Tyler has to help me get my arms out of the sleeves.

"God, you look incredible." He's got smooth skin with a smattering of dark hair leading up his abdomen and spreading across his chest. The need to prove to him that I love everything I see overtakes me, and I lean in and suck a nipple into my mouth.

"Fuck. Graham." Tyler winds his fingers through my hair and pulls me in tighter.

"Please."

I don't know what he's asking for, but I'm happy to try everything I can until I figure it out.

Tyler thrusts against me, and I let out a long groan. My erection is achingly hard and pressing against the zipper of my jeans. I lick my way across Tyler's chest until I reach his other nipple, teasing for a few minutes before sucking it into my mouth.

My hands trail down his back until they reach his ass. I cup his cheeks in my hands, encouraging him to grind against me. There's too much fabric in the way for either of us to get what we want, but it doesn't stop me from trying.

"Jesus." Tyler pulls me in ever closer for a second before loosening his grip on my head. He moves away, and for a second, I think he's about to ask me to stop. I would—in a heartbeat—but I hope he won't ask me to.

It takes only a second before I realize he's moving down my body, positioning himself between my thighs. I part my legs for him, making room for him to kneel between them on the couch.

Tyler loops his fingers under the waistband of my jeans before he starts working on the button. "Is this okay?"

"Anything." Just please do it soon. My impatience pushes me to help him with the button and fly before lifting my hips enough to yank my jeans down enough to give him access.

A grin spreads across Tyler's face as he leans in and begins mouthing my cock through my briefs.

"Fuck yes," I say. It takes all of my self-control to keep from pushing my hips up toward him.

Tyler takes his time—way too much time—exploring over the fabric. My cock is leaking against my skin, and I can see the wet spot spreading across the light blue fabric, a mix of my precum and Tyler’s saliva.

“Please, Tyler.” I’m not above begging. My cock is desperate to be in his mouth. I’ve been thinking about it since our first encounter, and now my fantasy is so close to coming true. Having him this close but separated by a layer of cotton is killing me.

In an act of mercy, he tugs the waistband of my briefs down and pulls out my cock, swallowing me down to the root in one go.

“Fuck, Tyler. Fuck!” My head falls back against the arm of the sofa. If I watch him suck me, I’ll come in two minutes flat. Even with my eyes closed, it’s not going to take long.

Tyler’s mouth pulls off occasionally, his tongue teasing over my sensitive head and slit. I’ve often wondered if I remembered the whole thing wrong between that first night and now. Maybe developed some fantasy that inflated how good Tyler’s mouth felt.

Now I know. I must have misremembered because this is so much better. It’s like he has a map that leads him to all the best places.

His hand slips between my thighs, and he fondles my balls in his palm. “Yes. Yes.” It’s the only word I can manage to say. My mind is entirely offline. As he takes me into his mouth again, his throat constricts around my cock as he swallows. All I can do is moan and whisper profanities.

“Fuck, I’m close.” I’m trying to hold on longer, but it feels too good. My body is racing toward orgasm.

At my words, he doubles his effort, sucking me and adding a hand around my base to stroke my cock. I'm defenseless against it, and my orgasm bursts through me.

It feels like I come forever with my cock pulsing in Tyler's mouth. He takes every bit of cum I give him, swallowing around me and then licking me clean. As the feeling turns toward oversensitive, Tyler sits back on his heels.

His lips are red and puffy, saliva clinging around the edges, and his wavy hair out of place.

"Fuck, that mouth of yours..." My brain is still waiting for the return of blood flow, so I can't finish the sentence.

"Good?"

I raise my eyebrows at him and glance toward my softening cock sitting against my belly.

"Come here," I say. He crawls up and kisses me, the taste of my cum lingering on his lips. "What do you need?" I ask.

"Can I... would it be okay if I jerked off on you?"

"Yes. Fuck." My cock twitches against my thigh at the thought. There's no chance it's going to get hard again in the next few minutes.

Tyler sits up and works his jeans open quickly before pulling out his cock. The head is an angry shade of purple. He spits in his hand, then starts stroking himself.

"Shit. I'm close," he says, eyes closing as his head drops back. "Feeling you come in my mouth nearly undid me."

“Yeah, you like swallowing my cum?” I can’t take my gaze off him. He’s so beautiful like this, completely caught up in his pleasure.

“Yeah. So. Good.” He manages to get out between pants.

“I like the way you look sucking my cock.” Tyler shivers as I run my hands up the sides of his body.

“Fuck. Graham. Gonna.”

“Come for me, Tyler.”

It only takes a second before he groans and shoots thick ropes of cum over my stomach and chest. I run my finger through his spend and bring it up to my mouth, licking it off.

“Fuck that’s hot,” he says hoarsely.

Tyler rolls off me and grabs his shirt from the floor. He uses it to clean us both up a little. We’ll need showers, but this buys us a little time. When he drops the shirt back to the floor, he cuddles into my side, resting his head on my chest. The couch isn’t built for two grown men to lie side-by-side, but we make it work.

“So,” I start after both our heart rates seem to be back to normal. “Do I get a second date?”



### Chapter Thirteen

GRAHAM

Honestly, I'm surprised Tyler agreed to a second date.

I think we both had a good time on Monday—I know I did—but Tyler's hard to read. Maybe he's still torn about mixing business with pleasure? Sleeping with a client might raise a few red flags at his company. He did mention working toward a promotion. I don't want to be the reason he's overlooked.

The first of his texts come through on Tuesday morning.

Tyler

Can I plan this date?

Absolutely!

I say yes not only because I don't have any ideas that can top terrarium night, but I'm also excited to see what he comes up with and learn more about his interests beyond computers and plants.

Tyler

It's a surprise

Oh. I didn't realize I'd be giving up that much control. Surprises are great, but I'm picturing everything from a movie to rock climbing to ballroom dancing. That's a lot of wiggle room around how to prepare.

I'm still deep in regret on Wednesday morning when he sends me an update.

Tyler

Dress casually

That rules out ballroom dancing.

But wear comfortable shoes

But maybe not the rock climbing.

And bring a coat

I send him a quick text to let him know I'm looking forward to it. Between the suspense of figuring out what we're doing and getting to see him again, I'm too fidgety to get any work done. Instead of continuing to stare down the budget spreadsheet, I shift my focus to volunteer applications. They're easy enough to sort through with limited attention. Not that they don't require care, but most people who apply receive an invitation to training. Only big red flags get a second look.

My phone buzzes on my desk.

Tyler

Casual like jeans, not casual workout clothes

At least he's thinking about me and the date. Thirty hours feels like a lifetime. What idiot agreed to wait until Friday?

Right, I did. If this next date goes well, I'm not letting as much time pass between dates.

Whatever you wear is fine

I can't wait!

I barely manage to hold back a laugh.

Less time also means fewer opportunities to call it off. When I left on Monday, things between us were good. Or they seemed that way. I worried that once the glow from the orgasm wore off, Tyler would start overthinking things again and pull away. The text messages are a nice reminder that he's thinking about me. And our date.

I return to the applications, putting them into three piles: yes, maybe, and no. The majority are clear yeses. A handful end up in the maybe pile where we need more information, usually because they skipped a section of the application. The few nos are because they don't meet minimum requirements, or they're looking for something we can't provide. As much as we want to say yes to everyone, an organization isn't always a good fit. Right now, we don't have openings for volunteers on weekday evenings. Through some sorcery, we have all those shifts covered, with several current volunteers on the list to take them over if they become available.

I'm down to the last three when my phone buzzes again. My heart races, sure Tyler's cancelling on me. Normally, I'm not this nervous, but Tyler brings it out of me in all the best—and worst—ways. When I check, it's from my sister.

Charlotte

Did you lock that guy down yet?

It's clear why I don't normally tell her things. My siblings have zero boundaries where I'm concerned. Nevermind I try to find anything out about their lives. Drawback of being the baby, I guess.

Getting closer

At least partially true.

Charlotte

Work faster. Christmas is coming.

It's still several months away, though it's hard to picture Tyler in the chaos of my family Christmas. We aren't what anyone would call quiet.

Maybe I'll go to his place.

Charlotte

You wouldn't dare

I'm telling Mom

The favorite threat of siblings everywhere. I doubt she'll make good on it, knowing I have years of dirt on her as a bargaining chip.

I place the applications into the appropriate folders and email the volunteer coordinator to let them know that they're ready. My cell phone buzzes again, this time with a phone call. An actual call—not a text.

Shit. Charlotte told on me. My parents are some of the rare people who call without texting first. No matter how old I get, the fear of being in trouble with them hangs over my head. Instead, Tyler's name lights up on my screen.

Shit, he's canceling. "Hey, Tyler."

"So, I wanted to run the date by you to see what you thought." Phew. Not canceling.

"I thought it was supposed to be a surprise," I tease, quickly closing my office door to prevent anyone from eavesdropping.

"I did, but then I started to worry you wouldn't like it."

It's not possible, but I swear I can hear him chewing his bottom lip through the phone. "I'll like anything you came up with. Except maybe ballroom dancing."

"Why would we go ballroom dancing?"

"Never mind."

"This pavilion on the edge of town has a big mini-golf course. I thought after we grab dinner, we could go play a round." He pauses and takes a big breath before continuing. "I don't remember the last time I played, but it seemed like something fun and active. I'm probably shit at it and will end up throwing my ball or something. If you want, I can find something else."

"Tyler?" I hold back my smile, afraid he'll be able to hear it through the phone.

"Yeah?"

"It's perfect."

\* \* \*

Knowing the location and activity for tonight should make picking an outfit easy.

It doesn't. I'm on my third shirt and second pair of jeans. The first pair made my ass look incredible, but they weren't practical for playing mini-golf. This pair doesn't hug my legs as nicely, but I can move freely. I don't care so much about winning, but I'd like to make sure I can bend over to pick my ball out of the bushes as needed.

The gray button-down shirt I'm wearing is perfect, but I'm not sure I can move my arms well enough. It's something I don't give a lot of thought to when I purchase my shirts. Office life doesn't require a lot of shoulder mobility. I strip the top off and throw it in the laundry, past the point of having enough patience to hang it up again. I pull a slate gray henley out of one of my drawers and throw it on. Definitely meets the definition of casual.

I glance in the mirror one last time. Good enough . I found my pair of sneakers last night and put them by the front door so they'd be ready tonight.

Five minutes to go. I do a last check of the place, making sure the bedroom and the living room are tidy. Tyler didn't mention coming back here in his plans for the evening, but I'm hoping we end up in my bedroom. Or his, I'm not picky.

In the living room, Gulliver curls around himself on the couch, oblivious to my fashion meltdown. "What do you think?" I ask. Gulliver picks his head up to inspect me, then falls back asleep. "Not helpful." I should expect nothing from him. He doesn't care what I do or wear so long as his dinner's served on time. Tonight's his lucky night because he got fed a whole hour early, so I didn't have to worry about it while out with Tyler.

When the doorbell rings, I nearly jump out of my skin. Gulliver opens one eye to look

at me incredulously. I don't think I've been this nervous for a date in... maybe ever?

"Hey," Tyler says when I open the front door. His body sways back and forth as he digs his heel into my welcome mat.

"You look nice tonight." He looks down at his clothes—the typical dark jeans and leather jacket look I've grown accustomed to. "Do you need anything before we get going?" Can he bend down to pick up a ball in those? No idea, but I bet the view is incredible when he tries.

He hesitates slightly, and I wish I could read his thoughts. That kind of superpower would be useful right now. It could have some benefits in the bedroom, too.

"Oh, I think I forgot to grab my wallet." I make a show of giving my back pocket a few taps. "Do you mind stepping inside for a minute?" And if my wallet happens to be securely in my coat pocket, no one needs to know. Maybe whatever he's thinking about will come to the front of his mind if he gets a chance to relax.

"Sure," he says as he follows me inside.

Gulliver hops off the couch and trots over to brush up against Tyler's legs. "Have you been a good boy for Graham?" Tyler coos as he runs his hand along the cat's back.

"No, he has not."

"Don't listen to him. I'm sure you're the best boy." Tyler sinks to his knees and heaps attention onto Gulliver. This cannot be the same man who told me he didn't like cats. The gray fluff ball flops over and shows his belly. "And so soft, too."

"You know that's a trap, right? He'll attack your hands in a few seconds." I stand in the kitchen, watching the scene in front of me unfold. Should I step in and make sure

Tyler's hands don't turn into a bloody mess?

Tyler's face is pure bliss. Somehow, that ridiculous cat manages to soothe something inside him. I wish I could get Gulliver to share his tricks with me, but I can't even get him to share his hiding places. He just reappears sometimes after going missing for hours.

Tyler gives me a look of pure shock. "How dare you say such things. He's clearly innocent." I sense the sarcasm in his statement, but I also worry that my cat is about to destroy him. The belly is always a trap.

Except my traitor of a cat doesn't even try to swipe at him. Gulliver simply stretches his legs out to give Tyler better access. Those two were made for each other. It's too easy to imagine Tyler in my life—and in Gulliver's life. It's early, but he slots in effortlessly. Like a puzzle piece, perfectly designed to line up on all sides.

"Do you want to give him a treat before we go?" Gulliver sits up straight at his favorite word.

"Can I?" Tyler stands and rubs his hands on his pants. We'll both end up wearing cat fur on our date this evening. It's a hazard of having a long-haired cat. Somehow, no matter what I do, there's fur everywhere.

"Of course." I grab the treat bag from the kitchen drawer, pull out a few small treats, offering them to Tyler. Right before he grabs them, I snap my hand shut. "I do require payment, though."

He raises an eyebrow at me.

"I need at least three kisses in exchange for these."



“Is that the going rate for cat treats these days?” Tyler steps in front of me, and I grab hold of his hips and pull him closer.

“Pretty sure that’s wholesale cost.” I pull him a little closer, loving the way he leans into me. “I’m giving you a discount.”

“I’d hate to know what you had to do to get the bag.” Tyler tilts his head up, his deep blue eyes staring into mine.

“I can show you later.” Tyler’s muscles tense for a second. Did I push too far? He relaxes a second later, rising on his toes to give me the most chaste kiss I’ve ever received. His lips barely brush over mine before pulling away. The slight touch still manages to electrify my body.

“How’s that?”

“I was hoping for a little more.” Before I can say anything else, he leans in and captures my lips. This time, he doesn’t pull away immediately. His lips move over mine slowly before his tongue tentatively traces over the seam of my lips. When I open to him, he tangles our tongues together briefly before pulling away. I instantly feel the loss. I could spend the whole night getting to know all the ways he can kiss me. Everything from the chaste kiss he gave me a second ago to the desperate kisses I’ve gotten when he’s on the brink of orgasm.

“Better?” Tyler asks.

I’m still gasping for breath. My body anticipated more with that kiss, leaving it waiting and wanting. “Much.”

“I think I still owe you one more.”

Thank God for that because I'm not ready to be done with him—not right now and certainly not for the night. “You do. Better make it good.” Hell, I'm fine with skipping mini-golf. I know going on dates and talking is an important part of a relationship, but right now, all I want is to get him in my bed.

A bed would be a nice change for us. Then I can take my time with him. Take him apart completely before putting him back together.

He captures my lips again, diving into the kiss with his whole body. I take a step back, needing to steady myself. His hand strokes my cheek and chin, encouraging me to open to him. We've only kissed in the heat of the moment before, so having him like this, with no rush to get anywhere, is new.

I pull him closer to me, digging my fingers into his hips until his hard cock presses into my thigh.

Tyler seems to take that as his cue to take control of the situation, and it's all I can do to hold on as his tongue explores every inch of my mouth, stroking against my tongue in ways that I hope are a prelude to the main event.

I don't think I've ever loved kissing this much. It's always been great, but this feels different. It's not that I don't want to turn this into something more; it's that I'm content to stay like this. Fully clothed, bodies touching and kissing until we can't stand it anymore.

At least, I feel that way until Tyler backs me up against the kitchen island and pulls away. He doesn't stop, though. Instead, he tilts his head to the side and peppers kisses along my jawline. My body starts to settle until he licks a path from my ear down to my collarbone. I can't hold back the moan that he drags out of me.

“Do you like that?”

“Fuck mini-golf.” It’s the best answer I have.

I reach for the hem of his shirt, but something bumps my forehead. I turn and find Gulliver sitting on the counter—where he’s not allowed—holding up a paw.

Tyler looks over and breaks into laughter. “You still have his treats in your hand.”

“You’re a menace,” I say to Gulliver. Cockblocked by my own cat. He doesn’t deserve the treats.

“Ah, poor kitty. Give him the treats.”

Poor kitty? Poor Graham. My cock is hard as steel. I want my hands working to get Tyler off, not placating the furry beast.

“Can I still give him one?” Oh, right. That’s how this whole thing started. I can’t resist Tyler’s puppy dog face.

“Of course. I think you sufficiently paid for these.” I hand over the treats and watch Tyler feed them to Gulliver one at a time. Each time the cat takes one, Tyler showers him with praise and affection.

“So...” Tyler says as he gives away the last treat. “What were you saying about mini-golf?”

“I’ll do whatever you want, but I’m not against taking a rain check on those plans and staying here tonight.”

Tyler bites at his lower lip while he considers my suggestion. “What would we do if we stayed here?”

I'm not sure he's ready to hear the depth of my fantasies on this one. "What would you say to popcorn and a movie?"

TYLER

After hours of planning a mini-golf outing, I'm watching a Marvel movie on Graham's couch. I forget which one we agreed on, and now I haven't been paying enough attention to be sure. It's one of the ones with The Avengers , but that doesn't narrow it down much.

It's only slightly less awkward than I thought it might be. The first minute or two were rough, figuring out how close to him I should sit, but after a few deep breaths, I let him lead. He's got a sixth sense for knowing when something's stressing me out. And then he magically fixes it. Obviously, that's not always an option. But tonight? The way he gave me a minute at the front door? Or how he shifted on the couch to make sure we were touching? If knights in shining armor existed, he'd be mine.

I jump when something explodes on the screen. Oops . I guess my lack of attention is no longer a secret. Graham smiles and pulls me closer. He smells incredible, that same combination of citrus and spice from our first night. I can't help nuzzling up to him, resting my head against his shoulder.

"You okay?" he asks as his thumb strokes the back of my hand.

"Yeah." I'm comfortable. Actually comfortable. Not because the couch cushions are soft, but because Graham is so inviting and sweet. It shouldn't be possible for one person to be this wonderful. I asked around a bit at Sprouting Joy, expecting to hear that he's a monster to work with or that he yells at volunteers. Nothing but nice comments. Not a single person could find something bad to say about him. Worse? Half of them admitted to lusting after him.

If someone asked me last week if I was the jealous type, I would've said no. Now? The green-eyed monster has me considering taking days off work so that I can follow him around and make sure no one flirts with him.

That sort of power shouldn't exist. It's hard to argue, though, especially when he leans in and kisses me softly, his hand coming up behind my head and gently pulling me toward him.

Even harder when he deepens the kiss, brushing his thumb over my jaw to encourage me to open to him. His mouth tastes of buttery popcorn and chocolate. It's all Graham, a perfect mix of sweet and sensual that I can't get enough of. My body contorts to get more of him, needing to feel him all over. Despite my best efforts, I can't ignore the aching in my neck.

What's a guy to do but to crawl onto his date's lap? Being short has its advantages, and I intend to make full use of them tonight. My knees on either side of Graham, I can finally get the contact I crave. He moans when I press my hard cock against him, encouraging me to thrust against him. Fuck that feels good.

It's tempting to crawl off so I can get his cock in my mouth again, but that means breaking away from his kisses. I groan against his mouth when he grabs my ass and pulls me in closer. Guess that answers the question about what he wants. Nope, not breaking away anytime soon.

Graham's must have a different plan. One second, I'm rubbing up against him, and the next, he's pinning me to the couch. Not that I'm complaining.

"This okay?" he says, panting.

"Fuck, yes." Being trapped usually makes me anxious, but Graham holding me down like this only makes me feel safe.

Until his erection rubs against mine. Then my brain short circuits.

So good.

Not enough.

My mind bounces between the two options. Our stupid jeans are the in the way, and my cock is pressing uncomfortably against the zipper. We need less clothes. Now .

Graham must have the same idea because we reach for the waistband of my pants at the same time. Between us, it doesn't take long to get our clothes off, letting the jeans, briefs, and shirts fall to the floor next to the couch. Not the sexy strip tease I've been thinking about all week, but it gets the job done.

It's sinful the way he thrusts against me when we reset. Without the annoying clothing in the way, our slick cocks easily glide against one another.

"Oh. Fuck."

"Yeah. This okay?"

"Yes. Fuck." I break away long enough to look down to see where our bodies meet. Heat pools in my belly. It's too good. I close my eyes and gather my self-control. I don't want this to end, but I'm dangerously close to the edge. "Keep going."

Graham must sense my rising orgasm. His hips slow, but he more than makes up for it with the way he kisses. I never spent much time kissing my hook-ups. It's too weird. This is what I've been missing out on. The way his tongue strokes mine, the vibrations that shoot through me each time he moans. His kisses demand answers, and I'm all too happy to obey.

It seems impossible with how close our bodies are, but Graham snakes a hand between us and wraps it around our cocks. I groan at the sensations as his grip tightens. Somewhere, my brain screams at me to slow down, but I don't listen, thrusting into his fists faster. I'm nearly there when he pulls away again. When I whimper, he nibbles along my neck and laughs. "Not yet, sweetheart."

