



Worthy (Adrenalin #1)

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Category: LGBT+

Description: Okay, I might have a reputation as a playboy, but I swear that's not my fault.

Cade When your small tourist town is lacking in single people, your only option for company is the temporary kind. And if given the choice between sleeping alone or sleeping around, well, can you blame me for choosing the latter?

If you think about it, I'm a victim of circumstance. A product of my environment. And that suits me just fine. Or it did, until a sexy stranger knocked me over, literally.

The newcomer is an angel to my devil. The type A to my slacker, working on a PhD thesis while I do everything in my power to delay taking over the family business. We should be totally incompatible. Yet somehow, I feel more at ease with this outsider than people I've known my whole life.

For the first time in—ever—I don't want to be just a fling, but how do I win over a relationship prone genius when I'm a notorious flirt? That's not even the worst part. Did I mention I'm crushing on a guy, and until I met him, I considered myself straight?

This opposites attract MM romance features a small-town bad boy, the studious boy next door, townspeople who love an excuse to wear a costume, and a not safe for work drinking game.

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I know every storefront, every window, even every crack on the sidewalk in this town, which is why I know there's no good reason for me to crash into a wall walking down Main Street.

A piney scented wall.

One that makes a rather suspect “mmph” noise for an inanimate object.

And... is that... My nostrils flare. Citrus?

Whipping my head around, I catch sight of an object flailing toward the earth. Before my brain can catch up to what I'm about to do, my arms shoot out. My hands grasp solid muscle, dragging the sweet scent closer.

My roadblock is roughly my size, but I'm able to stop his momentum enough that he just sort of sinks to the ground. Another noise escapes his lips, only this time it's more of a little “oomph” as he goes down.

I stifle a laugh. In my defense, it was growly and kind of cute.

The bags he's carrying crash to the sidewalk, produce spilling everywhere. I cast a quick look in my cousin Deacon's direction, and he nods, acknowledging that he'll escort the ladies we were just entertaining to the bar while I help clean up the mess .

“Sorry, I didn't see you there.” I scramble to pick up the groceries and put them back in their bags.

“Yeah, I got that much.” His words drip sarcasm, though his voice is almost amused. Not cynical.

“You okay?”

“No damage.” He rubs one of his arms, right where I’d been gripping it.

“What about your groceries? I’ll replace anything that’s ruined.” I chase an apple down before it hits the street, hoping the offer will absolve me of my carelessness. I’m a lot of things, but asshole isn’t one of them.

“Everything seems fine.” His dexterous fingers dust off his pants as he twists to make sure he’s clean.

“Okay, good.” I finish collecting the spilled items and hold the bag out, getting my first real look at the man I plowed into. And damn if he doesn’t plow me right back. Dark blonde hair hanging in loose waves to his shoulders. Stormy gray eyes framed by long lashes. A day’s worth of stubble on a chiseled jaw. And full, pink lips, still plump even though they’re pursed, studying me.

Damn . I’ve seen a lot of gorgeous people come through my little tourist town deep in the Colorado mountains, but none of them compare to the one staring back at me, who’s downright captivating. The fact this one is a man is a little surprising, though. I’ve only recently caught myself looking at men, and hadn’t yet concluded if that meant my tastes are changing—not that I care if they are. If my dick is curious, I’m not going to let gender stand in the way, and it’s definitely curious about this guy.

He’s my height, his build slightly broader than my lean frame, though I wouldn’t go so far as to say bulky or stout. Just...solid. Perfect . Exactly the right size to hold his own in bed, maybe even take charge .

My mouth waters at the thought. I've always wondered what that would be like, and thanks to the man in front of me, I'm infinitely more curious.

"You can catch up to your harem, I'm fine." He takes the bag from me. Again, the words are saucy, yet the voice doesn't hold any anger.

"Funny." I look him over, cataloguing the firm chest and trim waist his t-shirt doesn't exactly hide. "I'll have to tell my cousin. He'd get a kick out of that."

"Why? Is it his harem?" He cocks his head, his curious expression so sincere it's adorable.

I bark out a laugh. "Bachelorette party. Close enough."

"Ah, I see how I could make that mistake. Well, enjoy." He adjusts his grip on the bag and turns to leave.

"You're new here." I gamble this stranger isn't just passing through, like most new faces I see.

"What makes you say that?" A little crease appears between his brows as he halts his retreat.