When he moves again, his cock drags over my hip, the way eased by the mix of our precum. His fingers graze over my cock before pressing against my thigh, urging me to spread my legs a little more. My brain is hazy, and it takes a second for me to register to move. He cups my ass and traces a line down my crack.

"Okay?" Graham asks.

My mouth goes drier than the desert. I try to make a noise, but nothing comes out. Fuck. Fuck. Fuck. This is why I tell people ahead of time.

"Tyler?" Graham pulls his hand back, but I swear I can still feel the ghost of it on my body.

I don't want to ruin the evening, so I catch his wrist and pull his hand away. I try to shimmy down, kissing along his happy trail. It's a distraction technique I'm hoping he won't notice. Except Graham is way too smart for that. He catches me and pulls me back up, kissing me forcefully.

"Not tonight, sweetheart. I'm desperate to taste you. If you'll let me." Fuck. It's hard to argue with that. I can see him searching my face, trying to get a handle on the situation.

"Yes. Please." My voice might be a little overenthusiastic, but I'm trying to make up for my moment of panic. I want Graham; there's no question in mind about that. And the chance to have his mouth on me? No way am I saying no to that.

My cock flagged a little in my panic, but as Graham positions himself between my thighs, my erection returns. I'm still a bundle of nerves, but my unease moves to the back of my mind when his tongue glides up the underside of my cock.

And fuck, I've been missing out this whole time. Graham's mouth is heaven, and he knows exactly how to use it. He wraps one hand around the base of my cock and slides the other one up my stomach. Seeing and feeling his hands, knowing exactly where they are—and where they're not—give me that ability to relax that last little bit. Enough to start to feel my orgasm building.

I'm not ready for this to end. Neither is Graham, apparently. He pops off of my cock and uses his tongue to lick around the head like a lollipop, lapping up the precum that bubbles up from my slit. "How's this?"

As if he needs to ask. The way my body responds to him leaves nothing to the imagination. I want—no, need him to suck me again. He's clearly not going to, though, until he gets a real response. "So, fucking good. Please, don't stop." I manage to pant out the words, picking my head up in time to watch him swallow my cock again. It's the sexiest thing I've ever seen. Full stop.

"Oh, fuck. I'm gonna come." I manage to warn him only a second before my orgasm races through me. I shout his name as I shoot down his throat. He swallows every drop before coming up for air.

"Fuck, Graham. That was incredible." I'm boneless, absolutely spent from the orgasm. I will myself to make a move, grab hold of Graham, and get him off. Before I can reach for him, he's back on top of me, kissing me, the taste of my cum on his lips.

His cock presses against my hip. The realization hits me like a ton of bricks. He's not hard. Fuck, I knew I screwed things up with my mini freak out. Graham's kind, so he



wouldn't say anything, but it clearly killed the mood for him. I'm mentally kicking myself when he pulls away.

"What's wrong? Am I crushing you?"

I think for a second, trying to figure out what to say. "I didn't get you off."

Graham turns a shade of pink I've never seen on him before. Shit . It's even worse than I thought. "Sorry. I came when you did."

"What?" I can't quite process what he said. I run it through my brain several times before it starts to make sense.

"Sorry. I've been fantasizing about doing that for a while, and the real thing was even hotter." He glanced down toward where our hips are pressed together. "We should probably clean up the couch." He chuckles and rolls off of me.

His words finally sink in. "You really came from giving me a blow job?" I'm not trying to embarrass him, but I'm still in shock. Not wanting him to feel bad, I sit up and lean in to kiss him. "That's hot."

We both look toward the wet spot on the couch.

"How about I grab something to clean that up with, then we move this to the shower?"

"That's your second-best idea tonight." Graham cocks his head to one side. "The best one was skipping mini-golf."

### Chapter Fourteen

#### GRAHAM

I meet Tyler in the bathroom. He's already got the water warming up for a shower. For the first time, I wish I had a bigger shower stall here. It's perfectly roomy for one person, but two is going to be tight.

As soon as Tyler declares the water warm enough, we hop in and let the water wash over us. There are several moments of comfortable silence. I've got a fancy tankless water heater here, so we can enjoy the tight space and intimacy for as long as we like.

I'm biding my time, waiting for Tyler to bring up what happened on the couch. Even if he recovered quickly, I know I hit a trigger back there. The second his body tensed up, I could feel the difference. Not only in the way he felt beneath me, but in his energy. I can make lots of guesses, but I'd rather hear it straight from his mouth. Both because I want to be sure I don't do it again and because I think it'll be good for him to talk about.

He leans against me, letting his head rest against my chest. I manage to reach the shower gel and pour a hearty amount into my palms. I soap us both up slowly, running my hands soothingly over his skin. By the time I make my way up from his hips to his shoulders, he's practically purring. "God, why does that feel so good."

"Because you're too tense for someone who just had an orgasm." I chuckle and dig into his muscles a little bit more. He's quiet, so I take the opportunity to work my way down his back, making sure to spread the suds everywhere. They only last a

second before the water washes them away. “Want to talk about it?”

He lets out a massive sigh. I keep my hands moving slowly over his back. The suds are long gone, but I hope the motion itself is soothing. He tips his head back, looking up into my eyes.

“I... I’m a side.” Tyler’s voice wavers a bit. “Do you know what that means?”

“I’m familiar with the term.” The internet is a trove of information, whether I want it or not. It’s thanks to many of the great sex columnists that I worked out my own bisexuality and how to fit into queer spaces. “But why don’t you tell me what it means to you.” One thing I’ve learned is that everyone is different.

“I don’t like anal penetration. At all.” He pulls back, his words almost a challenge. “And yes, I’ve tried both. Multiple times.”

“I’m not questioning that.” Given his response, I can only imagine Tyler has had this conversation with some real assholes over the years. “I’m more interested in hearing about the kinds of things you do like.”

He stares at me, blinking. “Pretty much anything that doesn’t include ass play.”

“So that includes oral and frotting?” He nods. “But no rimming, no penetration?”

“Pretty much.”

“Okay.” I can work with that. I’ve typically considered myself vers, though I more often top than bottom. It’s never been the main thing for me, though. Sex is about connecting with my partner, bringing them pleasure, and enjoying each other’s bodies. I don’t need anal for any of those things.

“Just okay?” He backs up, stepping out of the spray of the water. “Okay, what? Do you want me to go?”

“Go? Why would I want you to go?” I step forward and place my hands on his hips. “I mean, okay, that’s fine with me. I’ll respect your boundaries.”

“But being in a relationship with me means you won’t get real sex.”

Jesus. Who the hell has he been talking to? “First, what we’ve been doing is very much sex in my mind. That bullshit about anal being sex is a bunch of garbage. Second, I’m very happy with what we’re doing. I don’t need penetrative sex to be happy in a relationship.”

He seems skeptical, but when I pull him into a hug, he relaxes against me. “You don’t think you’ll get bored?”

“I have a very active imagination. I bet together we can devise a long list of things to do in bed.” We stay like that for a few minutes, resting against each other, enjoying the warm water against our skin. Eventually, we both decide it’s time to get out. Endless hot water doesn’t mean endless showers. Plus, it’s a lot easier to cuddle on the couch or in bed. I can tell Tyler’s emotionally exhausted.

“Want to finish our movie?” I ask once we’re back in the living room. I’ve pulled on a pair of sweats and loaned Tyler a pair, as well. They’re way too long for him, but with some creative rolling of the ankles, he’s managed to make it work.

“Sure.”

I rewind the movie back to about where we stopped. Before Tyler can overthink, I pull him down on the couch and tuck him up against my body, right where he belongs.

## TYLER

My neck hurts, is my first thought as I wake up. The second is that I'm having a heart attack. I can't suck in a full breath, my chest tight and heavy.

I open my eyes and relax. Gulliver's on top of my chest, dozing away as though he didn't almost put me in an early grave. Those cartoons of cats sleeping on top of people always seemed a bit over the top. I'm slowly learning they're exactly right. This cat is more than happy to make me his bed, even though I've seen no fewer than six cat beds around Graham's place. I give him a few small nudges, and he finally concedes, hopping down and storming out of the room.

With that part taken care of, I roll off Graham, who got the worse end of the deal. He's apparently been sleeping under the combined weight of both me and Gulliver. I have no idea how he's managed to sleep, but I'm guessing he'll have a few knots that rival my own. I roll my neck a couple of times, trying to loosen up.

The night slowly comes back to me. Canceling mini-golf, starting a movie, freezing up on Graham when we were fooling around, and, of course, my shower confession. It's all left me feeling a little raw. I know I should've mentioned it sooner, but it tends to be a relationship killer. Any guy I've been interested in has made it clear that no anal sex is a deal breaker.

My last boyfriend, Jasper, tried hard. At least, he said he did. I never got the feeling he put much thought into our sex life. Not after the first month, anyway. I'd told him over text message before we even met. I didn't want to waste an evening on an awkward first date if he already knew we weren't compatible. He seemed good with it, though, assuring me that a combination of hand jobs and blow jobs would suffice. And it did. For the first couple of months. After that, he changed. He pressured me more often, becoming increasingly frustrated with our limited options.

By the time I ended things, he'd taken to trying to wear me down, insisting I didn't like it because I hadn't been with the right guy. Assuring me that he was the one .

Since then, I'd been strictly a hook-up guy. Swapping blow jobs for a one-time thing is easy. No one expects more, and I'm not asking them for a commitment. Graham says he's okay with it, but I can't help but wonder for how long.

"Hey," I say when Graham sits up, rubbing at his eyes. "We fell asleep." I check my watch. It's a little after two in the morning.

"Let's go to bed." Graham slowly gets up from the couch, his movements stiff and slow. Exactly how I feel right now. When he offers me his hand, I hesitate. I should go home to my own bed. If he's going to call things off, it's better not to get any more attached.

Right now, I want nothing more than to curl up next to him, though. My muscles might be in knots, but I swear the nap on the couch is the best sleep I've had in a long time. It's been a long time since I had a sleepover with anyone, though. Probably since Jasper and I broke up all those years ago. With guys on the apps, it's a safety thing. I don't need to stay at their place, not knowing what will happen in the morning.

"Come on, we need real sleep."

That's hard to argue with, so I let him pull me from the couch and follow him down the hall to his bedroom. We both drop our sweats and shirts on the floor before climbing into the comfiest bed in the world. That might be an overstatement, but I swear it's incredible. Maybe it's the mattress, or maybe it's the way Graham scoots to the far side and opens the sheets, waiting for me to join him. Maybe it's the way he pulls me close and nuzzles into the crook of my neck, his stubble scratching against my skin and making me squirm.

My brain tries to overthink, coming up with a long list of all the ways I can screw this up, reasons why Graham didn't mean what he said in the shower.

I want to believe him, not because of his words, but because of how he holds me. I can hear his heart beating, steady and calm, as he wraps his arms around me. Graham manages to be gentle and strong simultaneously, a combination that shouldn't exist, much like this man. He's too good to be true. I know it.

Or my head knows it. My heart might need more convincing.

### Chapter Fifteen

#### TYLER

We've been out a few times since I spent the night at Graham's house. He took me out for lunch one day after a website review meeting, enjoying a stolen hour together before returning to work. Another day, I brought him coffee before my shift at Sprouting Joy, locking ourselves away in his office for a few minutes to catch up. This week, I met him at a bar for a drink before I met my friends for our usual Thursday night at The Flaming Unicorn. I don't recommend the pre-gaming approach for anyone over the age of thirty. It made for a very rough Friday morning.

All those dates—and I use that word loosely—have one thing in common. They had zero chance of ending up in bed. The worst part is that I'm not sure which one of us is avoiding it.

It's the weekend, and the two of us don't have anything planned. I'm acutely aware that our relationship is on a timeline. We're halfway through Steph's maternity leave, which means that soon, she'll be back in the office I've come to think of as Graham's. Then Graham will be off to another job in some other city.

I'm trying to keep my mind off of it, but it's not easy, even when I'm sitting in Matthias's backyard, enjoying a beer and the company of my best friends. They're yammering on about some sports thing I know nothing about. Football? Hockey? Doesn't matter. Hearing their voices is comforting. But even they aren't enough of a distraction to keep Graham off my mind.



It doesn't help that my beer is the same stout Graham ordered on our first date. It tastes like him.

"We need a tie-breaker. Tyler, you're the last vote." Colt looks at me, hopefully. I assume he believes I'll side with him since he's dating my best friend. Normally, it's a good guess. Today, he's out of luck. Not because I'm not on his side but because I don't know what we are voting on.

"Um..."

"I told you he wasn't listening." Nathan laughs and pulls Colt closer to him. They might be in separate chairs, but they're nearly on top of one another. I briefly let my mind wander to what it would be like to bring Graham to one of these get-togethers. Matthias is a the more, the merrier kind of person, so he'd tell me to invite him in a heartbeat. Hell, Aaron drags Oliver along every now and then.

Awkward at first since we only met him when he was out on a date with Colt. That's before Nathan pulled his head out of his ass and told Colt how he was feeling. Thankfully, there doesn't seem to be any ongoing animosity between the two of them.

"Does someone want to tell me what we're voting on?" I ask.

Aaron grabs another beer from the cooler and hands it to me. "They were taking bets on whether you were listening to the conversation or off in your own little world."

"Fuckers." Just because they're right doesn't make it better. "Which of you voted against me?" They all look guiltily around our little semi-circle.

"Colt is the only one who took your side." Aaron takes a beer for himself and sits back down, draping his legs over one arm of the chair and leaning back against the

other. How he manages, I'll never know. Somehow he's fit and flexible, even though I never hear him mention a gym or exercise.

"Sorry." I shrug at Colt.

"No worries. I didn't think you were paying attention, but it seemed like good odds."

Great. Now I'm both a shitty friend and a shitty boyfriend. At least I'm winning at something.

The conversation shifts to the stock market. Matthias gives out all sorts of insight, which is my cue to slip away. Not that I'm not grateful for his knowledge, but he does handle all my investments for me. Whatever wisdom he's sharing, I'm already benefitting from it.

At the snack table, I take in the spread. It's been picked over at this point, so there's only a few chip crumbs, the cookies that come in the variety pack that no one likes, and a few pieces of fruit. It's Matthias's attempt at getting us to eat healthy. I grab one of the oranges and stare at it, trying to figure out if I want it enough to deal with peeling it. Or to deal with the satisfied look on Matthias's face when he sees his evil plan working.

"So, what's up?" Aaron crowds in next to me, and I let out a heavy sigh.

"Nothing."

"That's bullshit." My mouth falls open as I look at him. Aaron is as sweet as they come. Him cussing at me and calling me out? It might be snowing in hell. "I know the guys were ribbing you back there, but we know how to be serious when the situation calls for it." It's nothing I don't already know. These three have been part of my entire adult life. It's hard to picture a time before them. Anything significant that

happens to me, they're always right there.

Except, they also aren't. Not their fault. They're physically there, but the rest I tend to keep to myself. The few times Nathan's seen me emotional were because we were drunk. Drunk Tyler can't keep his big mouth shut. It's been a long time since that version of me came out. Around the time I got arrested, I took a good, hard look at my habits. While I didn't cut out alcohol, I cut back considerably. A few beers are my limit now.

"Thanks." I put my hand on Aaron's arm. "The same for you." Everyone's aware that something's going on with Aaron. He's been weird for months, constantly ducking out of things early and finding reasons to be busy during group events.

"Sure," he says. The tone isn't as convincing as he thinks. I start to say more, then think better of it. He can keep his secrets. I certainly keep mine. "You gonna eat that?"

"Nah." The orange is even less appealing than when I picked it up. "Want to raid the pantry and see if we can find some junk food?"

Aaron grins at me. "I know where he keeps the extra chips. The good ones."

As soon as we get to the kitchen, Aaron opens the pantry door and starts sifting through the various items on the shelves. While he works, I stare at my phone, willing Graham to message me. It's rare that we go a day without talking, but some of that is work-focused. I ask about website issues, and he responds to requests for approvals or more information. The personal texts are slower to pick up steam. Still, it's strange not to have anything from him. My anxious brain immediately comes up with the worst possibilities. What if he's decided he can't do this?

I scroll back through our messages over the past few weeks, looking for anything I

can use as evidence. As I do, one thing becomes abundantly clear. Every time we've had a date, whether a big planned night or a small chunk of time between things, it's been because Graham initiated it. At first, it was because he was chasing after me. Now? I don't have an excuse.

"Let's go. They'll start to miss us." Aaron stands in front of me, big bags of chips tucked under his arms.

"You mean we have to share?" I ask, pouting.

"That doesn't work on me." It totally works on Matthias, though. For any of us, one desperate look and we can get most things out of him.

"Fine, we'll share."

Aaron leads the way back outside, dumping the treats on the table after grabbing some for himself.

I can't focus on snacks anymore. My heart is racing at my new discovery. It wants Graham, which means I need to make sure he knows it. It might have taken me a while to get onboard with dating him, but now that I have him? I don't want to let him go. Ever .

That's a lot to process. It may have been a while since I last dated, but I didn't feel this way about any of those guys. Which means I need to work not to fuck this up.

I pull up our text chain and type out a message.

What are you doing tomorrow?

I send the message without a real plan. His reply only takes a few seconds.

Graham

Whatever you're about to suggest.

Pick you up at 1?

Can't wait

Great, and also shit. I need to come up with a date idea. Fast. Except, my mind is completely blank.

"Hey, guys?" I call over, interrupting whatever they're hotly debating. "Anyone have any good date ideas?"

"Woah. Like date-date or hook-up date?" Nathan asks. Colt punches his shoulder.

"You don't take hook-ups out on a date first," Colt chastises.

"I mean, I do take them somewhere public first. Just to check that they're not a serial killer or anything." It's the safest option. Plus, it allows for a bit of negotiation.

"Okay, is this a romantic date or a not-a-serial-killer date?" Nathan looks at me expectantly.

I'm already ninety-nine percent sure Graham isn't a murderer. If he is, then he's very good at hiding the bodies. Romantic though? That seems like a big step in our relationship. At what stage does it become romance? "Let's call it somewhere in the middle."

"Well, there might be a craft fair tomorrow. You could go there. Walk around, get some food, and get to know each other," Colt suggests.

I hold back my eye roll. Pass .

“You could do one of those escape room things. People love those.” Matthias has a point. Though, I’m pretty sure those only lead to arguments. My guess is that more people break up after an escape room than end up in bed.

“Or one of those rage rooms? They let you break a bunch of shit.” Nathans gives his boyfriend a look that says I don’t want to know the details.

“How about a museum? The art museum is always good, and they’ve got a big Egyptian exhibit this month.” Aaron gives me the best idea so far. “They also have a nice bar at the back, so you can hang out after.”

Sold . One Sunday afternoon at the art museum, coming up.

\* \* \*

## GRAHAM

“What should we see first?” Tyler holds the museum map open in front of us, trying to pick a place for us to start. It’s never possible to see the whole thing in one go, so we decide to focus. Tyler reminds me that we can always come back. The fact that he’s suggesting that we have future trips here together makes me giddy.

“Well, the Ancient Egypt exhibit will only be here a couple more weeks, so maybe we should go there first in case we run out of time.” It’s why he suggested this in the first place, so I want to make sure we get there, even if it’s all we do today. Tyler told me he loves spending time at museums when he travels, so I’m hoping to see that side of him today.

“If we have time, I’d love to see the surrealist stuff they have on display. I’ve seen it

before, but I always like checking it out.”

“We’ll do that second.” I don’t care what we see if it means I get to spend time with Tyler. The fact that he’d texted me to set this up meant a lot. I worry that I’m still chasing after him, even after all this time. While pursuing him was worth it, at some point, I want to know he’s mine. We’re making progress and this put us one step closer.

We set out toward the special exhibits, meandering through the long hallways and turns that take us to the back of the museum. Clearly, it’s set up to encourage folks to stop off along the way. Tyler’s a man on a mission though, his sole focus on getting to the Egyptian space.

The entrance to the exhibit is built with fake stones resembling the outside of a pyramid. It’s a bit over the top, honestly, but it’s clear the kids love it. Many of them are climbing the walls, trying to see who can get the highest. Honestly, my heart races while we watch, knowing how quickly things could take a turn if one of them falls. I shiver and shrug it off. Their parents can worry.

As soon as we enter the exhibit, Tyler’s eyes widen as he takes in the surroundings. It’s hard not to be overwhelmed by the sheer amount of stuff in the space. Display cases line the walls of the connected rooms, with more prominent cases running through the middle. And so much gold. It’s like the whole room is coated in it.

“Wow,” Tyler says, coming to a complete stop after a few steps. “This is insane. And so much bigger than I imagined.”

“Where do we even start?” I hate when there’s no clear path to take through these things.

“Over there?” He points toward the far wall, where a giant poster explains the exhibit.

That's good enough for me. I follow him through the crowd, desperately trying not to trip over any children.

For the next hour, we make our way through the room, pausing to read the various signs with information about the art and mummies in the exhibition. Mummies were not on my bingo card for this venture. It's an art museum. I thought there would be primarily rocks with hieroglyphics and other forms of... well, art.