Yep, not a vacationer. Only a new person would want to know how I can tell the difference.

"I haven't seen you before." I lean against the side of the building.

"You know everyone in this town?" Those gray eyes bore into mine.

I give him my sexiest grin. "Yes, actually."

“And I suppose knowing you would work in my favor?” He surmises with a wry smile, eyes taking a quick trip along the length of my body. It’s subtle, but it’s enough to spur me onward.

“It can.”

I’m creeping into dangerous territory. My interest in men isn’t common knowledge—okay, it’s my little secret—and sharing it with our newest resident before I’ve told anyone else probably isn’t the wisest move. Especially, considering I’ve never actually made a move on a guy before. But he’s seriously hot. More stunning than ninety percent of the women who come through here, which is saying something.

Maybe it’s the combination of masculine bulk with feminine hair. Or those sultry lips. It could even be the angular cut of his jaw. Regardless, he paints a picture I’m struggling to tear my eyes away from, so even though my escapades have thus far been limited to the softer sex, I want this guy like I’ve never wanted a female.

“Is this the part where I’m supposed to ask you to help out the new guy? To give me the scoop on the town and show me the lay of the land?” He blinks, feigning innocence. I like it.

“If you want.” I stuff my hands in my pockets.

“Let me guess, you’re the only tour guide around?” He rolls his eyes.

“Not the only. But I am the best.” I give him my sexiest casual shrug.

“Cocky.”

“Honest,” I correct. “Few people have lived here as long as I have.”

“How long is that?”

“All my life.” I drag my eyes to his with a bashful smile.

“What makes you think I need someone to show me around?” He purses those full lips.

“You’re grocery shopping on Main Street.” I tilt my head toward the building I’m leaning on.

“So?”

“So, you’re paying tourist prices. Nona’s a sweet lady and I can see why you’d want to shop in her store, but she marks everything up since her customers are mostly visitors. There’s a better option a little further out of town. And they offer a local discount.” I give him a conspiratorial wink.

“And this option is open at—” he checks his watch “—nine thirty at night? ”

“Nope,” I say, emphasizing every syllable. “So, you need someone to show you where and when to do your shopping.”

“Well, thanks for the offer, but I think I can figure it out on my own.” He smiles with false sweetness, amused. Odd . Admittedly, I’ve got way more experience picking up girls than guys, but women are usually batting their eyelashes and asking when I’m free by now, and he’s...not.

I’m confused. He totally checked me out a second ago, right?

He did. I know he did. I’m not imagining that. And I’m not imagining the playful tone in his voice either. But he’s still going to walk away?

It's on the tip of my tongue to correct this guy, to tell him he does need me to learn his way around so I can keep this dialogue going, but he's got me off my game. His words suggest he's turned off, yet his tone suggests curiosity, and I'm not sure how to handle that. I'm used to a solid green light, and this guy is more like yellow. We may not have stoplights in this town, but I do know yellow means caution, which means it's probably safer to back off.

That's ok though. I can work with caution.

"Suit yourself, neighbor. See you around." I nod goodbye and continue walking toward the bar, a move that usually leaves them wanting more. Only I don't feel his eyes on my back as I leave.

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Chapter one

Maddox

The rhythmic beeping from the backhoe is more distracting than I anticipated.

Uncle Rick warned me to expect noise, though when I made arrangements to spend the summer here, I thought I'd be out exploring during the day and using the quiet nights to write my thesis. What I hadn't counted on is how June in the mountains isn't the same as June on the coast, so mornings and evenings get pretty cool. Cold even. That means no exploring until the afternoon sun warms the air, which in turn means schoolwork has to get done in the mornings if I want to get outside at all.

I look at all my notes, spread over the desk in front of me. I can't make much sense of them right now, not in any meaningful way, so I jot down the primary points of my thesis, adding bullets about which supporting information fits best under each section. It's the most that can be accomplished with this racket, but by the time lunch rolls around a few hours later, a plan is taking shape.

After a quick sandwich, I grab my hiking gear and head out to the car Rick left me, thinking to explore a trail that leads to a little cave in the foothills above town. But when I get to my car, I see it's blocked in by the trailer the workers' used to transport the backhoe. Dammit .

The machine seems to be sitting still off to the side and somewhat behind the house. I make my way toward it, gripping the straps of my backpack to keep it in place as I navigate the jumbled ground.