I'm far from disappointed, though. The mummies and their masks are the highlight. The museum also displays pictures and information from various tests they've been undergoing, including MRIs and other imaging. It's fascinating and a far cry from what I got in elementary school, which I'm sure is the last time I heard anything about ancient Egypt.

When we finally reach the end, we pass through another faux pyramid and return to the museum corridor. Suddenly, the space feels bland and dark. I know the art is in the various exhibits, but would it kill them to put some in the hallway, too?

"What did you think?" Tyler asks as he slumps down on one of the benches. I don't blame him. My feet ache from standing around in the exhibit. Loafers were not the right choice.

"It's amazing. I can't believe how much science there is in it. I swear I thought it would all be artwork and maybe a couple of pieces of jewelry."

Tyler looks at me like I passed an exam. "Right? They've been able to do so much over the past few decades. With all the technology available, they don't have to destroy things to study them."

"I didn't know you were so into this stuff." Art I got. His job might be technical, but there's an art to it. Even my untrained eye can see that. Between that and watching



him with his terrarium, he clearly has a knack for it. I can barely manage to match my clothes. It's why I stick to a color palette of black, gray, and navy. It makes mornings more manageable and saves me from embarrassment.

“As a kid, I wanted to be an archeologist for a couple of years. I watched everything I could find on TV, which wasn't much back then, and devoured all the books on the topic.” His cheeks turn bright red, and he looks down at his shoes. “At least the kid-appropriate ones.”

“What changed your mind?” The path from archeologist to web developer is not clear in my mind.

“I realized it's hot in the desert. I don't handle the heat well, and being outside in the sun for months at a time was enough to convince me that I wouldn't be good at the job.”

I can't help but chuckle. “Good point. So how did you get from there to computer stuff?” Stuff because even though he and the rest of his team have explained the differences between web developers, web designers, graphic designers, and many other terms, I still can't explain a single one of them.

“My parents sent me to a coding camp, and I fell in love with the problem-solving side of things. I went into college knowing I wanted to do something with it, but it wasn't until I took my first computer science course that I figured out what that was.” Tyler stands, and I reluctantly force myself up. My feet protest, but maybe these following sections will allow for more walking and less standing. Or maybe more sitting. I think Tyler mentioned a bar when he told me about this.

“Can you manage one more exhibit?” he asks. My efforts at hiding my discomfort must have fallen short.

“You wanted to see the surrealists, right?” Tyler nods and checks the map. “Then let’s do that one before we take a longer break.” Once he knows the direction, he leads the way down the hall. After we turn away from the main building into one of the annexes, I slide my hand into his.

For a second, I’m sure he’s going to pull away. There’s a sharp intake of air, and his shoulders stiffen. I’m in shock when we make it to the surrealist wing, and he’s still holding my hand. Even with several other couples around, he doesn’t make a move to drop my hand. I’m so entranced that I don’t see a single painting while we walk around.

After everything, hand-holding shouldn’t get me excited. He’s had my cock in his mouth. And yet, this feels more intimate—a part of him I’m not sharing with anyone else.

We stay hand in hand throughout the entire exhibit. It’s not until we sit down at the museum bar that he drops my hand.

“What do you want?” Tyler asks.

“Oh, gin and tonic. Please.” It’s an old-fashioned bar, the kind depicted in old movies, with plush stools and a big mirror running the length of the space. The lights are dim, with battery-operated candles lining the table and bar top.

When the bartender appears, Tyler orders my gin and tonic and a pilsner for himself.

“So how do you end up being a... fill-in director?”

I chuckle at his classification. It’s not wrong. “I went to school for business and non-profit management. I thought I’d get a typical job, but it didn’t work out.” Lousy timing when I graduated, but I was also picky. “The first position I got was

temporary. It wasn't supposed to become a permanent thing, but then they recommended me somewhere else." I shrug. "And it kept happening. Eventually, I joined a small group that consults and contracts with other places."

"Do you like it?" The bartender slides our drinks in front of us, and we clink them together before pausing the conversation for a couple of sips.

"I do like it. I get to do a lot of different types of work, so I never get bored. Plus, I meet a lot of new people." I give him a wink and watch as his cheeks turn red again.

I always love meeting new people, getting to know a whole new setup, and picking up new skills. For a long time, I couldn't imagine doing anything else. The fact that I'm able to travel made it even better. Or at least it did. As I get older, it's harder to move around, each time making new friends and setting up a new home.

"And the moving?"

"That's the harder part. It was easier when I was younger. As a twenty-three-year-old, moving every couple of months was exciting. Now, it's a pain. Especially with Gulliver." It's not for lack of trying that I'm still doing this. I've had a few close calls with hiring. Places where I've been in the final round before being told the other person got the job. It's not an easy way to live for me or for anyone I'm seeing. It's been an issue before, and I really don't want it to come between Tyler and me.

"So how long are you here?" He refuses to meet my eye.

"Well, I cover for Steph until her maternity leave is up. That means I've got about six more weeks here." Six weeks and one day, not that I'm counting.

"And then what?"

That's the magic question, isn't it? I'm looking for another position in Cardinal Falls, but there's a chance nothing will pop up. I put out some feelers and check the job postings every few days. There are some surrounding areas, but they're smaller and less likely to have something. I told the agency I prefer to stay, which means very little. Technically, the whole region is open. I have seniority, but that still has to match an open spot.

"I'm not sure yet. I'm trying to stay in Cardinal Falls, or at least close by, but..."

"But there are no guarantees?"

"Yeah." Well, don't I know how to ruin a great date? I want to reassure him, but it would all be hopeful platitudes. I don't know what the future holds, and asking him to be in a long-distance relationship for an indeterminate amount of time makes my chest ache. I'd rather that than break up. If it means a period of time driving long miles on weekends and spending the evening on video calls, then so be it.

We finish our drinks in silence, and Tyler pays the bill. He insists that he should pay for the museum and drinks because he planned the date. I want to protest but bite my tongue.

"Any chance you want to try another movie?" I'm not ready for our time together to end.

"That sounds nice." Tyler slips his hand into mine, intertwining our fingers for the walk to the car. I try not to let my emotions show through.

### Chapter Sixteen

#### GRAHAM

I run my hand over the sheets beside me and find the spot empty. The bed is still warm, so he can't be gone long. I sit up and take in the room. Tyler's bent over, wearing only those tight briefs I love, pulling his jeans up.

"What time is it?" I ask, my voice rough with sleep.

"Shhh... it's early."

"Why are you up?" I sit up abruptly. He's been sleeping here most nights the past week. His place is nicer, but he insists that we stay here for Gulliver, who's started sleeping in the bed, as well.

"I have to get home to change before work."

I sneak a peek at my phone. Five-thirty. Damn, it's too early. He usually brings a bag so he can change here in the morning. It's led to a lot of great morning sex, the two of us exchanging lazy hand jobs in the shower.

"I'll get up with you." I pull back the covers and summon the energy to sit up.

Tyler pulls his jeans up over his hips and comes to sit next to me on the bed. "Don't do that." He strokes the back of my head, running his fingers through my hair. I'm sure it's a mess, but I don't care. "You should get a little more sleep if you can. I have

an early meeting this morning, so I need to get into the office and ensure everything's set up." I pout a little when I realize the meeting isn't with me. I love getting to see him at work. It's our little secret, a bubble for the two of us. Even if everyone else is there, the little looks we exchange, knowing that later I'll get to strip him out of that ridiculous polo shirt, make work so much better.

"I could make you coffee." Anything to buy myself a little more time.

"Don't worry about it. Really." He bites his lower lip, a sure tell that there's something else he wants to say. "When can I see you again?"

"Right now, for coffee," I say, pulling him close to me. I inhale his scent, wanting to memorize the way he smells first thing in the morning so I can think about it while we're apart.

"Somehow, I doubt it's coffee you're after."

"How about tonight? After work? I'll order takeout, and we can make a second attempt at that movie?" Hopefully, the second attempt will end the same way as the first one. The action movie we started last night was great, but I enjoyed the show I got in the bedroom a lot more.

"Done. What time do you want me?"

I ignore the clear innuendo. "Does seven work? I have a meeting that might run late." Usually, I don't care. Now, I wish I could pass it off to someone else. If our time living in the same city is limited, I want to savor every minute.

"Seven it is." He kisses the top of my head, lingering for a moment. "Have a good day."

Tyler picks his shirt and socks off the floor, pulling them on before disappearing. I keep myself awake, listening to the noise in the living room until I hear the front door open and close. When I'm sure he's gone, I sink back into bed. There's still time before my alarm clock goes off. The debate about whether it's worth it to try and go back to sleep bangs around in my head for a minute before Gulliver strolls in and decides for me.

Right, it's time to feed the cat. "Sorry, but your favorite person had to leave early." Tyler quickly became Gulliver's biggest fan. It seems to go both ways. My cat that used to hide anytime someone was here, greets him at the door and stays by his side.

The morning ticks by slowly as I manage to get Gulliver and myself breakfast, shower, and find an appropriate outfit for donor meetings today.

A few people at Sprouting Joy look at me funny when I walk in, but I shake off the feeling. Whatever they're gossiping about, I don't need any part of it today.

It's not until halfway through the day that someone says something. "You seem very... smiley today," one of the volunteers says when I make the rounds, checking in with everyone.

"Do I?" I'm not sure if that's because they think I normally don't smile or because I'm extra happy today. I hope it's the second one.

"Yeah, like you have some big secret." She winks at me. "It's not about Sprouting Joy, is it?"

"Uh, no. Just happy, I guess."

She snickers and walks away, undoubtedly to tell the rest of the group.

For once, I don't care about the gossip. I might if I thought Tyler would be incriminated, but I doubt anyone here can piece that together. We're careful. Rarely seen together unless strictly necessary for work. Thankfully, he doesn't work front desk shifts, or I'd have a hard time staying in my office and not hanging out right next to him, bugging him the whole time, and sneaking kisses when no one's watching.

I put the office rumor mill out of my mind and return to my paperwork. Only six more hours until I get to see Tyler again. Six very long hours.

I'm such a sap, but it's hard to avoid when I'm falling for Tyler. Now, I need to find a way to stay in Cardinal Falls and his life. Not an easy task, but I'm not one to back down from a challenge. If there's a way, I'll find it.

\* \* \*

## TYLER

It's all too easy to fall into a habit with Graham. In the last two weeks, we've been together more nights than we've been apart. There's the odd night here and there when one of us has work or a social engagement, but most nights, we're curled up on one of our couches.

I kinda love it. I thought dating someone might be too much stress. I like my life. It's not perfect, but I have a good job and friends. Plus, Sprouting Joy. I didn't think I was missing anything.

I have never been so happy to be wrong.

Graham spends every night showing me what I was missing out on. In as many ways as he can think of. I know he said he had an active imagination, but he seems



determined to prove it. He's used his hands and mouth to explore every erogenous spot on my body. Seriously, the man's a fucking god.

And it's finally Friday night. After I've spent most of the week sleeping at his place and either packing a bag or slipping home in the wee hours of the morning, it's finally the weekend, so we can stay in bed as long as we want. I love sleeping with him every night, but it's hard when one or both of us gets up early for work. Usually me since we stay at his place more nights than not. We can't leave Gulliver without attention.

I really need to keep some clothes at his place. I keep forgetting to pack key items in my overnight bag. Like underwear.

Woah. That's a new one for me. It's not moving in. Not exactly. It's still a big deal. Having some of my stuff live at Graham's home. The thought makes my chest swell, but not like my usual anxiety. This is softer, almost comforting.

I grab some snacks from the fridge, mostly cheese, and some crackers from the pantry. I ordered pizza, but I'm hungry and don't want to wait until it gets here to eat.

Graham knocks on the door but immediately opens it and lets himself in. I know we've only been dating a short time, but the easy way he lets himself in, knowing I left it unlocked for him, makes it seem like we've been doing this for years.

Don't tell Nathan. I gave him lots of shit for how fast he moved with Colt. I guess I finally understand.

Another thing I won't be telling Nathan.

"Hey, how was your day?" Graham walks over and kisses me before he takes off his shoes. It's not a quick peck like I expected, either. This is a promise for what's to

come later tonight. A promise I intend to be sure he keeps.

“You were there for most of it.” Virtually, at least. The team spent most of the morning updating Graham, giving him choices, and making progress. With any luck, the project will wrap up before Steph gets back.

I miss Steph, but the thought of her coming back twists my stomach in knots. Of course, I want her to be at Sprouting Joy, but the minute she’s back, Graham is out.

And then what? That’s the magical question I spend hours a day not thinking about. And since not thinking about it requires active effort, it’s been a lot of work.

“True. I like getting to see you on video calls. It’s almost as good as being in-person.” Graham nuzzles against me, his stubble rubbing against my skin. “Well, maybe not almost as good.”

His breath tickles, and I pull away slightly. “Video is definitely lacking.” I run my hands up the side of his body, enjoying how his muscles tense beneath my touch.

“Hmmm... dinner first. Then we can continue this.”

I open my mouth to disagree, but my stomach growls. Loudly. Apparently, I’m overruled today.

We settle on the couch and munch on the cheese and crackers until the pizza arrives. We have a documentary on Ancient Egypt running in the background when we finish our slices. Neither of us seems to be watching, though. Instead, we snuggle up together, spending the evening with little touches and the occasional kiss, neither of us in a hurry to take this any further. We’ll get there—we always do—but right now, I’m enjoying getting to just be. The two of us, with nothing else.

No ticking timeline on when Graham might leave.

No pressure to tell Steph about our relationship.

No nosey friends getting into our business.

When we finally fall into bed, I spend the time worshipping every inch of his body until we both see stars.

\* \* \*

The best part of Graham sleeping over? Morning cuddles.

“Hey,” I say when he starts to stir. I’ve been awake for a while, staring at him and enjoying the way our limbs are weaved together.

“Hey.” He presses against me, head resting against my chest. Neither of us moves for a moment, still letting the sleepiness wear off. “You know, if we were at my place, Gulliver would never let us sleep this late.”

It’s eight. Not exactly late, but the point’s taken. Gulliver’s usually meowing and pawing at our faces by six. Cats, I’ve discovered, don’t know about weekends.

“You sure he’s okay alone?” The neighbor has been all too willing to step in and take over some cat duties, but I still feel bad. I’ve taken his owner away.

“He’s fine. I fed him dinner before I came over last night, and Marybeth will look in on him this morning.”

“Hmmm...” I make a note to grab a bag of his favorite treats from the store before I head over there again.

“Breakfast?” Graham rolls over toward me. His face has lines from the pillow streaking across his cheeks.

“I don’t think I have much.” Even that’s likely an overstatement. I’ve been... distracted.

“What if we order something?”

I agree, but only because the other option is going out. I like the idea of spending the morning lounging around and enjoying the morning together. This way, we can keep our comfy clothes on. I personally vote for staying naked, but Graham insists someone might see in.

Graham orders from a nearby place with amazing breakfast sandwiches on bagels and sets it to have the food delivered. Since we still have thirty minutes, we decide to shower. We fell asleep without showering last night after a minimal effort to clean cum off our skin with a washcloth.

The shower is long enough for us to thoroughly enjoy soaping each other up. Graham presses my back against the shower wall and leans in, kissing me gently. He slicks us up using my conditioner and strokes both our cocks until we come, our combined release washing down the drain. I’m still in awe of how quickly he can make me come when he wants to, the way he can apply the perfect amount of pressure, or how he runs his tongue over the underside of my cock.

Graham leans against me, letting the tiles hold us both up for a second. Fuck I hope we can do that again today. Several times, if possible.

The water turns cold because I don’t have one of the fancy tankless heaters like Graham does, so we get ourselves dry and decent enough for the delivery driver. It’s getting toward the time of year when mornings and evenings are chilly, but the

middle of the day is warm and toasty. That means we get to enjoy sweats and heavy socks. Nathan buys me these big fuzzy ones every year for Christmas. They're ridiculous, but I love them on mornings like this. I get out pairs for each of us and start the coffee.

We retire to the couch, the conversation switching between topics every few minutes. Finally, there's a knock at the door.

"I'll get it." Graham jumps up before I can protest. Instead, I go to the kitchen to fill our coffee cups and grab plates.

"Hey, Tyler, there's someone here for you."

### Chapter Seventeen

TYLER

“Coming.” I run through a list in my head. I didn’t put in any maintenance requests. I’m not expecting any packages.

When I get to the door, I find Nathan and Colt grinning at me. “Hi,” Nathan says. I can tell he’s holding himself back, which I’d appreciate more if I didn’t know I’d be answering a lot of questions later. “Are you going to introduce us?” Nathan asks.

“No.”

“Hi, I’m Graham Stevens.” Graham sticks his hand in front of me. Shit . My boyfriend—if I’m allowed to call him that—is way too polite.

“I’m Nathan, Tyler’s best friend, and this is my boyfriend, Colt.”

“Did you want to come in?” I shoot Graham a dirty look as he says it. He gives me a stern expression back, one that says I’m not getting out of this situation.

“We would love to.” Nathan marches past us and heads for the kitchen island, making himself at home. “We were running errands and thought we’d stop by to return the photography equipment we borrowed.”

Oh, fuck. That’s right. Nathan texted me early on Friday to let me know they’d bring it by. I loaned them my digital camera and tripod for a project. I didn’t ask what they

were doing with it, and I don't want to know. However, I made them promise that there wouldn't be anything obscene on the memory card when they brought it back.

"Thanks for dropping it off. I'm sure you're very busy and need to get going." I take the big bag from Colt, who looks suspiciously at everyone in the room.

Nathan gives me a knowing look. "We've got time."

"In that case, you should join us for breakfast," Graham says.

I've heard about cases where people who are dating can give each other looks and communicate telepathically. We aren't at that point yet because every look on my face conveys how much I want them to leave.

"Oh, they don't—" I start to reply, but Nathan cuts me off.

"We'd love to." Nathan slides into one of the seats at the counter.

"We brought some pastries, too, as a thank you. Figured it was the least we could do." Colt holds up a big purple box from my favorite bakery. Fuck, now even Colt is against me. I thought I liked him.

"We have food being delivered in a few minutes, and we overordered, so there will be plenty for everyone." I remind myself that I like how nice and hospitable Graham is. It's one of his best qualities, the ability to talk to anyone about anything. Usually. Right now, I wish his ability was to make people go the fuck away.

So much for my relaxing morning. Right now, my heart's about to beat out of my chest.

"I'll brew another pot of coffee," Nathan offers. And, just like that, somehow, my

friends are meeting Graham.

They busy themselves in the kitchen, raiding the fridge for things they want to add to breakfast. Even Colt seems to fit into the flow of things. For a moment, I forget why I hadn't done this before. It's the two parts of my life crashing into one another. Right now, everything looks great, but I'm waiting for the collision to go up in a ball of flames.

The next knock on the door is our food. I grab the bags from the guy and add them to the spread on the counter. We did overorder, but neither of us could decide what we wanted this morning. At least there's plenty for everyone.

I look around the room. A good portion of the important people in my life are in the room. We're missing a few people—mainly Matthias, Aaron, and my parents—but this is almost everyone. Together.

"I'll be right back." I'm not sure anyone hears me over their conversation, but I sneak off into the bedroom. I need a moment alone to collect my thoughts.

My kitchen is full of people I adore. That should make me happy. It does—honest—but it also makes me break out in a cold sweat.

I sink down on the bed, focusing on my breath. The room spins a bit, and I slam my eyes shut.

In.

Out.

Repeat.



I'm at least ten rounds in when there's a soft knock on the door.

"You in here?" Nathan pushes his way inside.

"Sorry, I'll be right out."

"We can go. I'm sorry we barged in." Nathan sits down next to me. Do I want him to leave? Not really. This needs to happen. My best friend should meet my boyfriend, even if that word still makes my chest swell. It would be better if I had control over the situation, but that's clearly not happening.

"No, stay. Please." I start to stand, hoping the dizziness is gone.

"I like him." Nathan grins at me. "How long have you guys been dating?"

"Um... a while." The guilt sets in. He's asked me what's new in my life at least a dozen times since Graham and I officially started dating. I could've told him at any of those times.

"Hmmm... well, I guess it's time to give him the third degree."

"Nathan—" It's too late. He runs out of the room, cackling. Fuck. My best friend and my boyfriend. What could possibly go wrong?

GRAHAM

If I thought about what it would be like to meet Tyler's friends, I could honestly say that in my wildest dreams, I wouldn't be doing it in pajama pants and a sweatshirt. I certainly wouldn't be doing it wearing fuzzy socks.

Here we are, though. Standing around the kitchen island, piling our plates high with

an assortment of food. When everyone's satisfied, we move to the small kitchen table. It's a tight squeeze with four people, but we make it work.

Tyler sits next to me. I try to catch his gaze to check in, but he keeps his eyes fixed on his plate. Nathan checked on him earlier, but these surprises throw him off. Even if everyone here cares for him.

"I forgot to grab a few things for the table. Tyler, will you help me?" Tyler's head pops up with a curious expression on his face, but he follows me back into the kitchen. We have everything a small army needs for breakfast on the table; I doubt there's anything even left in the fridge unless we decide to start day-drinking.

"How are you doing?" I wrap him up in a loose hug so I can touch him while also looking into his eyes.

"Fine." Liar. Tyler's eyes dart back and forth.

"They're kind of a lot this early in the morning." He nods. "Your friends are nice, and they care about you a lot." They might need to figure out better ways to show it. Maybe ones that didn't send Tyler into an anxiety spiral.

"Yeah." Tyler lays his head on my chest and sighs. I hold him close, not daring to move until his body relaxes a little. When we finally break apart, I give him a little smile and grab a bottle of ketchup from the fridge. He looks at me quizzically, then nods.

"Got it! Can't have hashbrowns without ketchup." I set the bottle on the table. If either of them wonders why getting the ketchup is a two-person job, they don't ask.

"So, Tyler's been tight-lipped about your relationship—ow." Colt gives Nathan a stern look. "Don't kick me. I want to know."

“Well, I think Tyler and I are still working out the details.” Tyler focuses on his food, chewing slowly. I’m trying to be diplomatic here. I know he’s private about his life. I don’t want to give away too much, but they did find me here in my pajamas. They’re smart guys; I’m pretty sure they caught on.

“I see. And how did you two meet?”

Tyler sighs and jumps in. “We got matched up at speed dating.”

“Wait.” Nathan holds a hand up and looks back and forth between us. “The speed dating event that I signed you up for?”

Tyler nods. Nathan opens his mouth several times but always seems to think better of what he wants to say. I can already see the slew of text messages Tyler will get once they leave. For whatever it’s worth, at least his friends know how to shut up when the occasion calls for it.

Eventually, Colt butts in. “So, Graham, what do you do?”

“Well, right now, I’m the interim director of a local non-profit. Sprouting Joy? The director is out on maternity leave.” Neither of them shows any sign that they’ve heard of the place. It’s not huge, so I wouldn’t expect anyone to know about it unless they’ve crossed paths with the organization. Except that it’s a big part of Tyler’s life. Shouldn’t he have mentioned it once or twice? Even in passing when he talks about his week? It’s been five years since he started there, so surely there have been opportunities in conversation.

Though, I could say the same about our relationship. Even if it’s newer, we’ve been dating long enough that I expect he’d tell someone.

“And they hire you to... fill in?” Colt’s confusion isn’t new to me. It’s a weird thing

to explain to people.

“Think of it like an executive-level temp. I take on short-term positions when people are either on medical leave or when they can’t replace someone quickly after they retire.”

“Isn’t that hard? Jumping from position to position without ever getting to know the place?” Nathan looks at Tyler when he asks.

“Yes and no. I like the challenge that comes with it, and getting to do a range of tasks keeps me pretty happy.” Until recently, I didn’t think twice about it either. Now, I can’t imagine a life without Tyler. I want him to stay in my life, which means I need to figure out how to stay in his.

“You know, my non-profit might be looking for someone to cover in the coming months.” Nathan chews a bit of his bread while I wait impatiently for him to continue. “Our director is finally going to retire, but it’s a bit sudden. I’m not sure our board is going to be able to do a search fast enough. Can I give them your name?”

“Of course. I’d appreciate that.” It’s a long shot. Most places can hire fast enough. In fact, most already have a few people in mind. Boards tend to stick to folks they know through personal contacts, which means there’s a short list at the ready. But I’ll take whatever I can get. Another short-term assignment in Cardinal Falls buys me more time to look for a permanent job here. “I don’t have any business cards at the moment, but Tyler can give you my contact information.”

Nathan and I easily fall into conversation about the world of non-profit fundraising. Colt and Tyler occasionally say something, but they’re mostly busy working through the feast on the table. One downside of the travel lifestyle is that although I might have a lot of friends, I rarely get opportunities like this to hang out with people who know me well. Sometimes, I get lucky and make a connection with someone, but

often, it's lonely. Text messages and video calls only go so far. Plus, those people have friend groups, one like Tyler's gang, who meet up weekly.

Eventually, Nathan and Colt pack up to go home.

"Call me," Nathan says as he hugs Tyler. "Seriously."

"I will." I'm sure Nathan will keep showing up in the morning if he doesn't. I'm not against making Saturday brunch into a regular thing, but next time a little warning would be nice.

"Fucking, finally," Tyler says as soon as the door's closed. "I'm sorry. I swear they don't usually invite themselves over."

"I don't mind, really." He's got friends who care deeply about him. "Can I ask you a question?"

"Sure." He chews on his lower lip.

"Why don't your friends know about me?" It's been on my mind for the last hour, and I can't hold back any longer. "Are you ashamed of me or something?"

"God, no. Graham, it's nothing like that." Tyler slumps against the kitchen counter.

"Then what is it? Why wouldn't you mention our relationship to your best friend?"

"It's... I... I don't usually share about my private life." He stares at the counter.

"I get that. It's one thing not to mention our initial meeting—though a little odd since they sent you on the date—but we've been dating for a while now. I thought we were serious." We never had the conversation, but I thought it was implied. Guess that will

teach me to assume.

“Technically, I told him about our first date right after. At the time, I thought you would be a one-night thing. I didn’t share your name or anything else with him.”

“But you haven’t mentioned anything since then?” Nathan looked completely blindsided this morning. Initially, I thought maybe Nathan showed up to snoop. But he looked clueless about the whole thing. “Why?” I’m the first to admit things started off rocky, but after the past couple of weeks, I thought it’d be clear that the two of us are serious.

“It didn’t come up?”

“Tyler.” I didn’t need to tell him what was wrong with that answer. “Have you told anyone about me? A friend, coworker, family?” A lump forms in my throat.

“Fuck, no. I’m private.”

“Why?” I keep coming back to the same question, the one I can’t shake. If this thing between us is real, then it shouldn’t be a secret. I don’t need to scream it from the rooftops—especially while we still work together—but some general inclusion in each other’s lives would be nice. “I’m not asking for you to share intimate details or give a play-by-play of our nights together. That’s kind of what friendship is. You have to share parts of yourself in order for others to be willing to share with you.” I pause and try to put my thoughts into some sort of order. “You say Nathan is your best friend, but he’s never heard of the place where you volunteer every week. He has no idea you have a boyfriend. I can only imagine what else he doesn’t know.”

Tyler lifts his head slightly but doesn’t respond. I take a few deep breaths to center myself. When I start again, I lower my voice. “I’ve talked to my sister, Charlotte, about you. A lot. Partly because I value her opinion and wasn’t always sure how to

move forward with you, but also because I was excited. My brother Dan and I don't talk as much, but I still send him a few texts about our relationship." I pause to catch my breath. "If Steph weren't weirdly in the middle of this, I'd have told her, too." Keeping something this big from her weighs on me every day. It'll be a long conversation once she's back at work.

"I... I can't." Tyler's words come out barely above a whisper.

"It's not just that, though. If you don't share those things with Nathan, it makes me wonder what secrets you're keeping from me." I expect him to jump in and say he has no secrets, but he doesn't. Maybe I'm right on this. I don't want to be, but it's looking to be more and more likely. "I don't need to know every detail about you right now. That's part of the fun of dating, getting to know you. Finding out all those little bits and pieces. But I have to trust that you'll tell me in time."

"I want to." His voice is small and weak. "But I'm worried once I crack everything open, things won't be the same anymore."

"Maybe that's a good thing. Stuff never stays the same very long. If it did, I never would've ended up in Cardinal Falls or meeting you. Change is hard, but it's also worth it."

A tear rolls down Tyler's face, and it shatters my heart.

"I think you should take a little time to think about what you want. Both from this relationship and from your friendships. I want you, Tyler, but only if you want to be in this relationship one hundred percent." My chest pounds as the words fall out of my mouth. What if, after all this, he says no? It nearly broke my heart to walk away from him before, and we weren't even officially dating then. Now, it feels like it might kill me. "Call Nathan or someone else, but call someone."

But I mean what I said. I need him to be in this with me. He's had at least a toe out the door the entire time. I don't bother saying anything else. Tyler's been a closed book since the first day. I knew what I was getting into, and while he's opened up a little, it still feels like there are whole parts of him that are a complete mystery. Apparently, I'm not alone in that feeling. He needs time, though. Time to process his thoughts and think about what he wants to say. This circular conversation isn't getting us anywhere.

In the bedroom, I grab the things I brought over for the night, intentionally leaving a few clothing items behind. This is not goodbye, I remind myself.

I hope this isn't goodbye.

Tyler's still in the same spot in the kitchen.

"Tyler, call Nathan." I stand next to him and kiss the top of his head. Wet streaks run down his face, but he's still quiet. "When you're ready to talk, I'll be on the other end of the phone. Promise."

I let myself out of his apartment and almost make it to my car before the tears start streaming down my face. Am I doing the right thing by giving him space? No idea. I sure hope I am, though.



### Chapter Eighteen

#### GRAHAM

“Okay, I’m coming.” The banging on my door drags me out of my bed. After getting no sleep the night after leaving Tyler’s house and a long day at work, I’m not in the mood for disruptions. Whatever neighborhood kid is pranking me is in for a rude awakening.

Instead, I find Tyler on my doorstep. Wholly drenched and shaking. “Tyler, what are you—” I stop myself. Questions later. I need to get him dry and warm first. “Get in here.” He steps inside, and I quickly close the door. “I’ll be right back. I’m going to grab a few towels. Strip out of those wet clothes.” He stands frozen, chest heaving between breaths. “Tyler, get the wet clothes off.” I use my most authoritative voice, the one I usually save for when my niblings are in danger, which seems to do the trick. He slowly starts to pull off his hoodie.

Content that he’s moving in the right direction, I head for the linen closet and pull out a bunch of towels, some for the floor and some for Tyler. I stop off in my bedroom to grab some warm clothes for him. On the way back, I make sure to turn the thermostat up a couple of degrees. I’m not sure what’s brought him to this point, but nothing matters right now except getting him warm and comfortable.

When I get back, he’s managed to get all but his boxer briefs off. I wrap a towel around his shoulders and rub him gently. His skin is frigid and pale. How long has he been out there? Shit, I knew I shouldn’t have left his place like that. I thought he needed space to think, but seeing him like this makes me think I should’ve stayed and

let him think through things with me holding him tight. “Okay, let’s get you in some warm clothes, and we can go sit on the couch, and you can tell me why you’re here.”

I help him change into my sweatpants, rolling up the legs as much as possible so he doesn’t trip over them. He swims in my sweatshirt, but at least the combination is getting some color back in his cheeks.

Once I have him tucked under a blanket on the couch, I turn on the electric fireplace. It’s a feature I’ve only used a time or two, but this feels like the perfect use for it.

I sit down next to Tyler and take his hand in mine. I’m terrified he’s here to tell me things are over. When he didn’t call or text yesterday, I thought that was it.

He’s quiet for a long time, and his eyes stay on the fire. Out of the corner of my eye, I see Gulliver slink into the room. He takes in the scene, then quickly takes up his position on Tyler’s lap. It only takes a second before Tyler snakes a hand out from under the blanket to pet Gulliver. As always, that cat knows exactly what to do. “Take your time, sweetheart.” I rub my hand down his arm, making slow circles to soothe him and get the blood pumping. Eventually, Tyler leans down and puts his head in my lap.

“Can you not look at me?” It’s the first thing he’s said since he got here.

“How about this?” I pull out my phone and use the app to turn off the lights in the living room. The only light left is the glow of streetlights through the window and the fire. Tyler’s breath sputters a few times with false starts before he starts to speak.

“I didn’t start out volunteering at Sprouting Joy. I mean, I technically was a volunteer, but it was mandatory.” My mind races. There are only a few reasons that someone ends up with mandatory volunteer work. I’d seen enough people come through with required hours for things to be able to get a general idea of where this

conversation was going. “They were court-ordered. Steph took pity on me when I was calling around to places, trying to find someone who would take me for hours.” That sounds like my friend. Steph’s got a good sense for people and a soft spot for those she thinks deserve a second chance. “Everyone’s desperate for volunteers right up until you mention you’re a criminal.”

I shook my head. So many places instantly judged without asking any questions about why someone needed the hours. So many of the court-mandated volunteers were the best ones I had. They weren’t late, worked hard, and never missed a shift. People were judgmental idiots, never willing to hear the whole story or learn about the person behind it.

“What happened?” I prompt after a period of silence.

“I was going through a hard time. I’d tried dating again for the first time in a while, and while they always said they were fine with the whole side thing, it always became a sticking point. It doesn’t really matter, but it had been a particularly angry breakup with this one guy, Jasper.” He sighs. “It’s not an excuse, but it was on top of a work project where our client kept making inappropriate comments about my appearance. Everyone knew he was harassing me, but he was giving the company a lot of money, so...” Tyler trails off, and I rub my thumb against his cheek. If I knew it wouldn’t cost Tyler his job, I’d march into their offices tomorrow and demand an explanation. “I was so lost and angry all the time. I was only a couple of years out of college, and even though I still saw my friends, it wasn’t the same. None of that is an excuse.

“One day, I was walking home late from the bar. I’d been drinking after work, trying to drown my sorrows. I passed a store with a bunch of self-help stuff in the window. All this crap that said things like, The best is yet to come, and You can do anything . I lost it. I picked up a big rock and chucked it into the window.” He winces when he says it. “The police were there in no time, not that I tried to run or anything.”

“Then what?” In the back of my mind, I knew the general process this kind of thing would take, but honestly, most of that information comes from TV shows—not the most reliable source. I can picture all the worst-case scenarios easily. My heart breaks for him, going through that whole ordeal. Sure, he shouldn’t have destroyed someone’s property, but that split-second decision cost him so much.

“It’s kind of a blur. Eventually, I got to go home and wait for my court date. I ended up with three hundred hours of community service and required counseling sessions.” Wow, that’s a lot of hours. Definitely at the higher end of what I usually saw. It would take someone a lot of shifts to work something like that off. Especially while also working full-time.

“All of those things ended up being positive. I love Sprouting Joy, which is why I’m still there. The counseling was helpful, and I still see someone to talk through things. And I set up those Thursday nights with my friends to help me feel connected. I mean, it was the therapist’s idea, but still.”

“I’m glad you found some good in it.” Few people I knew could turn something so terrible into something favorable.

“Do you hate me?” The words are whispered, and I can barely make them out.

“Sweetheart, why would I hate you?” I pull him up so that I can see his face. His eyes are glassy and red from crying.

“Because I’m a criminal.” The dam breaks, and his tears start flowing freely.

“Tyler, it was a mistake. It’s in the past. We all make mistakes. Yours came with a very high cost, but it was still a mistake. It doesn’t change anything about my feelings for you.” God, he paid dearly. I can tell how much he still carries the weight of this around on his shoulders. As much as I know he loves the garden, I wonder how much

of it he still sees as penance. Continuing to work off his guilt long after he's paid back his debt to society.

"No one else knows. I mean, Steph knows because she had to sign the paperwork, but no one else."

Oh. I see where this is going. "You didn't tell Nathan or any of the other guys?" I'm starting to wonder whether his friends know anything about him.

"I tried a few times, but I couldn't. I knew they'd be disappointed in me, and I couldn't bear to see their faces." He turns away from me and stares into the fire.

"You don't think they would've supported you? Gone to the court dates with you or help you navigate the process?" Even my short time with Nathan tells me I'm right about this. Nathan would've been there every step of the way, holding Tyler's hand and ensuring Tyler got fair treatment.

"Of course they would have."

"Then why not tell them? This is probably one of the biggest events in your life. That's a lot to carry around." I pull him a little closer to me, rearranging the blanket over the top of us. He's warmer now, but I still want to make him feel cozy and safe.

"That's what I talked to my therapist about today." He turns back toward me. The tears are slowing, but his eyes are still watery. "I stopped telling people things little by little a long time ago. First, in college, when I figured out that I'm a side. I didn't know the term. I knew I didn't like the same things as the other gay guys. The others were starting to have sex, going on and on about how amazing it was. I thought something was wrong with me, so I didn't say anything. I pretended to like the same things—even to Nathan. I didn't think he'd understand, or he'd try to offer a lot of suggestions of how he thought I could make it better."

“And after that?”

“I think once I started segmenting my life into the things I told people and things I didn’t, the pile of things I didn’t tell people kept growing. When I didn’t tell them about being arrested, I also couldn’t mention Sprouting Joy.” He sighs. “And the list goes on and on after that.”

I don’t know what to say. I’m heartbroken for him, feeling like he can’t tell people about all the most important parts of his life. Yeah, I sometimes wish my siblings would give me a little more privacy, but I still tell them so much of my life. I can’t imagine it any other way.

“You’re right, though. It’s weird that they don’t know basic things about my life.”

“I didn’t say weird.” He snorts, and I take that as a good sign. “I guess it’s more concern. If we’re going to be in a relationship together, I want to be a part of your life. All of it, not just a small portion that you’re willing to share with me. I want the big things, of course, but also all the little things.”

“My therapist thinks I need to course correct. That it’s okay to have things that are only for me, and maybe, if you want, for you, but that I have to be willing to share more of it with my friends.”

“I think you have a very wise therapist.” I kiss the top of his head and finally let out the breath I’ve been holding. Not breaking up. Course correcting.

“Will you come with me?” Tyler bites his lower lip.

“Where?” I ask, not following the shift in our conversation.

“To tell my friends.”

“I’d be honored.”

TYLER

“Call in sick.” Graham doesn’t even open his eyes as I grope around the nightstand for my phone.

“Seriously?”

“Seriously.” He pulls me tightly against his chest. “We were up late last night.” He kindly doesn’t mention that it’s my fault we were up late. And my fault that neither of us got much sleep the night before. For a day, I thought I lost Graham. That fucking rock cost me so much years ago, but I can’t believe how much I kept letting it take away. It almost cost me Graham.

I’m not under any delusion that things are magically fixed. It’s going to take a lot of work and honesty to make it through the mess I made for myself. There are still a lot of hard days ahead, including telling all my friends, but knowing Graham will be there at every step of the way makes me lighter.

It doesn’t take much convincing for me to send an email to my boss and take a sick day. Graham does the same, sending a quick message to the office. With that out of the way, we snuggle back under the blankets, dozing on and off for the next few hours. Anytime I’m awake, I turn to watch Graham, enjoying the way he snores softly when he’s on his back. There’s not a single moment we aren’t touching. After a day of thinking I might never see him again, it’s nice to have the closeness and reassurance. If I had my way, we’d stay like this all day, never separating for more than the moment it takes to go to the bathroom or grab snacks. Graham seems to be of the same mind, only leaving a few times, but always coming back quickly, like he’s afraid I might vanish.

There's still a lot to do. That's what I think about while I watch him sleep. He's fallen back into a peaceful rest after grabbing us some bottles of water. I want to tell my friends the whole story—at least most of it—but the lingering doubts won't leave me alone.

What if they don't want to be friends anymore?

What if they treat me differently?

"I can hear you overthinking," Graham mumbles, his face practically buried in his pillow.

I snort. "I don't think that's scientifically possible."

"Hmmm... I'd like to test that theory." Graham curls around me, wrapping his arms around my chest. I'm glad we don't have anywhere to be today. I know we'll eventually need to move for something, but right now, the way we are is perfect.

Graham moans when I press my ass back. "Don't start something you don't intend to finish," he says before sinking his teeth gently into my shoulder.

Oh, I fully intend to finish both of us. I wiggle against him, letting his cock nestle against my crack. He's proven time and again that he respects my boundaries.

He plants kisses along my neck and shoulder, growing more insistent the longer I rub against him. My hand drifts down to stroke my cock a few times, needing something to help with the growing pressure.

"Can I try something?" Graham asks, his voice low and gravelly.

My throat thickens, and I can't respond. Instead, I nod vigorously. Anything.



Everything.

“Grab the lube.”

I set a record scrambling over to pull the bottle from the drawer of the bedside table. My cock jerks in anticipation at the snick of the bottle opening as he pours a generous amount into his hand and strokes himself a few times. I’m mesmerized as I watch, desperate to get my hands on him. “Come here,” he says, helping maneuver me back into position, his spooning me from behind. I push back against him again, this time feeling his slicked cock between my cheeks. He reaches around and strokes me a few times, coating my dick with the remaining lube.

“Fuck. Graham.” The release of all the emotional baggage last night left me feeling vulnerable. I need to be close to him, to feel him. “Yes.”

“Lift your leg a little.” I follow his instructions, moving my top leg to make space between my thighs. “Okay.” He helps me move my leg back.

Oh fuck. His hard cock is between my thighs. He moves slowly, pulling back almost all the way, then pressing forward. Fuck . That has no right to feel that good. The way he slides against my skin, how his cock brushes up against my balls. “This okay?”

“So good,” I say. “Keep going.”

He wraps me in his arms, pulling me close, before finding a rhythm. Shit . Each stoke sends little jolts through me. The familiar tingle makes its way up the base of my spine and settles in my balls.

“Graham. Please. More.” I claw at the sheets, trying to find some purchase to hold on.

“Stoke yourself,” Graham orders.

Who am I to deny him? I match his pace, thrusting into my fist. It doesn't take long before I'm teetering on the edge of orgasm. "I'm close."

"Yeah? Fuck, me, too. Keep your thighs tight." I squeeze my legs together, and Graham groans. "Yes, Tyler. Come for me, sweetheart." He grabs my hips before slamming between my thighs again.

My body can't help but obey. It only takes two strokes before my orgasm rips through me. Graham shouts his release a second later, his hot cum landing between my inner thighs.