Rounding the corner of the giant contraption I run into a wall of muscle, eerily reminiscent of the one I encountered last night. This time there's nothing covering it, and I get a very up close and personal glimpse of just how smooth and sculpted it is. It's a view I'm both thrilled and disappointed to see, confirming that this guy is going to be just as much of a distraction as I sensed he would.

"We've got to stop running into each other this way." A deep, silky voice washes over me. Yes, I'm aware silky is a strange way to explain a man's voice, and no, I don't want to change my description. I actually feel the words slide over me, same as I did mere hours ago, teasing goosebumps to the surface of my skin.

I take a breath and try to focus on the words, not the playful tone they're spoken in, or the mouth speaking them. This one is dangerous. Between his voice, his leanly muscled frame and a face that's so perfectly constructed it's borderline angelic, he could have me eating out of his hand if I'm not careful, and I don't have time for such a diversion. I need to ignore this guy, even if he's got the prettiest face I've ever seen.

"You've got to start paying attention to where you're going." My tone isn't as abrasive as I intend, so I cross my arms in front of my chest for good measure.

He smiles, amused. "This one's all on you, handsome. What are you doing wandering around my construction site?"

"Your site?" I take a half step back .

"Yeah, mine . That surprises you?" The corner of his lip rises playfully.

"Kind of. I figured you for a bartender or something, not someone who gets up early for work."

"How do you know I was up early for work?" He's toying with me, and it's making

my nerves buzz. Plus, his sexy little grin is downright sinful, making it nearly impossible not to return. But there's no doubt in my mind that would be bad, so I double down on my effort to appear unaffected.

"Can't miss the racket you're making out here." I gesture to the massive yellow vehicle.

"Well, if you knew I was out here making noise why didn't you come say hi?" His blue eyes twinkle.

"Why would I assume it's you making noise?" I purse my lips, trying to keep my eyes on his rather than wandering over his chest.

"I'm the only guy in town with this machinery." I know he's referring to the backhoe, but he's leaving another implication unspoken, which has me taking notice of the broad shoulders just below eye level. Gaze lowering, I find myself admiring the V that disappears beneath his low-slung jeans. He has the body of a man, all angles and hard planes, with a mischievous demeanor that suggests he knows how to have a good time. I hate that I'm curious, especially knowing what sort of a good time he likely got up to with the bachelorette party last night.

"I guess it's a good thing I don't know you then. I'd hate to distract you from doing actual work." I placate him with a brazen smirk.

"And here I thought you were stalking me." He leans against the giant beast as his eyes roam over me.

"I think you'd like that, but I just need you to move the trailer for your machinery." I jerk my thumb toward the trailer. "It's blocking me in."

"Blocking you in? Wait, you're Rick's nephew?" His brows disappear under the sun-

kissed blond hair that's a tad too long without being sloppy.

Hair that looks really soft.

"Yup." I'm enjoying his obvious surprise when a male voice rounds the backhoe and interrupts.

"I grabbed you a burger for lunch, cousin, extra pickles..." The dark-haired man pauses when he sees me. "Uh, hi. You're the dude Cade bumped into last night. You follow him here or something? Should I be worried?"

I shoot a questioning look toward the man who's run me over twice now. "Oh my God, you actually have people who stalk you."

The guy is hot, but no wonder his ego is inflated. A grin teases the corner of his lip, which makes my stomach flutter a little, dammit.

"I wasn't looking for him. And we didn't actually meet," I correct the dark-haired man. "Your friend here ran me over but never told me his name."

"You didn't tell me yours either." The shirtless one stuffs his hands in his pockets, drawing my gaze to his perfect abs.

"Looked like you already made a dozen new friends, no need to add my name to the mix." I dismiss him with an eye roll. "You wouldn't have remembered it anyway."

"I'd remember," he says softly, the hint of a smile still on his lips.

I find that hard to believe given its abundantly clear obnoxious flirt is this guy's permanent setting.

“You remember the names of all your new friends?” I raise my brows.

“They weren’t my friends, just people passing through town.” His eyes meet mine through the wisps of hair falling around his face. I know he’s trouble, but the flutter in my stomach is making the case I should ignore that fact.

“And you were showing them around?” I borrow his term from last night.

“Just being hospitable.” He manages to look bashful and mischievous all at once. He’s really too beautiful for his own good.