I'm overcome with emotion. I manage to stifle the sob from my throat but can't hold back the tears that stream down my face. After last night, there shouldn't be anything left. I hide my face in the pillow and wipe my cheeks clean. I don't want him to think he did anything wrong. The opposite. Fuck, this man.

"Tyler?"

I pick my head up and roll over, hoping that any remnants of my moment are mistaken for sweat.

"That was fucking incredible," I say.

"Well, we agree on that one." His smile melts me. Even though there's cum drying on my legs and abdomen, I scooch over and cuddle up against his chest. "I think I might have a few tricks up my sleeve still."

I can't wait.

### Chapter Nineteen

TYLER

I don't want to do this.

I mean, I do, but also, I really don't.

It's Thursday and our typical meet-up at The Flaming Unicorn. Except tonight is not a typical Thursday. Tonight, I'm bringing Graham. It didn't go over well when I told the guys Graham would be joining us. Thursdays aren't supposed to include significant others or friends outside our group. That's the rule. I texted Nathan on the side, telling him I wanted to talk to everyone about something. Somehow, he worked his magic and got the whole group to listen.

So bringing Graham with me is a big deal. Hell, Colt has only been here once, and that was when he accidentally crashed the group the night he and Nathan reconnected. Since then, he's stayed home like a dutiful boyfriend on Thursday nights.

I need Graham tonight. If I'm going to tell all of them, I want it to be in a place I know. Our bar. It's where we've talked about many things over the years. And I need Graham here to hold my hand and reassure me when they all run out screaming.

Okay, that last part is my anxiety speaking. It's still a possibility, though my therapist assures me it's a highly unlikely one.

“We could still bail,” I say in an offer outside the front door.

“We could, but we’re not going to.” Graham squeezes my hand gently. “It’s going to be fine. They’re your friends. They love you no matter what.”

I’m not sure about that last part, but I manage to shove down some of my fear. Waiting only makes it worse. Even getting to Thursday tore me apart. Inside, the others are already in our usual booth. Someone, probably Nathan, has added a chair to the end of the table. Even nicer? Matthias is sitting in the chair, leaving a whole side of the booth open for Graham and me.

I slide in first, wanting the comfort of being between the wall and Graham. Is it cowardly to use him as protection? Maybe, but I’m choosing to ignore that tonight. “Hey, guys. Um, this is Graham. He’s my—” I pause, and Graham smiles at me. “My boyfriend.” We talked about this yesterday. Officially, so there’s no question. I’m still getting used to saying the word aloud. “You already met Nathan, but this is Aaron.” Graham reaches over and shakes Aaron’s hand. “And this is Matthias.” Matthias greets him formally, standing and extending his arm like they’re here to discuss financial reports.

“Boyfriend, huh?” Aaron asks. “That’s new.”

“Kinda.”

“Good for you. I’m glad you’re putting yourself out there again,” Matthias says. There’s something about the way he says it that has me beaming.

“You know, boyfriends aren’t usually invited to friend night.” A thud from under the table follows Aaron’s comment. With the look Aaron gives Nathan, it doesn’t take a genius to figure out that Nathan’s holding the line tonight.

“I know,” Graham says. “And after tonight, I’ll stay far away from your Thursday nights, but Tyler asked me to come tonight to help him out.” I put a hand on Graham’s thigh and squeeze gently.

They all look at me. Waiting. Fuck . I guess this is the part where I start talking.

I almost summon the courage to start when one of the waiters brings over a pitcher of beer and glasses. It takes us a minute to get everyone’s drinks sorted. This must be one of Nathan’s picks because it’s watery and weak. Any other night, I’d tease him about it and get myself a different beer. Tonight, it’s enough of a distraction to give me time to think about where I want to begin.

Once things are quiet, I start in on the story. “You guys remember when I originally suggested these nights?” Everyone nods. “Well, I didn’t exactly come up with the idea on my own. My therapist suggested it.”

And then I tell them the whole thing. I tell them about the incident with the window, getting arrested, the volunteer hours, and discovering Sprouting Joy. And finally, I tell them about how Graham and I met, but more importantly, how we wound up dating. I leave out the salacious details—much to Matthias’s despair. We already know way too much about each other. Or at least I know too much about them. When we near the end, I even manage to talk about my anxiety issues.

They don’t ask questions while I talk; just sit and listen—no one comments on what a terrible person I am or how I should have known better. And Graham holds my hand the whole time, squeezing it to encourage me to continue.

By the time I’m done, I’m exhausted but relieved. I take a long drink of my now lukewarm beer and wait. Seconds tick by slowly while I wait for them to say something. Anything.

“Tyler, I—” Matthias cuts off. “I had no idea you were going through any of that. I’m so sorry.”

“Why are you sorry?” I sputter.

“Because you shouldn’t have gone through any of that on your own. I could have helped you find a better lawyer or made sure you got out of jail faster.” He could have done all that with his family’s connections.

“It’s okay. I didn’t want you to know.” I hang my head. It’s not that I didn’t think about calling him from the holding cell that night. As soon as the thought popped into my mind, I pushed it away. I couldn’t bear to see his face when he picked me up, knowing that I disappointed him.

“But why?” Aaron asks. “Why wouldn’t you tell us? This is huge. You let us talk every week about all the crazy things in our lives.”

It’s Aaron I worry most about. He’s sensitive but has a strong sense of justice. “I... I was afraid you wouldn’t be my friend anymore.” That’s something that took me a long time to admit to myself. These three are the best people I know. I can’t imagine my life without them.

Aaron stands up and moves to our side of the booth. Graham gives me a look, but I nod at him, and he slides out of the way. I slide out and stand next to Aaron, sure he’s going to punch me. Blood rushes in my ears until all I hear is ringing. Aaron shakes his head, and I put a hand on the side of the booth to hold myself up.

Instead, Aaron wraps me in a big hug. “That’s the stupidest thing I’ve ever heard you say.”

In seconds, the three of them all have their arms around me. We must look insane to

the other bar patrons. Most of them are regulars like us and are used to seeing us around, but we don't typically make a scene.

I promise myself I'm not going to cry. Not here. The last few days have seen more tears than I usually shed in a year. Even as my eyes turn blurry, I blink away the moisture.

Eventually, they let me go, and we all return to our spots.

Graham comes back with a new pitcher of beer, and from the color, I can tell he did a better job ordering than Nathan. He slides in and wraps his arm around me protectively. "Okay?" he whispers.

"Yeah." I'm better than okay. I'm wrung out and ready for a beer—a real one this time—and bed, but okay.

"So, now that we've dealt with all that, let's hear more about the two of you." Matthias raises an eyebrow at Graham.

"Oh yes, inquiring minds want to know." Aaron leans forward, propping his elbows up on the table. "Don't leave out any of the juicy details."

I plan to leave out all the good stuff. Sharing with my friends, not having to leave out large parts of my life in conversation, and getting confirmation that they'll support me is great. But some things are for Graham and I alone.

I lean my head on his shoulder, letting him take the lead as he talks about himself, his work, and his siblings. With Graham's natural storytelling ability, my friends eat up every word.

"Whose home do you want to go to?" Graham asks as we walk out. He drove here so

I wouldn't have to worry about getting home.

"Yours. We should check on Gulliver." I like having a pet to go home to, which is as much a surprise to me as anyone else. And, while I plan to be asleep within fifteen minutes of walking in the door, at least five of those minutes will be dedicated to petting my furry friend.

"You and that cat," Graham says under his breath. The smile on his face gives him away. I love this. How easily we fit into each other's lives. Not for the first time, I can picture it. A future full of date nights and quiet evenings home on the couch with Gulliver curled up between us. I can't help but stare at Graham on the short trip to his place. The dim lights from the dash play over his features.

I think I'm falling in love. The realization sweeps over me and lodges in my throat.

Shit . I'm falling in love.

\* \* \*

## GRAHAM

"I really wish I could help you, but we don't have any openings right now," My friend Elena explains over the phone. She and I went to school together years ago and have stayed in touch. She took a job last year running one of the big food banks in Cardinal Falls. Their operation is huge, taking in items from all over and then distributing them to smaller food pantries across the city. It's a massive undertaking, but she thrives under that type of chaos.

"I appreciate you checking for me. If anything comes up, please give me a call." I'm not above begging. Elena can probably smell my desperation, but if it gets me a step closer to making Cardinal Falls my permanent home, then I don't care.



“Of course. We’d love to have you.”

I cross her off my list. Over the last few weeks, I’ve called everyone I know. Each time, it’s the same story. They’d love to have me but don’t have any open positions.

Years ago, I couldn’t imagine wanting to stay in one place. The novelty of being in a new place every few months fueled me. It came with plenty of downsides—like packing my life up into boxes regularly—but the good always won out. Meeting new people, seeing new places, and trying my hand at new skills kept me enthusiastic and happy.

Family and friends always asked when I’d find a real job and settle down.

My answer: Never.

Hell must have frozen over because never has arrived. Now, I want a house decorated with my things to come home to every night instead of a bland corporate rental. I want a place where I can paint the walls and hang family photos. A place to share with Tyler.

We might not be at the move-in-together stage of our relationship, but I can picture it. That image, the one of us cooking dinner together before relaxing in front of the TV each night, Gulliver nestling on Tyler’s lap? I want that. Enough that I’m willing to keep making an idiot of myself on the phone, begging everyone I know for a chance.

Unfortunately, I’ve only got a few options left to make it happen this year. The agency is still looking, hoping a last-minute request comes through here or in a nearby suburb. The other option is Nathan. Tyler gave me his email address and phone number, but unlike the rest of the people on my list, he’s not a personal friend.

I’ve heard a lot about him through Tyler’s stories, but that’s not the same thing. Plus,

the times we've hung out have been a little... tense. We don't feel like phone call-level friends. Instead, I send him a formal email letting him know I'm interested in something at his organization, either short or long-term, and attach my resume. It doesn't feel hopeful.

"Are you ready?" Tyler sticks his head in my office. He's wearing what I've started referring to as his gardening uniform: a pair of well-worn jeans and a dark hoodie. Bits of dirt stick to his knees, a sign of all the hard work he's been putting in over the last few hours.

"Let me grab my bag, and then we can head out." It took a bit of planning on our part, but Tyler dropped me off on his way to work this morning. It makes it easy for us to transition to our date since we're both at Sprouting Joy this evening.

"I'll meet you at my truck." Walking out together would be nice, but it might raise an eye or two around the office. There aren't many people here this late in the evening, but better safe than sorry. With limited time until Steph returns, we're making the most of it. I'm still not sure how that conversation will go. I know she'll be happy for me, finally seeing someone who I care about. It's the hiding it from her for several months part that's going to cause problems.

"Be there in five." I take one last glance at my email, hoping to see something about a job, but it's all work-related and can wait until tomorrow morning. I lock the screen and grab my stuff, taking one last look around to be sure I didn't forget anything.

Outside, I hop into the passenger seat of Tyler's truck. A quick glance around the parking lot tells me we're alone, so I lean over for a quick kiss.

It turns into anything but quick and chaste, leaving us both gasping for air when we pull apart.

“You know, we could skip mini-golf,” Tyler says, winking at me. It’s his idea to finally go play the round we canceled weeks ago.

He’s killing me with his big blue eyes. “How about we play mini-golf and then pick up where we left off.” As much as I want to take him home and discover all the dirty things going through his mind, we need to spend time together clothed, as well.

I think. Right now, my brain and my cock are on different pages.

“Fine,” he says in a huff. “Mini-golf it is. But I call the black ball.”

I sit on my hands to keep from touching him. Traffic is busy now with rush hour, and as much as I want to touch him, I like being alive. I’ll save the distractions for later. Like during the game. If it happens to work in my favor to let me win, then even better.

“Hey, Graham?” he asks when we stop at a red light.

His serious tone throws me off. “Yeah?”

“Is it too late in the season to go camping?”

I think about it for a few minutes. A month ago would’ve been the ideal time, but it’s still warm enough to go now. With proper equipment, of course. “No, not too late. But there’s probably only a few weeks left before it gets bitter cold. It’s less fun when you feel like a human popsicle.”

He chews on his lip as he eases us back into traffic. “Could we go?”

“Camping?” I ask as though it’s not obvious.

From what I've seen, Tyler's more of an indoor type. While he's shown interest in my family camping trips, I never thought he'd want to go. In my mind, I'd already been working through my argument for why he should come with us next year, expecting to convince him to spend a week in a cabin surrounded by my crazy relatives.

"Sure, if you want to." A weekend alone with him in the woods sounds heavenly. With this role wrapping up and nothing concrete on the books yet, I need to soak up every minute I can get with him in case I end up having to put in a long commute or worse, be long distance for a while. "You don't have to, though. If you want to go away for a weekend, we could always find a bed and breakfast or hotel." Really, anywhere we can lock ourselves away from responsibility for a few days.

"I'd like to try it. With you."

If it was possible for a single sentence to turn my insides to mush, that's the one that would do it. "I'll set it up." I hope I can remember how to put up a tent. It's been a while. For Tyler, though? I'll happily figure it out so I can give him the whole experience. Plus, with YouTube, I can learn anything.

"I'll need a list of what to bring. I don't really own any camping things."

Based on what I've seen of his wardrobe, that doesn't surprise me. "I'll send you a packing list, but I've got all the key stuff. You'll mostly need clothes." I give his hand a squeeze. "You'll want to bring lots of warm layers this time of year."

"And what if I want to find other ways to keep us warm?" His hand moves further up my thigh to where my cock is thickening.

"That can be arranged." The clothes are still a good idea since we'll have to leave the tent at some point. I'm not stupid enough to mention that right now.

Tyler strokes my cock through my slacks. “We should probably check, though, right? Make sure we know how to stay warm?” I’m the one who insisted we play mini-golf, right? It’s hard to remember my reasoning right now. If he doesn’t stop soon, the other patrons are going to get quite a show. As if he hears my thoughts, he puts his hand back on the steering wheel, making the final turn into the complex. I adjust myself and think unsexy thoughts.

“Never hurts to practice.”

### Chapter Twenty

TYLER

“You’re what?” I wince at Nathan’s screech. He’s sitting on one of my bar stools, mouth wide open.

“You heard me.” I glare at him. Didn’t Graham say being more open with my friends would be nice? So far, it’s not working.

“I don’t believe it. You, Tyler Mossman, are going camping?” I nod. “In the woods?” I’m beginning to feel like a bobblehead. “You know camping is outside, right? With dirt and bugs and wild animals?”

Fuck . Did Nathan think so little of me? I spent hours a week in a garden filled with those things. Well, not the wild animals, but the dirt and bugs. The occasional rabbit shows up, as well. “I’m not that fragile.” Plus, Graham promised there were no wolves in the area.

Nathan snorts. “No, of course not. Hey, who was that friend of ours who once refused to make s’mores in Matthias’s backyard because the marshmallow touched a stick?”

“That’s different.” No one said anything about having to put dirt in my mouth. There are limits. There are purpose-built tools for roasting marshmallows. Ones not covered in muck. “This’ll be fine. Graham goes camping a lot and knows what he’s doing.” Or at least I hope he does. One of us should, and it sure as fuck isn’t me.

“And you’re happy about this?” Nathan pauses and looks me over, cocking his head to one side and pressing his lips together.

“Very.” Like, over the moon, sickly sweet, happy. That part I prefer to keep to myself.

“Then I’m happy for you. Really.” He comes around the counter and pulls me into his arms. It takes me a minute to realize he’s hugging me before I fully relax. “You deserve this.”

I’m not sure how to take that since he’s all but said he expects me to get eaten by a bear on this trip, but I decide to take it as a compliment. When Nathan releases me, I feel better. Less buzzy and more at ease.

“You tell Graham that if you don’t make it back, I’ll hunt him down and kill him. Colt works at a hospital, so he knows how to dispose of bodies.”

I chuckle. “He works in administration.” I’m pretty sure his office is nowhere near any actual patients—dead or alive.

“He still knows things.”

Yeah, I know better than to argue with Nathan when he gets in one of these moods. Plus, Colt will do almost anything for him—including figuring out how to hide a body.

“Help me pack?” As excited as I am to do this, I could use some help pulling things together. It’s surprisingly difficult to figure out what to bring on a trip like this. As promised, Graham sent me a list, but it raised more questions than it answered. While Nathan might not be what anyone would call outdoorsy, he’s got a better chance than I do of knowing what all this means. At least his family camped while he was

growing up. Mine is more the luxury hotel type.

“Fine, but I demand pizza as payment.” I raise an eyebrow at him. I’m more than happy to have pizza, but he’s usually the one nagging me about eating healthy. Between him and Matthias, it’s a wonder I ever get junk food. “What? Colt’s a bad influence.”

I shake my head as I laugh and pull out my phone. Personally, I think Colt’s been a great influence.

After a few button presses, the pizza’s ordered. While we wait, Nathan and I retreat to my bedroom to pack. Of course, Nathan throws himself onto the bed and makes himself comfortable among the pillows. Real helpful .

“You have the most comfortable bed. How is this even possible?” He squeezes one of the throw pillows to his chest.

“Could you focus, please?” I give him my best stern look. As usual, it has no effect. The downside of having been friends for so long. He knows that there’s nothing behind my glare except empty threats.

“Sure, what do we need to pack?”

I pull out my phone and refer to the message from Graham. “Um, let’s start with the easy stuff.” Skimming, I look for the obvious things. “Okay, so we’ll be gone for three days, so I need an outfit for each of those plus one extra.” Just in case. I reach into my closet and pull out a couple of pairs of jeans.

“Uh, I don’t think that’s what he meant.” Nathan puts my pillow down and grabs for the jeans. “You want something a bit more rugged. Something you can hike in.”



“I can hike in jeans.” Also, I highly doubt I have anything that resembles the cargo shorts I usually see on hikers. The only other option is the slacks I wear to work. I doubt those will meet Nathan’s approval.

“Do you have any pairs that are loose? Think of something you would wear to help me move rather than what you might wear to the club.”

“I’m not helping you move ever again. That’s what your boyfriend is for.” To be fair, I’m also out of my clubbing phase. It’s not my fault I look best in skinny jeans.

I rub my fingers over my temples. If I’d known there would be a dress code, I wouldn’t have suggested this. “Graham’s the most put-together, suit-person I’ve ever met. I don’t think I’ve seen him out of the house in anything even resembling casual wear. I’m sure whatever I have on will be fine.”

“Suit person?” Nathan presses his lips together, stifling his laughter.

“You know, someone who looks comfortable and confident in a suit.” He’s probably been wearing them since high school. It’s not a complaint. He looks damn good in them.

“Somehow, I doubt that. Get the comfy jeans out. Plus, t-shirts, underwear, and socks.” Bossy Nathan is better than unfocused Nathan, so I follow his directions, piling the items on the bed. Nathan gives me a few odd looks but doesn’t say anything about my selections.

Camping is a chance to prove to Graham that I fit into all aspects of his life. Soon, we won’t work together anymore. While that comes with some relief, mainly related to being caught, it also means that we need to find new ways to connect with one another.

“Okay, he said I need a buff, whatever that is, and a hat.”

“It’s like a bandana but a full loop of cloth.” Nathan taps on his phone and then holds up the screen with a clear picture of what he described.

“Fuck, I don’t have one of those.” I look around the room for a substitute. “I don’t have a bandana either.” Because this is neither the Wild West nor a gangster film. Do people really buy this crap?

“You can probably get away without it. You have a hat, right?”

Technically, yes? I rummage through the back of my closet, looking through a few bags of stuff that I set aside to donate but never got around to taking anywhere. I guess that’s a good thing because I find the Cardinal Falls University ball cap that they gave me at orientation. I’m pretty sure that day is the first and last day I had it on.

“I can’t believe you still have that thing,” Nathan says when I hold it up triumphantly.

“Me, either.” I toss it on top of the growing pile. “He says swimsuit, towel, pajamas, hiking shoes, and a raincoat.” I have maybe half of that. And that’s if we’re willing to count my Vans as hiking shoes. Either way, I pull together some version of the remaining items.

Nathan says nothing and eventually gives up, choosing instead to play games on his phone. When I pull my bag out of the closet, he looks up and scurries off the bed. “No, I’m sorry. I’ve watched you pack some ridiculous things for this trip, but I draw the line here. You cannot take a suitcase camping.”

“It’s a trip. What else would I use?”

“Do you have a backpack or a duffle bag around here somewhere?” He’s got that look on his face that says it’s not worth arguing. I don’t think he’s going to find anything. I’m not a gym person, so I’ve never needed something like that. I’ve got two suitcases and a laptop backpack, and there’s no way all of this is fitting in the backpack.

I shove the suitcase back in the closet, ignoring the clatter of various items that fall from the shelves. I can worry about it later. After a few minutes of searching through some of the hall closets, I find an old duffle. I’m not sure where it came from, but hopefully it’ll work. “Does this meet your approval?”

“Not really, but it’s better.”

I roll my eyes. If Nathan sees, he doesn’t say anything.

“You promise Graham has done this before, right? He’s got real equipment and everything?” Nathan looks between my pile of stuff and the duffle bag.

“Yes, Dad.”

“Hey, I’m not trying to take over Matthias’s job as the worrier of the group, but I keep picturing you out in the wilderness for more than five minutes with all of this”—he waves his hands over my stack of stuff—“and the image that pops into my mind involves me talking to some poor park ranger when you don’t come back on Monday.”

“I promise, Graham has things covered.” Plus, it’s not like we’re hiking up a mountain or something. We’re going to a campsite with other people. How much trouble can we get into?

“You really like him, don’t you?” Nathan grips my shoulder and gives it a soft

squeeze. The best I can do is nod and swallow around the lump in my throat. “Good, because I can tell how much he cares about you.”

I don’t know when all these feelings entered my system, but they’re overwhelming, threatening to bubble over the surface. Six months ago, I never would’ve agreed to date anyone. I never would’ve gone camping. And now?

I try to think about what’s changed inside me in that short period of time. It’s not me, though; it’s Graham. He’s changed me. Not just the dating thing, either. I’m closer to Nathan than I’ve ever been, which is saying something. Aaron and Matthias, too. I feel... lighter? I wrack my brain for another explanation but come up empty. Tears burn in my eyes, and I blink them away. Lucky for me, my phone buzzes, and I pull it from my pocket, using the notification as a convenient excuse to pull myself together.

“Now, will you please help me finish packing?” I ask, clearing my throat. “The pizza will be here in less than five minutes, and I want to be able to enjoy it while it’s hot.”

A few minutes later, Nathan and I have somehow managed to fit everything into the bag, though the seams are bulging. It’s meant for a trip to the gym, not a weekend away with my boyfriend.

The word boyfriend still makes my heart flutter. I don’t hate it.

\* \* \*

## GRAHAM

“You got everything?” I eye the duffel bag over Tyler’s shoulder. It’s not quite what I had in mind when I sent him a packing list, but it’ll work. I know he said he didn’t have any camping experience, but maybe I should’ve asked more questions before agreeing to spend a weekend in the woods.

He did say he wanted to go, though.

“Close enough.” He shrugs. The answer doesn’t fill me with confidence, but I smile anyway.

“I’ve got a lot of extra stuff with me. As long as you have clothes and shoes, we should be good.”

Tyler shrugs his shoulder, bouncing the stuffed bag. “Yep, got all the clothes. The shoes didn’t fit, so I’m wearing them.”

I glance down at the well-worn sneakers on his feet. They’re... sufficient. He’s been so excited to do this that I can’t bring myself to say anything that might dull his enthusiasm. “Perfect.” I can adjust our activities and pick trails that’ll be a better fit for what he brought. Honestly, I want the time alone with him without work, friends, or noisy siblings interfering. It doesn’t matter what we do as long as we’re together.

I open the trunk, and he tosses his bag in with the rest of the stuff. We settle in, and, against my better judgment, I give Tyler free rein over the music for the drive. It’s an eclectic mix of nineties metal, current pop hits, and alternative rock. I’m afraid to ask if it’s a predesigned playlist or if he simply hit shuffle. Either way, it’s a nice background to our light conversation. The drive is fast with little traffic, and we approach the state park around six.

“This is it?” Tyler stares out the window, worrying his bottom lip between his teeth. “Really?” I can practically see the wheels turning in his head. I hope none of the expressions on his face are regret.

“It doesn’t look like much, but that’s why we brought our equipment. We’ll get the tent set up first and then pull out the extras, like chairs and cooking equipment.” He still looks skeptical but opens the door and meets me at the back of the car.

I pull out the stuff we'll need to get the tent set up. It's not much. A simple two-person tent designed for sleeping and nothing more. Since we usually opt for cabins as a family, I don't have any of the fancy things. As a kid, we had all the coolest stuff: tents with extra rooms, lanterns, camp tables, and plenty of other options. Now? I'm down to the bare minimum.

We don't need much aside from a place to sleep and a few things to use for cooking. Though, I'm still not sure this is Tyler's thing. I may know a nearby hotel with empty rooms. Always come prepared for Plan B.

"Ever set one of these up before?" I hold up the tent bag.

"Definitely not."

"Why don't you take it over to the clearing there and lay the pieces out so we can get started?" I hope. Honestly, it's been a lot of years since I put one of these together. Suddenly, I'm thankful my siblings felt the urge to procreate and provide us with a reason not to rough it anymore.

I grab a few more bags and take them over to the fire pit. I've got enough to allow us not to starve. We might need to eat peanut butter and jelly sandwiches a few times, but it won't kill us. Most importantly, I brought coffee and a way to make hot water.

"Is this okay?" Tyler calls. He's got all the pieces lined up. There's not really a wrong way, so I give him a thumbs up.

"Give me a second to finish up here." I store all our gear out of the way where we'll be able to find it later and head over to help.

I wish my phone got better service out here. A step-by-step guide would be a big help right now.

“Okay, there’s a big tarp in there we need to lay out first.” I find the ground tarp among the items, turning it shiny-side-up. “This way goes toward the ground.” We grab the corners and spread the tarp out on the ground where the tent will go.

Tyler looks happy when we spread it out on the ground. That’s the part that’s nearly impossible to screw up. “Now we need the tent.” We grab it and unfold the fabric. “Somewhere on here is a door. We want to make sure it points out toward the rest of the site.”

It takes us a few minutes to find the zippered entrance, but once we do, it’s easy to lay the tent out on top of our ground tarp. Tyler eyes our progress. “Um, it’s a bit... small?”

“It’s for two people.” Technically. “It’s a tight fit, but we won’t spend much time in there. Think of it as being the bed.” I’m not sure my pep talk is as convincing as I hoped.

“Time for the tent poles.” I hand him one of the folded tent poles and keep the other for myself. “It’s pretty easy, but you can watch me first.” I start putting mine together, letting the individual segments snap together. I get mine done first, but Tyler’s not far behind. He’s a little clumsy, letting his pole wiggle and move around behind him. Lucky for me, I’m out of the danger zone.

When we both finish, I squat down on the ground and show him where the sheaths are that we’ll thread the poles through. I do mine first, pushing through and over to Tyler, who pulls it through. Then we repeat the process with his pole, this time letting Tyler get it started.

“It’s supposed to stand up, right?”

I can’t help but laugh. “It will. We have a couple more steps before it’s done.” I love

this part; it's a bit like magic. "Grab one of the poles on your side and stick it into the grommet." I show him the one on my side.

"Are you sure this is right?" he asks, flexing his pole and trying to get it through the loop.

"You can't break it." I hope. "The poles are supposed to bend like that."

Tyler's tongue peeks out of the corner of his mouth as he forces the pole into the grommet. We switch and get the other set of corners done.

"Oh my God! It's a real tent." Tyler's eyes light up, looking at the scruffy old thing. It's an ugly shade of gray with red stripes around the edges. It's at least a decade old, and the pigment has faded from too much time in storage. It's amazing to see it pop up, though. Not that long ago, it was sitting in a small bag. Now, it looks functional.

"Very real." I pick up the last of the equipment set out. "We need to get the stakes in so the tent doesn't blow away."

"That could happen?" Tyler freezes. It's tempting to screw with him, but I decide against it. I'm sure there'll be plenty of opportunities on this trip.

"Not once we get the stakes in." I do all of them, moving from corner to corner and hammering them in with a rock. The ground is soft, so it doesn't take much to get them in. Tyler watches intently, following me around, but doesn't ask to help. I don't mind doing them, plus I like knowing they're secure.

We stand back and admire our work for a second. It's a major success that we got the tent up so quickly and that we're still on speaking terms. In my experience, that's not a given with something like this.



“Want to get our sleeping bags set up while I start a fire?” My suggestion may have a secret motive behind it. I’m not so confident in my fire-starting skills that I want an audience for the endeavor. If it takes me a few tries to get it going, I can still pretend everything went according to plan later and keep my wilderness credibility intact.

Tyler rustles around in the tent with the occasional soft curse. As long as I don’t hear any yelling, I can assume things are going okay.

A few minutes later, I have the fire going, and Tyler joins me in the set of folding camp chairs. They’re nothing fancy. Simple blue fabric chairs with built-in cup holders, but they do the job. We both stare into the fire, watching as the sun goes down and leaves nothing but the light from the flames dancing across the campsite. We ate on the way here, but there are cookies I brought for us to munch on. We spend the evening swapping stories from our childhood.

By the time we douse the fire and crawl into the tent, I can barely keep my eyes open. We change into our pajamas—at my insistence that it’s too cold to wear only boxer briefs to sleep—and slip into our sleeping bags. The only downside of this whole thing is that cuddling like this is challenging. He’s too far away, and there’s too much fabric between us.

Tyler wiggles next to me, then reaches his hand out and taps my sleeping bag. I free my arm and rearrange myself so I can take his hand. I drift off, listening to the sound of our breathing, holding on to him.

### Chapter Twenty-One

TYLER

People do this for fun .

I hold back a groan as I shift in my sleeping bag. No matter what position I'm in, there's a rock under my shoulder blade. It sounds impossible, but every time I move, it ends up stuck right back in the same spot.

Light streams through the tent's fabric, so at least this time, it's morning. A nice change from the last dozen times I've woken up throughout the night. Graham seems so peaceful, curled up on his side, the front of his sleeping bag tucked under his chin. His soft snores fill the quiet of the space, and for a moment, I'm content to simply listen to him sleep.

The moment ends when my bladder becomes insistent. Sadly, tents don't come with an ensuite bathroom, which means a trek across the campground to the communal bathrooms.

Those are words I never thought I would use.

I wiggle my way out of my sleeping bag, limiting my movement as much as possible to let Graham sleep a few more minutes. On all fours, I make my way to the front of the tent and find the zipper. It takes a few tentative movements before I figure out the right way to move it to open the flap enough that I can shimmy my way out.

“Tyler?” Graham asks sleepily, lifting his head. Damn. Almost made it.

“I’ll be right back. Have to pee.” He mumbles something as he snuggles back down into his sleeping bag. How the fuck is he comfortable enough to go back to sleep?

Once I’m free of the tent, I grab the flip-flops I set in front of the door before we went to bed. It’s not worth arguing with the zipper when I’ll be right back.

It’s only a two-minute walk over to the shared bathrooms for the campsite, but it feels like a mile. It’s tempting to find a nearby tree instead, but my fear of getting caught outweighs the convenience.

My flimsy sandals barely keep the rocks from digging into my feet. I’m also regretting not getting some real clothes out of my bag. My pajamas are fine, but the last time I wore pajamas in public was back in college. I feel... exposed. I know the trend is to go out in athleisurewear, but I can’t do it. I want real clothes if I’m going to be out of the house.

When I finish emptying my bladder, I start the walk back to the tent. Is there even a slight chance I can fall back asleep? Weekends are for sleeping in and lounging on the couch. Even if we’re in the middle of nowhere, I’d like to catch up on some rest. I’m nearly back to our spot when a couple of squealing kids race in front of me. I come to an abrupt stop in an attempt not to run over them. The toe of one of my flip-flops catches on something, and I go down, ending up on my ass.

The two kids stop and gawk at me. At least they’re fucking quiet.

“Are you okay, mister?” the older of the two boys asks.

“Fine,” I grumble. There’s no chance I’m getting back to sleep now.

“But you’re bleeding,” the younger one whines. The way he says it makes it sound like the blood is coming out of his body instead of mine.

“Just a scratch,” I say. The last thing I need right now is a crying child, and this one’s chin is already trembling. “Why don’t you go back to your parents?”

They exchange looks but decide to take me up on my suggestion. They walk by me slowly before taking off running again. Good luck to whatever poor sap they run into next.

Once they’re out of sight, I take stock of the situation. My ass is sore, but nothing I can’t handle. The kid was right, though. Blood oozes through the fabric of my pajama pants around my knee. The light gray fabric does little to hide it. I don’t suppose campsites come with a laundry room?

“Fuck,” I whisper under my breath, hoping the kids are out of earshot. I push myself up and take stock of the damage. A lot of dirt, but given the blood, I’m not sure I care at this point. The pants are past the point of being salvageable. Graham may have to put up with me sleeping in my briefs instead of wearing pants.

Other than my knee, everything else seems okay. My toe is sore from where my foot caught, and my ass smarts, but mostly, I’m pissed off.

“Tyler?” I snap my head up and catch sight of a sleepy Graham coming my way. His hair is a mess, and he’s wearing his flannel sleep pants, no top. He rubs his eyes as he gets closer, looking me up and down. “What happened? I thought you were going to the bathroom?”

“There was a mishap.” Graham shoots me a questioning look. “I stopped short to avoid running over some kids. I guess my flip-flops aren’t built for quick breaking.” I try to keep it light. My mood sours by the minute, and I’m dying to beg him to pack

up all our shit and drive straight back to the city so we can shower and spend the day ordering takeout and watching TV.

I want him to share his love of camping, so I swallow down the annoyances and give him my best smile. It feels fake, but he seems to buy it. It's a tough start to the day, but it can only go up from here.

"Let's go back to the car. I have a first aid kit we can use to clean you up. Then we can get some food and coffee."

"Coffee, please," I beg. This is way too much to deal with before caffeine.

"Bandage first, then coffee."

I pout but don't say anything. He's right. I can wait an extra five minutes for coffee.

When we arrive back at our camp, he disappears into the tent for a minute and comes back with car keys and a shirt. I'm disappointed when he pulls the shirt on, covering the abs I've been admiring. I suppose the whole area doesn't need a show.

"Have a seat. I'll grab the kit and be right over."

I plop down in one of the camp chairs. Graham's been busy since I left. A small fire is burning in the pit, and a bunch of kitchen items are on the picnic table. I take a moment to roll up my pant leg, a hiss escaping when the fabric tugs away from the sticky wound. It's not as bad as it looks. Just a lot of blood.

"Alright, let's take a look." Graham sets the bag down next to me. It's bigger than I expected. My first aid kit at home is the size of a small paperback. His looks like it could hold at least ten of mine. "Well, you got it good, but at least you don't need stitches. Probably going to hurt for a while though, especially since it's right where

your knee flexes.” I give him my best shrug, pretending not to be bothered by the injury. “Okay, I’m going to clean it up first, then we’ll get a bandage on.”

I watch with amazement as he busies himself, grabbing a bottle of water from our supply and a cloth. He cleans around my knee, carefully dabbing the bits of blood that dried and making sure he’s extra gentle when he touches the broken skin. I still wince and fight the urge to pull away, but he gives me the sweetest look as he leans in to plant a kiss on my knee. Well, not the knee exactly, but an inch or two away.

“Now it’s all better,” I say, grinning like a complete idiot. Somehow, it does hurt less, even though I know it’s a placebo effect. Maybe I can convince him to kiss it throughout the day to help with the pain. I wonder if it works if he kisses other body parts?

“I’m going to put some petroleum jelly on it to help keep it moist.”

I scrunch up my face.

“Don’t give me that. It’s good for it and will help with healing. We’ll need to watch to make sure it doesn’t get infected, especially since we’re outside.” He covers my knee in the stuff, and it feels... weird. Once he’s satisfied, he reaches back into his big bag and pulls out some bandages. Knee thoroughly covered, Graham gives it a second kiss and rolls my pant leg down.

I swear my heart skips a beat at the gesture. I don’t remember the last time someone did something like this for me. Probably my mom when I was a kid. But an adult? Never.

I look away, afraid Graham will be able to see all the feelings dancing across my face.

“How about you put on some clean clothes while I get coffee and breakfast started?”

I nod, still not able to fully trust myself with these big feelings. It’s not an easy task crawling around the tent with my knee, but I’m thankful for a few minutes of alone time to pull my thoughts together. My chest feels full, not quite the same as when anxiety is building, but similar. I swallow and force myself to get dressed for the day. Coffee will help. Coffee always helps.

GRAHAM

I should’ve booked a bed and breakfast. Camping has too many unknowns for a first weekend away together. What was I thinking?

I want to share this side of myself and my upbringing with him. Even though I don’t do much solo camping anymore, it used to be a big part of my life. I still get little-kid-level excited each year for our family time at the lake. Living in the city is great, but out here, all the sirens and traffic fade away and leave behind the rustle of leaves.

That’s what I imagined when Tyler agreed to this. But this was far from even an economy-type cabin at a resort. I could see how he’d gritted through the morning so far, pretending everything was okay for my benefit.

I can fix this. Only a half day in, I still want to show him so many things.

But first, coffee.

Making pour-over coffee around a campfire is one of my favorite things about being at the lake. Even with my typical accommodation, I try to get out and do it this way. It’s technically the same, but I swear the fire infuses something into the coffee that gives it that extra boost.

Once I've got the fire going and my kettle set to boil the water, I find the coffee grounds, mugs, dripper, and filters. Instant would be easier, but life is too short to drink shitty coffee.

"I don't smell coffee." Tyler emerges from the tent wearing a pair of light-wash jeans and a gray henley.

"Water's getting going. We'll have coffee soon enough. Why don't you take a seat, and I'll bring it to you as soon as it's done."

He seems unsure but settles into one of the chairs by the fire.

"Are eggs okay for breakfast?" I ask. It's one of my camp specialties. Okay, it's my only specialty, but they're pretty good.

"You can make eggs here? I figured we'd have oatmeal or something."

"I do have oatmeal packets and hot water if you'd prefer. I can make eggs easily, though. It won't be fancy, but eggs with vegetables and potatoes make a nice hearty breakfast." Please let me remember how to do this . It's been at least a few years since I did a lot of stovetop-style outdoor cooking, but it feels doable. Plus, we need something filling before the hike I want us to take. It's flat and easy, but the trail ends at a cute pond. The perfect place to relax and enjoy the outdoors.

I get to work pulling out all the pieces I prepped at home and stuck in the cooler for the trip. We'll need to make a stop today to pick up more ice to keep things cool.

As soon as the water starts to boil, I pull it off the fire and busy myself making the coffee. Tyler keeps his eyes on me as I slowly pour the water into the dripper with the grounds. Rushing is never good when it comes to coffee. Tyler might be frustrated now, but it'll be worth it when he gets the good stuff.



Five minutes later, I pull the cup free and carry it over to Tyler.

“I never thought I would miss my coffee maker so much as I do right now.”

“You’ll be ready to break up with that thing once you try this.” I hope.

He takes the cup from my hands, inhaling the steam, and holds it up to his face. Gingerly, he tries the first sip.

“Damn, that’s hot.” He takes another sip. “Oh my god, that’s incredible. What did you put in this?”

I beam under his praise. It’s nice to see a real smile on his face rather than the one he’s been plastering on for my benefit. “Nothing, just coffee.” I wink at him.

“I don’t know about that, but I’m going to demand coffee like this more often.” He grins around the edge of the mug.

“I’ll be happy to oblige. It’s too much effort for me on workdays, but weekends are perfect for sitting around on the couch and enjoying.” If it meant that Tyler would stay over and cuddle up with me in the morning, I’d make as many cups as he wanted. That’s if I manage to stay in Cardinal Falls.

Once I get breakfast ready, I move us over to the picnic table to enjoy the scramble. It’s got some char around the edges, but otherwise, not too bad.

“If the whole management thing doesn’t work out, you’ve got a second career as a chef.” Tyler scoops a big bite into his mouth and moans around it.

“I think this is pretty much the limit of my cooking skills.” Years of living alone and moving around made me reliant on microwavable dinners and takeout. Staying with

Tyler might be the push I finally need to learn to use my kitchen. Or, at the very least, buy more than the three pans I currently own.

“What’s on our agenda today?” Tyler pushes his empty plate back.

“We aren’t on a schedule, so we can relax and enjoy the fire and coffee, but then there’s a hike I thought you would like.” One that can be done without any real hiking gear. “And then when we get back, we can hang out by the lake for a while.” It’s too cold to swim this time of year, but it’s still nice to watch the water.

“Sounds perfect.” I search Tyler’s expression for sarcasm but find none. “I think you might need to factor in some nap time, though.” He winks at me. “We did such good work putting up the tent. I don’t want it to go to waste.”

“I’m sure we can work it into the itinerary.”

### Chapter Twenty-Two

#### GRAHAM

“Did you bring any hiking clothes?” I try to keep my words gentle, cognizant that this is all new to him.

“Uh, I figured these would work.” He looks down at the jeans and sneakers he’s wearing. “They’re comfortable enough.”

A lot of thoughts run through my head. Comfort is not the deciding factor here. I bite my tongue and manage to keep all my thoughts to myself. “Those will work.” I mentally prepare for today to be a little slower than I previously anticipated. We’ll be making a trip to the outdoor store before our next camping trip.

I hand Tyler a small backpack. “It’s got a few snacks in it, plus some water bottles.” I grab the bigger pack and shrug it onto my shoulders. It’s nothing crazy, just a few extra safety items and water in case we get stuck. It’s overkill for what we’re doing, but there’s no such thing as too safe.

“I can carry more.” He sticks out his bottom jaw. I can see his brain working overtime, trying to come up with reasons why he should be doing more work.

“Don’t worry about it. I’m high maintenance, so I need a lot of things.” Also, I don’t want us to end up lost in the wilderness, dehydrated and hungry. The trails are clearly marked, but there’s always a chance. It’s one of the things my father instilled in us from a young age.

“Okay. Lemme know if you want to trade or something. I know I don’t look like much, but I can handle it.” I don’t doubt that at all, but if he completely wears himself out hiking, we won’t get the fun time in the tent when we get back.

“I’ll let you know if I get tired and need you to carry something. It’ll get lighter as we go since we’ll drink some of the water.” There’s no way I’m trading with him, but he doesn’t have to know that.

After a quick drive to the other side of the lake, we set off from the trailhead at the far end of the parking lot. “I’m going to snap a picture of this map in case we need to reference it later.” I take my photo and spend a minute looking over the routes. “We’ll follow this blue one all the way around. It loops around a pond at the end,” I say as I point toward the top portion of the posted map. “Then we can make our way back on the same trail.”

“How far is it?” I can see him trying to make sense of the distance markers on the board.

“The whole trail is probably about three miles.” Enough to make us feel like we worked, but not so much that we can’t move tomorrow morning.

At least, I hope that’s true. I’ve been so busy over the last several years that I’ve ignored a lot of my conditioning. And the last few months, my focus has been... elsewhere. I didn’t even bother signing up for a gym membership in Cardinal Falls. If I stay, that’ll need to be at the top of my to-do list.

The worn sign on the edge of the trail points off to the right with a little blue dot noting the Pond Loop Trail I chose.

It takes a couple of minutes for us to fall into a rhythm, but eventually, we’re in step with one another, walking side by side. It’s the perfect day for this. Not too cool, but

enough of a breeze to keep us from overheating. My fair skin is thankful that there's plenty of cloud cover, meaning I'm less likely to end up with sunburns. Even with plenty of sunscreen, it's always a risk.

"Do you have another vacation planned soon?" I ask. He's talked about his trips only a few times, but I get the sense that they mean a lot to him.

"Oh, um, in February." That's sooner than I expected.

"Where to this time?"

"The Netherlands. Well, The Netherlands plus Brussels. It'll be about ten days, so a little bit of traveling around to spend time in a few different cities." The excitement in his voice is palpable.

"With your parents?" He hums as he nods. "Have you been before?"

"I visited Amsterdam once back in college, but I've never been farther than that. We'll start and end there this time, but we'll travel around some and see some of the art museums and churches on my parents' list." I still can't imagine spending that much time with my parents as an adult.

"And what's on your list?"

He gives me a side look that almost sends him tumbling when his toes hit a branch. I catch his elbow to steady him.

"Thanks." Yeah, those shoes are not the best pick for this adventure. Even if this isn't a technical trail. He refocuses on where his feet are going, eyes glued to the few feet of dirt in front of him.

I try my question again. “What are the things you’re looking forward to seeing?”

“I don’t really have a list. My mom picks out most of the sites. Art museums are always on the list so that keeps me happy.” He steps over a few big rocks on the trail. “I usually come up with a few breweries that interest me, especially for somewhere like Brussels.”

“A beer-cation?” I’m not proud of myself for that one, but it gets me a laugh.

“I guess you could call it that.”

“You get along pretty well with your parents then?” I’m not sure if I’m asking or making an observation. I love my family, but they’re a lot. My siblings and I are close and message each other constantly. I love hanging out with them each summer. For one week. Outside of that, I prefer them in small doses. Meeting up for coffee when we have time. The occasional family dinner.

Traveling through Europe with my parents would be... a nightmare. Not that they aren’t wonderful, but our relationship works best when we aren’t trying to agree on the day-to-day details of life.

“They’ve always been my best friends.” He clears his throat. “I mean, Nathan is my best friend, but my parents have always been there for me. I wasn’t always the easiest kid to deal with. I wanted to spend time doodling and thinking about computers rather than whatever book was assigned for English class. While other parents went to soccer games or track meets, mine suffered through a lot of show and tell time at coding camps.”

“I don’t even know what that means.”

He smiles at me. That great big Tyler grin that only comes through when he lets his

guard down for a second. “I don’t think they did either, but they always showed up. When I sat them down one morning and announced that I was gay, they didn’t even flinch.” A few different emotions flash across his face, and I brace myself. I’ve heard enough coming out stories over the years from friends to know that the ways that conversation goes range from wonderful to traumatizing. “I think they already knew. I thought I did a good job hiding it, but in hindsight, it was pretty clear. They said that they loved me one hundred percent and that as long as I was happy and safe, then they were happy.”

I reach out and take Tyler’s hand. It’s clumsy and awkward while trying to make our way around rocks and tree roots, but it feels necessary. My parents barely noticed when I came out. As the youngest, I think they were relieved that my big conversations didn’t include teen pregnancy.

“I know a lot of people don’t get that lucky. It’s always been like that for us, though. They go along with everything I want to do. I love hanging out with them. I think they were always waiting for me to grow up so we could do more fun things together without them having to worry about saying the wrong thing or dragging their underage son into a bar.”

“You’re very lucky. I think I’d kill my family if we were together that long.” Or they’d kill me first.

His head snaps toward me. “I thought you got along with them.”

“I do, but in small doses. It’s not because I don’t love them or appreciate them, but we’re all strong-minded, independent people. It doesn’t always work in tight spaces.”

“Is that your way of saying that you’re all stubborn assholes?”

I snatch my hand back. “How dare you?” I ask incredulously.

“Hey, if the shoe fits.”

“Well, at least my shoes are appropriate for the terrain.” We’ve started heading uphill a bit at this point, and I can’t imagine his shoes have a good grip to deal with the loose gravel.

“Do not mock my Vans .”

“I would never.” I bring my hand to my chest and clutch the invisible pearls around my neck.

“Fine, but you’re right. Different shoes would help.”

I hold back my snarky comments. “I think you’ll make it in those. This is pretty much the worst of it.” At least, I hope so. It’s been a while, and my memory tends to be a bit flimsy. We take the kids on it, but that means nothing. They’d all hike a mountain in sandals and come back with energy to spare.

Today, the trail is our own private oasis. In the time it takes to get to the pond, we only pass one other couple. The woods sprawl out quietly in front of us, our own little slice of wilderness. Long stretches of comfortable quiet mix with the sounds of the dirt beneath our feet. Occasionally, a squirrel or bird catches our attention, bringing us to a stop for a few minutes while we watch.

When we reach the pond, I tug Tyler toward a few boulders at the edge of the water. “Let’s sit for a bit.”

“I’m fine to keep going,” he says, his chin jutting out.

“I know you are, but I want to take in the view for a few minutes.” It’s the goal of all this, in my opinion. Stopping to enjoy the scenery and the journey, not ticking the



destination off a long list of trails or things to do. Sure, it's slower, but it's worth it.

"Okay."

He lets me drag him off the trail and down to the pond. I drop my backpack and prop it up before taking a seat. Tyler copies my motions and sits down next to me. A few ducks glide across the water, dipping under the surface to check for food.

"This is nice." I can't help but smile. When I pictured this weekend, this was the image in my mind.

"So, how many suitors have you used this trick on?" Tyler asks.

"What trick?"

"The whole, bring the boyfriend out to the beautiful pond thing?"

"I think you're greatly overestimating the amount of game I have."

"And the whole rugged outdoorsman thing? You fool everyone by making them think that you're some buttoned-up, suit-wearing city guy, then you spring this whole getup on them." He waves his arms around wildly.

"I assure you that you've put more thought into this than I ever have. I've never..." I let the sentence trail off. Is Tyler the first boyfriend I've ever brought camping? My ex came with me once to the cabin. It'd been a complete disaster. I knew it wouldn't be his favorite thing, but he hated it more than I possibly could have imagined. He only lasted three days into the week before he made up some work excuse and left. "I've never brought anyone camping before," I admit. "You're the first. It's either been solo trips or with my family."

“Really, that’s kind of—what the fuck!” Tyler jumps up from the boulder and whips around.

Not quite the reaction I was looking for.

“Mother fucking bee stung me!”

TYLER

What the actual fuck? I grab my forearm and stare at the reddening skin.

“Let me see.” Graham stands and moves toward me. He’s fucking calm. How does he do that? No matter how shit the situation seems, he always has this serene tone to his voice.

I offer him my arm, the welt where the asshole stung me, growing by the second.

“The stinger is still in your skin, so we’ll need to get it out.” My stomach churns, and I worry my breakfast is about to make a return.

Graham’s right, though. I can see the small speck in the middle of the bump. How does something so small hurt so fucking much? I reach toward it with my fingers, ready to yank it out, but Graham catches my hand.

“Nope, if you pull it, you’ll get more toxin in your skin. Hang on.” He fishes through his backpack and returns with his wallet and a small, zippered bag. He opens the wallet first and grabs his credit card.

“Are you going to offer it money to see if it will leave?” Would that work?

“Very funny. Hold still.”

I do my best not to seem like a total wimp. I spend plenty of time in the garden with lots of bees. I don't love them, but we have a general agreement. I don't swat at them, and they don't sting me. It's not complicated, but it works for us. Apparently, the bees out here don't know about the deal.

Graham skims the card over my skin, and through some sort of voodoo magic, it removes the stinger. I swear I didn't even feel it.

"There, that should help."

I eye my arm. I do feel better knowing that the stinger's gone, but my arm still hurts like hell and itches, too. Is it possible for things to itch and hurt at the same time? I scratch at the spot, but it doesn't help. A few more red bumps pop up around the spot. Did I get stung more times?

"Tyler?" Graham asks, his voice suddenly serious. "Have you ever been stung by a bee before?"

I try to think. I've been bitten by plenty of mosquitos and one tick, but I don't remember being stung. "I don't think so. Why?"

"You've got hives. I'm worried you might be allergic." He grabs my arm, holding it still and keeping me from itching anymore.

"Isn't that bad?" My mind races through everything I've heard about bee sting allergies, and, well, the prognosis isn't great. Nathan's going to be pissed if I die out here.

"It can be," Graham says slowly, like he's choosing each word carefully. "But it also might not be." He opens the zippered pouch and pulls out a few things, all while mumbling to himself. I can't make out the words, so I focus on breathing. I count my

breaths, in and out, until I get to ten.

Hey, I'm breathing. That's a good sign, right?

"Tyler?" I open my eyes to find Graham staring at me with a level of panic in his expression that I've never seen before on him.

"I'm okay," I say, putting my hand on his shoulder to reassure him.

"You closed your eyes. How are you feeling? Can you breathe?"

"Other than the fact that my arm fucking itches, I'm doing fine." He searches my face for a minute, and I can only hope that he sees I'm telling him the truth. "Just needed a minute to relax."

"Okay. I'm going to put some cream on the sting to help for now. We can put some ice and other stuff on it when we get back to the car." He rubs some white ointment over my skin. I can't hold back a hiss when he goes over the spot. It's an angry tomato red at this point and throbbing. "I want you to take a couple of antihistamines. It'll help with whatever reaction your body's having." He holds out two small pink pills.

"Won't those make me drowsy?" The last thing I need is to sleep through our entire trip. So far, I'm doing a great job at fucking up the whole vacation. One bee sting is not going to keep me from proving that I can camp with the best of them.

"Maybe, but they're the best choice. It won't hurt you. We'll head straight back to the car."

If I'm doing my math right, we've got at least a forty-minute walk back to the car. Maybe thirty if we really hustle. Drugged? Who knows. Maybe an hour or more.

“What if I wait to take them until we get back?”

“Nope. You need them now. I don’t want to risk it.” He pushes the pills into my hand. “Please?” His voice breaks, and so does my willpower. I swallow both pills with some of my water and give Graham my best smile.

“We better get walking. If I fall asleep on the side of the trail, you’ll have to carry me and both backpacks.” He chuckles at my joke, but his smile doesn’t reach his eyes. We grab our gear and start walking back the way we came. I suddenly wish we could stay longer and take in the view, enjoying the quiet. Maybe he’ll bring me out here again? It might take some negotiating after this shit show. I’ve got a few ways of convincing him, though.

I swipe my bag away when Graham reaches for it. He’s carrying my bag over my dead body. Maybe I shouldn’t joke about dead bodies right now, not aloud anyway. Graham doesn’t argue with me about it, which shows his level of concern. I can do this. One foot in front of another.

Right, time to focus. First, we need to get back to the car. Second, I need to keep breathing and not need a hospital. And third, and perhaps most importantly, I figure out how to keep Graham in my life.

### Chapter Twenty-Three

#### GRAHAM

For the fifth time in an hour, I open the tent flap enough to watch Tyler's chest rise and fall. Once I'm sure he's still breathing, I close the tent back up and collapse into one of the chairs.

The kettle over the fire whistles, and it takes every ounce of energy left in my system to fix myself a cup of tea. I prefer coffee, but the last thing I need is caffeine coursing through my system. Today's events got my adrenaline pumping enough.

Thankfully, the hives didn't spread any further once he took the drugs, and nothing more serious cropped up. The drugs did their job, but they also knocked him out. The minute we got in the car, he fell asleep, his head lolling to the side as we drove back to the campsite. He barely registered me getting him out of the car, fixing his bandage, and putting him in his sleeping bag.

I check in on him every ten minutes to ensure he's breathing. Overkill? Absolutely. The internet said that if he didn't have any more severe symptoms by now, we're probably safe. Probably. That's not my favorite word. I need a few more minutes to come down from the day.

Hence, tea. I take my cup and settle in next to the fire. Logically, my brain knows we're out of danger, but my body hasn't gotten the memo yet. I can feel the tension tugging at the fibers in my body. This trip is working against me.

Maybe when Tyler wakes up, I'll suggest we move this party to a hotel room. A nice hot shower that doesn't require flip-flops, room service, and a comfy bed would go a long way toward relaxing both of us.

And make up for the spectacularly lousy day.

A rustling in the tent grabs my attention. Tyler sticks his head out, eyes barely open.

"How are you doing?" I ask gently. He'd been pissed off with me on the hike back to the car. I asked that same question repeatedly. I know it'd been partially his own worry combined with the pain of the sting and itchiness of his skin, but he'd told me never to ask him that again. It was a heat-of-the-moment thing, though. Right?

"Um, okay. A bit foggy." He rubs his eyes and squints at me.

"How's the arm feeling?"

Tyler stares at his arm as though he needs to see it to decide. There's not much beyond my white bandage over the top of the site. "Okay, I guess. Still smarts a bit, but that's normal."

I like that he's suddenly become the expert on bee stings. "It'll probably hurt for a day or two. What about the hives?" I force myself to stay in my seat and not hover.

He runs a hand over his skin. "They're gone," he says. When he walks over and offers me his arm, I relax a bit. He's right; there's no sign of the angry bumps that were there earlier. I bring his arm up and kiss around the bandage, careful not to bump where he might still be sore.

"That's much better than those pills," he says. I snort. Yeah, I'm not sure kisses are that good. "With the added benefit that I don't sleep like the dead for... how long

have I been out?”

“About four hours. You fell asleep in the car on the way back.” I leave out how he didn’t even get his seatbelt on. He must’ve been fighting to hold it together for the last mile of our hike. I wish I could’ve carried him or gotten the car closer.

“Fuck. I’m sorry.” He runs his hand through his sleep-rumpled hair. “I ruined our whole day.”

“You did no such thing.” I pull him into my lap. The need to be close to him and feel him in my arms is overwhelming my desire to not act like an overbearing ass. “It’s not your fault you got stung.” I nuzzle in close to him.

“Oh? And whose fault is it then?”

“The bee’s.”

“I can get on board with that. He was an asshole.”

“You scared me,” I mumble against his skin. It’s a massive understatement, but it’s the best I can come up with. What if he’d had an anaphylactic reaction out there? Who knows how long emergency services would have taken to get to us? Too long when someone can’t breathe.

“I know. I’m sorry,” he says softly, running a hand over my head. It feels so good to have him touching me again. I never want it to stop.

“Promise you won’t do it again?”

Tyler kisses the top of my head. “I’ll do my best, but I can’t guarantee anything on behalf of the bees.”



“Or the children who trip you.” Was that earlier today? It feels like it’s been longer.

“Them, too.”

I hum softly. “What if we didn’t camp tonight?”

Tyler pulls back and puts a finger under my chin, forcing me to lift my head and look into his eyes. “You want to go home? I’m okay. Really. Now that I’ve slept off the medication, I’ll be set for the rest of the trip.”

“What if we went somewhere else? We could find a hotel or a bed and breakfast? We could cuddle up together in real bed and watch Netflix.” I already checked. They have rooms open tonight. It would take us less than an hour to break down camp and drive over there.

“I asked you to bring me camping because I want to get to know this side of you. Today didn’t go according to that plan, but I’m not ready to throw in the towel yet.”

I search Tyler’s face for any sign that he’s doing this to make me happy. As long as we’re together, I’ll be happy. “Are you sure? Because this is the worst first camping experience I’ve ever seen.”

“Well, I have to be the best at something.” I shake my head and laugh. “And I’m sure someone has had worse. There haven’t been any bears or wolves. The tent is still standing, and I have the most handsome outdoorsman in the world keeping me company.” He runs his hand over my chest and kisses me softly.

“I don’t think we’re near bear territory.”

“That’s what you took away from my little speech?” He pulls back and glares at me.

“Okay, we’ll stay the night.” I must be insane, but he’s made a good argument. “One condition, though.”

“Name it.”

“I want you close to me all night, touching me at all times so I know you’re safe.” Tears burn in the back of my eyes, threatening to spill over. Tyler squeezes my hand.

“I’ll be right here.”

TYLER

So camping? Not so bad if you take out the sleeping on the ground, communal bathrooms, and insects. The part where we cuddle while roasting marshmallows for s’mores? That part is heavenly. Even if we’re using sticks from the ground to do it.

I snuggle into the blanket Graham has wrapped around the two of us. He wasn’t kidding about wanting to stay physically connected for the rest of the night. Some part of him has been touching me at all times. Sometimes, it’s a hand on the edge of my thigh. Sometimes, like now, he’s got his whole body draped over me so that nearly every part of him is in contact.

No complaints. It’s a perfect night.

“Another one?” Graham asks, holding a marshmallow out in front of me.

“I think five might be my limit.” Okay, three was probably my limit, but they’re so good.

He puts the marshmallow back in the bag and closes it up, setting it aside with the other supplies.

“I think this is what I love so much about the lake and being outdoors in general.”

“The desserts?” He gently pinches my side, and I wiggle in his arms. It’s all for show. He’s stuck with me. At least for tonight.

“The quiet. Getting to be here, holding you, watching the fire, and listening to nature around us. It’s different than being in the city.”

I close my eyes and listen for what Graham’s talking about. There are a few bird calls, crickets chirping, and the rustle of leaves. If I listen hard, I can almost hear the lake lapping against the shore.

I’m a city boy, so it’s what’s missing that makes a bigger impression. No traffic or sirens. No one’s screaming or arguing in the background. I let out a big breath. It’s a nice sound. Not quiet, but calm.

It’s the heat radiating off Graham and his stubble rubbing against my neck as he nuzzles closer that really gets me. Yeah, we can cuddle on the couch, but it’s not the same. Here, there are no emails or TV getting in the way of simply enjoying one another.

“I like it here. Will you bring me again?” The words are out before I can process them fully. Again. There could be a future time when Graham might not be living in Cardinal Falls. It’s easy to forget that there’s a clock ticking on this relationship.

“I’d love to. Maybe next time we can get a cabin, though. I’m getting a little old to sleep on the ground.” Thank fuck. A real bed would make the experience so much better. The cabin seems like a nice halfway point between what we’re doing this weekend and something fancier. “Maybe you can come with me and my family next summer. I know it might not fit with your work schedule, but you could come for a few days over a weekend. Then you’d get to meet everyone.”

“You’d want that?” Meeting the family is a big deal. I’ve never met a date’s family before. Unless you count high school, but that’s unavoidable. As an adult? Nothing ever got that far or that serious.

Graham hums his approval. “They’d like you. Plus, it’s best to meet them the first time when you have somewhere to hide. That way, if they start asking a lot of intrusive questions, you can hide out in our space.”

I don’t ask about the kind of questions he thinks his family will ask. Instead, I let my body relax even further into Graham, imagining what it would be like to be here with his family. Obviously different from my adventures with my parents. We have hotel rooms, fancy dinners, and more art museums than most people know exist. It’s wonderful, but there’s something about the picture in my mind of all the chaos that brings me a bit of comfort. I can’t make sense of it, but I guess I don’t need to. Not yet, at least.

We talk for a while with Graham telling me about his siblings and their antics over the years. Eventually, the fire starts to die down and we clean up the campsite for the evening.

“You aren’t really going to make me put my pajama pants back on tonight, are you?” I ask once we’re in the tent. I hold them up to show off the dirt and blood stains. I’m down to my shirt and briefs. If I get my way, I’ll sleep like this. The ridiculous sleeping bags Graham brought are warm enough.

“I guess not. As long as you don’t get too cold.”

“I can think of a few ways you could help keep me warm.” Graham’s down to his briefs, as well, having stripped off his clothes to get ready for bed. I can’t stop thinking about how he’s cared for me today, ensuring I had a good time.

I crawl over onto his sleeping bag and take off my shirt. Graham gets the hint and stretches out, giving me room to straddle him.

“What exactly did you have in mind?”

I decide to show him, rocking my hips against him a few times. Graham moans and presses his hips up into me. “Fuck, that feels good.”

I love when he’s vocal with me. I curse all the time, but he tends to be more restrained. These moments, when the words pass over his lips without a second thought, are my favorite. I pull my briefs down enough to free my cock and give it a couple of strokes. Graham watches me with big eyes like I’m holding his favorite dessert. It’s tempting to make him watch for a while, but I don’t want to be patient tonight.

I lift off him enough to free Graham’s erection from his briefs. A bead of precum bubbles up from his slit, and I swipe my thumb across it, spearing it around his head. He moans again, and I press my finger against his lips.

“We have to be quiet. There are families nearby.” I’m not sure how far away the next group is, but the campsites are busy and sound travels easily without walls. I heard plenty of their conversations when we were around the fire.

Graham responds by sucking my finger into his mouth. I manage to bite back my groan, but barely. Two can play at this game. I spit into my palm and wrap my hand around both our cocks. I start slow, keeping my hand loose. Graham tries to thrust up, but I press down on him with my weight, limiting his movement.

“Tyler...” He lets his head sink back into what passes for a pillow. All of this would be a lot easier in a real bed, but I’m happy to make do. I tighten my grip and start to jerk us off faster. God, it feels fucking amazing. It’s so dark in the tent I can’t see

anything except Graham and myself.

A light tapping against the tent makes me freeze.

“It’s raining,” Graham says softly. I listen for a minute, enjoying the way the sound drowns out everything else around us. Then Graham wraps his hand around mine and starts to stroke us again. Suddenly, I can’t hear anything over our soft grunts and moans.

It’s not long before I can feel my impending release starting to bubble over. “I’m close.”

“Me, too,” Graham pants. “Come with me, sweetheart.” I can’t see it, but I feel the moment Graham’s orgasm overtakes him, his cock pulsing against mine as his hot cum fills our fists. I follow him over the edge a moment later.

The sound of our heavy breathing combines with the patter of the rain.

I grope in the dark until I find my pajama pants. They’re already done for, so I use them to clean us both up, then lean in to kiss him. It’s a bit of a struggle to find the right position, but once we do, I lose track of time in his kisses.

The rain grows louder as we kiss. It’s a fucking monsoon out there. I roll off of Graham and cuddle into his side, wondering if there’s any chance we’ll both fit in a single sleeping bag tonight. Maybe we can zip them together?

“Do you think—” I’m cut off by a whooshing sound. Cold water pours into the tent right on top of us with no warning. We both scream and scramble up, trying not to hit each other in the dark. We manage to move away from the spot where the tent is leaking. It’s now raining inside our tent.

Laughter bubbles over, and I can't help but break into a full-on belly laugh.

"I'm glad you find this funny." Graham turns on his cell phone flashlight. He doesn't look nearly as amused as I am. His serious expression only makes me laugh harder.

After a full minute of not being able to stop, I manage to pull myself together, sucking in deep breaths to calm myself down.

"This is the absolute worst weekend trip I've ever been on," I say, fighting to keep my composure. "And I'm counting the third-grade field trip where I threw up on the bus." I manage to find a mostly-dry blanket in the corner of the tent and toss it to Graham. I move close to him in the small corner that's not wet—yet—and he wraps it around both of our shoulders.

"I love you," he says.

"But you're leaving," I blurt out. My stomach knots and the levity of the last few minutes evaporates. The rain is still pelting our tent, but I can't hear anything over the beating of my heart.

"Tyler," Graham starts.

"No, wait. Please." Fuck, what do I want to say? "Everything with you is so perfect, but you're leaving for another job in a few weeks. I can't... we can't..." I don't have words for what I want to say. All I know is that I'm fucking this up.

"Tyler, I might have to move away from Cardinal Falls, that's true. That doesn't mean that I'm leaving you or that we break up."

I swallow against the lump in my throat. I want to say something, but words still seem too hard for my brain.

“I can’t make you any promises. I don’t know exactly where I’m going to be. If I have my way, it will be very close, and I’ll be able to live in the city and commute.” He kisses the top of my head. “But if it is farther away, I want us to figure things out. We both have cars and video calls. I’ll keep looking for a job here. There might not be anything right now, but something will come up. I’m not leaving you.” He fumbles in the dark until he finds my hand and pulls it close, rubbing it against his rough cheek before kissing the tips of my fingers.

“Say it again,” I whisper, my words barely audible. For a second, I think he didn’t hear me. Or worse, he’s changed his mind.

“I love you.”

“I love you, too.” My voice is quiet but more confident, and my face hurts from the smile stretching from ear to ear.

“Tyler?”

“Hmmm?”

“Can we please give up on camping now? It’s only a few miles to a small town with a hotel we can stay in tonight. Please?”

“Fuck yes. How soon can we be out of here?”



### Chapter Twenty-Four

#### TYLER

“Look who’s alive?” Nathan spots me before the rest of the crew and runs over to give me a hug.

“Very funny.” We had a great time camping. And an even better time at the luxury hotel. I might leave that part out of my retelling.

It’s been a week since we got back, and somehow, I got talked into bringing Graham to one of Matthias’s backyard get-togethers. We let ourselves in the side gate to join everyone else. I’m glad we went camping last weekend because the weather has taken a turn for the worse and it’s much colder now. I’m bundled up in a hoodie and a jacket. Thankfully, Matthias keeps a fire pit in his backyard that will help with the chill.

Between Nathan and Colt showing up for breakfast and his appearance at The Flaming Unicorn, Graham already knows everyone. Mostly. Oliver’s here today. It’s not unusual for him to show up since Aaron adopted him into our group, but he hasn’t been around in a couple of months.

“Graham, tell us the real story. All Tyler will tell us is that you had a great time. That can’t be the whole truth,” Matthias says, joining us near the porch. It’s too small for all of us to be up here at the same time.

“Sorry, guys. It’s the whole truth. We had a great time camping, hiking, and generally

enjoying the outdoors.” I give Graham a smile. Someone’s getting a blow job later for sticking to my version of events.

“I call bullshit,” Matthias says, but he grabs a couple of beers from the cooler and goes back to his seat. I grab drinks for Graham and myself and lead him over to the circle of chairs.

“Any luck on the job hunt?” Colt asks. I know he doesn’t mean anything by it, but my heart rate ticks up a bit at the question. The clock is running out. Graham’s company is asking him to pick from the shortlist they sent him. None of them are in Cardinal Falls, but a few are close by. Not perfect, but it means we can at least spend weekends together.

“Not yet,” Graham replies. “But I’m still looking. If I have to, I’ll take another temporary position while I keep searching.”

After our trip, we’ve talked about it a lot. I’m not keen on the whole long-distance thing, but I’m willing to give it a shot, knowing that it’s temporary. Nathan puts his hand on my arm, and I place mine on top of it. I know he’s been helping where he can.

“Steph’s asked me to stay on an extra week when she comes back so that we have handover time.” Graham slips his hand into mine and gives it a squeeze. Steph coming back is... complicated. I love her to death and can’t wait to see her. It does mean we’ll need to come clean about our relationship. I might not need to say anything as a volunteer, but she’s Graham’s friend, and he doesn’t want to hide us.

The plus side is that it means I no longer have an issue at work, either. Graham won’t be a client anymore, so my conscience will be clear. Not that I’ll be advertising it, but at least I won’t worry that someone will see us at a restaurant. I give Nathan a look, begging him to change the topic. I’m slowly making my peace with the situation, but

I'm not ready to spend an afternoon discussing it.

"When are you finally going to get this backyard fixed up?" Nathan asks. He's been asking the same question for years. It's an amazing yard, but it's bare bones. There's so much space that could be used, especially since we gather here often. We always sit in chairs on the grass because the deck is too small.

"Funny you ask, I actually have a company starting the work next month. They're going to tear out the current deck and build a brand new one." I hope they do some planting, too, because right now, the yard's limited to grass. Maybe I can talk him into letting me have a small flower bed here to grow a few things of my own.

Colt whistles. "That sounds incredible."

"Yeah, but it means one of you might need to host for a while." A round of not-its makes its way through the group. There's no chance everyone's going to fit in my apartment. Especially now that we've got a few extra people. I look around, trying to figure out who might serve as a temporary host. Aaron has the best place for it, but he rarely invites anyone over. I can count on one hand the number of times I've been in his house. Guess that means Nathan and Colt are up.

Once the group finishes squabbling over who has the best apartment, the conversation moves along to something about sports. As usual, I tune out. Instead of picking up my phone to scroll social media, I watch how easily Graham fits in with the group. He shares so many of their interests, easily talking about who's injured this year or which team got the best draft picks. He's never afraid to fight back when they get pushy either, going so far as to throw a potato chip at Aaron.

I spy Oliver grabbing another round of beers, and I follow him over to the porch. Even though he's around occasionally, I don't know him very well.

“Hey,” I say, reaching around him to grab a couple of cans from the cooler.

“Hey, Tyler. What’s new?” Oliver picks at the label on his bottle.

“I went camping for the first time and didn’t get eaten by a bear.” I try to make it sound funny, but it’s clear from Oliver’s expression that he’s concerned. “Shit, I didn’t mean it like that. I don’t think there are even bears around here.”

“That’s good, I guess. I’m not really the outdoorsy type.” Yeah, I can see that. Though, up until a week ago, I would’ve said the same thing about myself.

“What’s new with you? It’s been a while.”

“Oh, you know, work and stuff. It’s been busy.” I don’t know. Honestly, I have no idea what Oliver does. It might be too late to ask, so I nod knowingly.

“Hopefully, it calms down soon. We like having you at these.” It’s the best I can do. I hope Aaron appreciates it. Oliver lights up at the comment, so I did something right.

“You’re all great. I’m not really sure I fit in, though.” Oliver waves a hand toward the others.

“Because you don’t know about sports?” He nods. “Fuck that. I don’t know what they’re talking about, either. Eventually, they’ll wear themselves out on the topic and go back to more sane discussions.” I’m not sure my explanation is convincing, but Oliver nods as he walks back to his spot next to Aaron.

Aaron leans over and whispers something to Oliver. It must be good because Oliver’s cheeks turn a bright shade of pink. Graham looks over at me and mouths, “Okay?” I nod and grab the beers I got out for the two of us.

When I hand over the can, Graham pulls me into his lap. I don't put up a fight, letting him wrap his arms around me and pull me close. He's warm and comfortable. The mix of alcohol, a warm fire, and the man I love cast a spell over the afternoon.

\* \* \*

GRAHAM

Unknown

Hey, it's Nathan. Call me when you get a chance.

The message appears on my screen in the middle of a staff meeting. My heart races as all the worst-case scenarios run through my mind. Did something happen to Tyler? Wouldn't Nathan say if it was some sort of emergency? Maybe he wants to tell me personally rather than putting it in a text message.

I wrap up the meeting in record time—twenty minutes early—and race back to my office, shutting the door behind me. My hands shake as I click on the number.

“Hey, thanks for calling.”

“Is Tyler okay?” I sink into my office chair, holding onto one of the arms to steady myself.

“Shit. Sorry, I didn't think you'd jump to that conclusion. Tyler's fine. I'm calling to talk about a job.”

Relief courses through my system. He's okay. Tyler's okay. I repeat the words in my head a few times until the message sinks in. “Great, go ahead.” My throat is still tight with worry, and I clear it a few times to make my voice sound less forced.

“So, I told you our development director is getting ready to retire in the next month.”

“Are you looking for someone to fill in until you can hire a replacement?” It’s a temporary fix, but it would keep me in Cardinal Falls a little longer. I know we can make long-distance work, but I’d rather avoid it if we can.

“That’s the thing. I thought they were going to want to hire a temp to fill the role while we did a whole big search, but they changed their minds.” My stomach sinks. That’s not what I wanted to hear.

“Thanks for trying. I really appreciate it.” The words sound flat, and I hope Nathan knows I mean them sincerely.

“I’m not doing very good at this.” He sighs, and I can hear him rustling paper in the background. “They want to hire you. Permanently.”

“What?” I must not be hearing him correctly.

“You’d have to interview for it, but it’s a formality. I gave them your resume, and everyone was really impressed.”

Seriously? Even without seeing a job description, I can tell it’s perfect. Nathan speaks so highly of the place, and their reputation is flawless. Plus, it’s here. With Tyler. This is my dream come true. Everything is coming together—a bit last-minute—to make our future work.

“Are you still there?”

“Sorry, speechless. I can’t thank you enough for this. Really.”

“I want you to stick around for Tyler. He’s happier with you than I’ve ever seen him.

Keep making him happy and I'll do just about anything for you. Same with the rest of the crew."

"That means a lot."

"I'll send you the details. They want to get moving, so they'll have you in for an interview within the week."

Given that this man is offering me a job, asking for more is rude. I do have a request, though. "Can you not tell Tyler yet? I don't want to say anything until I know for sure."

"Of course, just don't keep it a secret too long. He'll kill me when he finds out, and the longer it's been, the madder he'll be."

I laugh. That sounds about right. Maybe the joy of finding out I'm staying will override the anger?

### Chapter Twenty-Five

#### GRAHAM

“Well, she’s still standing.” Steph gives me a big hug when she enters the office. It’s hard to believe this is my last week at Sprouting Joy. While I often love the places I work, this one holds a special place in my heart. At least half of that is Tyler. I’m going to be sad to leave. “Hopefully, you left the rest of the place in good shape, as well.”

“I’m sure you’ll find that everything’s up to your standards.” At least I hope so. “If not, you know where to find me.”

“That I do.” Steph hugs me again. “I can’t believe I get to keep you in Cardinal Falls. The mighty Graham Stevens is finally settling down. I never thought I’d see the day.”

“Me, either, but I finally hit a place in my life where I want a little more stability.”

“And does that have anything to do with a certain volunteer?”

My jaw drops. She can’t know. We’ve been so careful. Or at least medium careful. Plus, Steph has been at home buried in dirty diapers. When would she have time for office gossip?

“You think I don’t have spies everywhere? I might have been out of the office, but I haven’t been completely out of touch.”



“We didn’t think anyone here knew.” It’s the truth. It’s not like we’ve been kissing in the hallways.

Steph snorts. “Sweetie, everyone knows. At least five people texted me about it. A few of them weren’t one hundred percent sure, but they thought something was up. One of them saw you kissing in the parking lot.”

“Well, I guess they saved me the trouble of telling you.” So much for the speech I practiced last night. Tyler’s going to freak out when he hears this.

“Why didn’t you tell me?” I open my mouth as she holds up her hand. “And don’t you even think about saying it’s because I had a baby and you didn’t want to bother me.”

I clear my throat. “To be honest, we were worried about how it would look. Tyler volunteers here, which made me his sort-of boss while you were out. Plus, with his team being on the website, that technically also made me his client.” Someone in human resources would have a field day with it. We might not technically be doing anything wrong, but I suspect that doesn’t mean it can’t be used against us.

“That all makes sense, but I love you, Graham. I’m so happy you found someone. And Tyler’s as good as they come. The two of you should be together.” She sits down in one of the chairs on the visitor’s side of the desk. It’s weird seeing her there. Now that she’s back, she should reclaim her desk chair. “Plus, there aren’t any rules about staff and volunteers on our end. Maybe there should be, but we’ve never had an issue. It’s a small place, and if people can find love while doing good work, I’m not going to stop them.”

“Does that mean we have your blessing?”

“Of course.” She leans back, crossing her legs. “But I’m going to give the two of you shit about this for years to come.”

“I expect nothing less.”

“Now, catch me up on the less interesting things. How’s Sprouting Joy?”

Steph and I spend the next hour reviewing every spreadsheet, donor contribution, and request that’s come through in the three months since I’ve been here. It’s tedious work, but I’m thankful for the time to do it. That’s not always the case, and an in-person hand-off like this is better than a written report.

I pack up my laptop, ready to move to a conference room for the afternoon to let Steph make a start on what must be thousands of emails waiting for her. “When you get settled, we’ll have you and Tyler over for dinner one night.”

Settled. I’m not sure that word has ever described my life before. It’s accurate, though. A nice home, a boyfriend whom I love and adore, and a new job waiting for me in a city where I have friends. It’s hard to ask for more than that.

I do have one more thing to work on before everything is set. I’m saving that one for Saturday morning.

\* \* \*

TYLER

“What’s all this?” I wander into the kitchen, still a little groggy. Graham usually stays in bed with me on weekend mornings. Waking up alone in bed, his spot cold and empty, feels worrisome. I half expected to find a note on the kitchen counter saying he’d left me.

It took a reminder that this is, in fact, his home to calm me down. Not that I’d put it past every guy, but Graham seems much too kind to leave a breakup note on his own kitchen counter before fucking off and hoping I’d be gone before he got back.

“Why don’t you come sit?” Graham’s on the couch, the electric fireplace running.

Something’s wrong. I can feel it. The whole scene feels—sideways. I don’t know any other way to describe it. I do my best to nod and look normal, but I’m sweating. As I move toward the couch, Graham gets up and walks toward me, abandoning the pile of blankets he has stacked up on the sofa.

“Everything’s fine, sweetheart. I wanted to do something special for you this morning.” He kisses the top of my head as he walks by. His words do little to reassure me, but I suck in a breath and plaster a big smile on my face.

My usual seat on the couch is covered with blankets, so I pull them up before burying myself under them. Given the roaring fire and mild weather, they aren’t necessary. Who lights a fire first thing in the morning? The fireplace is mainly a decorative feature. It’s more than warm enough, thanks to the thermostat.

It’s fine. I’m fine . I try to remind myself that the statement will be true, no matter what happens.

“Tyler?” Graham asks, pulling me from my thoughts. “Can you take one of these?” He has a cup of coffee in each hand. I grab the one in my favorite mug, the one with a unicorn pole dancing on it.

With one hand free, he pulls up the blankets enough to slide in next to me.

“Cheers.” He holds his mug up, and I clink mine against his, eyeing him suspiciously.

“Oh my god,” I moan after my first sip. “Why is this so good?”

“It’s pour-over. I made it the right way, too. Took forever, so I’m glad you like it.”

“Like you made when we were camping?” He clicks his tongue against his teeth.

We've largely come to an agreement that we don't mention that weekend. Well, most of it. The part where he told me he loves me and said we're going to find a way to make things work still plays on repeat in my head. If I watch the highlight reel enough, I might start to believe it.

"Exactly like that. Except, there aren't any children or bees here to injure you, and the weather today is calling for nothing more than a few clouds."

I hum my agreement while taking a few more sips of coffee. This is pretty much heaven.

"I figured this might be our last opportunity to drink coffee in front of a fire like this for a while."

My body tenses despite my best efforts. "Oh, so you found a job?"

"I did." I force myself to relax as he pulls me closer.

"So, when are you moving?" I let the mug rest against the arm of the couch. It no longer tastes very good. I'm prepared for this. It's been the topic of many conversations. Even if he takes something far away, it'll be temporary. Given all his contacts and experience, it's only a matter of time until a position opens. Until then, it's all about patience. I work in front of a computer all day, so a few more hours on a video call at night are nothing.

"That kind of depends. I technically have this place until the end of the month." So, three more weeks. Tears well up in the corner of my eye. Those fuckers better not fall. This is not the time or place. I can do that later.

"I was, however, hoping my boyfriend would let me move in a little sooner."

I blink a few times. Nope, not computing.

“I was waiting to mention it to you until it was a sure thing. I didn’t want to get either of our hopes up until I actually had something to tell you.”

“For fucks sake. Just say it.” Whatever it is, I know we can handle it. Together.

“I signed all the official paperwork yesterday to accept an offer with Nathan’s company.”

“For how long?” I’m still holding my breath. All of this sounds too good to be true.

“That’s the best part. It’s a permanent position.”

I throw my arms around him, spilling some of my coffee in the process. Who cares? Graham is staying.

We stay like that for a minute, me holding him close, afraid to let go and have this whole thing disappear.

“So, what do you say? I know I sprung all this on you, but what do you think about me moving in?”

“I hate it.” I can’t manage to hold back the smile on my face. Graham is staying. And he wants to live together. I didn’t let myself think about this option, too afraid that the fantasy would be ripped away from me.

“Oh, sorry. I didn’t mean to assume that it would be okay with you. I can find something else.”

Fuck. I really need to get better at this. “I don’t mean we shouldn’t live together,” I clarify. “I think we should find somewhere new. Something that’s for us, rather than you moving into my place. I don’t love that apartment. I want us to have something that’s for the two of us. A place we can decorate and call home together.”

“I love that idea.” He leans in and kisses me. “Maybe we can find somewhere with a fireplace so we can recreate this moment.”

“As long as you don’t make me go camping again anytime soon.” I’ll go, but I need a few months to allow the last experience to slip out of my memory.

“I seem to remember you begging me to take you camping and then refusing to leave the tent until we almost drowned.”

“I don’t remember any of that,” I say as I set my head against his shoulder.

Drinking coffee indoors in front of a fire is not quite the same as being at a campsite, but the benefits of being alone and away from bugs and critters cannot be overstated. Plus, no demon children.

I stare into the fire for a while, enjoying the coffee and closeness. I was wrong before. The blankets are completely necessary. Neither of us is cold, but the weight they add to our little cuddle fest is perfect.

When we’ve both finished our coffee and set the cups on the small table, I turn toward Graham.

“Are you sure you aren’t going to get bored? Living in one place, dating one guy, doing the same thing day in and day out?” I leave some of the questions unsaid.

“Tyler, you’re the least boring person I’ve ever met. Whether we’re sitting on the couch or battling a storm in a tent, I think everything with you is a bit of an adventure.”

“And if that changes?” I bite my lip.

“Look at me?” He lifts my chin so that I look directly into his eyes. I hate this trick. It

feels like he's somehow looking deep into my soul. That must be cheating. "I think we could both use a little less excitement in our lives sometimes. But, even if we get boring, I would rather be boring with you than exciting with anyone else."

As relief flows through me, I whisper, "I love you."

"I love you, too."