“Of course you were.” I have a pretty good idea of what he’s referring to when he says hospitable, and while part of me wants to be offended, my libido is intrigued.

“Offer still stands.” He interrupts my wayward thoughts, and as I focus back on Cade, I’m vaguely aware of the other guy drifting away, so it’s just us.

“What offer?” I squint.

“Showing you around.” He holds my gaze, waiting.

“I can find my own way. I just need you to move the trailer.”

“Yeah.” He ducks his head and rubs the back of his neck. “That’s not as easy as it sounds.”

“Why not?” I frown.

“I need a special hitch for that trailer.” He jerks his head towards it. “The truck with said hitch is on another job site right now.”

“You’re saying I’m trapped here? Did you not see the car when you pulled up this morning?” I clutch the straps of my bag, so I’m not tempted to ball my hands into fists.

“I saw it.” He nods in affirmation. “But I didn’t think you were supposed to get here until next week. Figured no one was around to drive it yet, so I sent the truck to another site.”

“How can the only truck capable of moving that trailer not be attached to it?” I grunt.

“That truck has to move several trailers around to different sites. I can’t leave it parked immobile all day when I need it for other projects. ”

“Great,” I mutter under my breath. “How long?” I can feel my anger rising, which is a good thing because it distracts me from the butterflies. I really don’t need to be experiencing those all summer.

“Today at least. Tell you what, take mine.” He fishes in his pockets for some keys and holds them out to me.

“You’re giving me your car?” I feel my jaw hanging open.

“Truck. You okay to drive one? It’s a lot bigger than what your uncle left for you.” His blue eyes drift between the Subaru wagon he’s currently blocking in, and the massive pickup parked in the street. At first, I think he’s making another lewd joke, like he did with the machinery comment, but when I look at him, keys extended, I realize there’s no pun intended. He’s just double-checking I’m good to drive such a large vehicle.

I want to be offended, but I look every bit the part of California surfer I am, and we don’t drive things this big, so I can’t blame him for the question. Still...is this really

happening?

“You’re willing to give me your truck? You don’t even know my name, why would you give me a vehicle?” My words are skeptical, yet I find myself holding a pair of keys as I say them.

“We blocked you in. Seems fair.” The sunlight glints over his broad shoulders as he shrugs.

“I’m a total stranger to you.”

“Cade.” He extends his hand.

I hesitate, knowing this is a bad idea, but it’d be rude to decline. The second my hand touches his, a spark of electricity zings up my arm, and I tighten my grip to keep my knees from buckling.

Since when does a handshake make me weak in the knees?

“Maddox.” I say a little thank you that my voice is steadier than my legs, noting the way his forearm flexes as he shakes my hand, which draws my eyes up his arm and over his firm chest. It’s just as smooth as his face.

“Sexy. Now we aren’t strangers anymore.” He smiles in a way that suggests we were never going to be strangers.

I drop his hand before the contact scalds me. “Are you trying to make me feel better about taking your truck? What if I wreck it?”

“It’s insured.”

“What if I have plans to leave town?”

“Looks like you’re going hiking.” He gestures towards my backpack. “And I’ve got plenty of people I can grab a ride from if needed. Plus, there’s the town bus. I’ll manage.”

“Do you do this for everyone who passes through town?” I draw my brows together.

“No. But you’re not passing through.” He stuffs his hands in his pockets again.

“I am though.”

“You sure about that?” He studies me. “Rick seemed to think you’d be here awhile. At least the summer.”

“That’s still passing through.”

“Stay here all summer, you’re practically a local. Locals take care of each other.” He grins as he leans a hip against the backhoe.

“Giving me your truck still seems excessive.” I chew on the inside of my cheek and force my gaze toward the road where it’s parked.

“Take it or don’t, up to you. But it’s the only way you’re going on your hike today. Unless you want me to take you.” He smiles coyly.

“Do you ever stop flirting?” I change the subject.

“This isn’t flirting, this is being hospitable .” He winks, drawing attention to his impossibly blue eyes.

“Is there a difference with you?” I squint at him .

“Not really.” He laughs, stomach rippling as it contracts, and starts walking down the drive. “Come on, Solo. Let’s get you set up in my truck so you can do your hike.”

“Solo?” I trail behind him, keeping a safe distance between us.

“Yeah, you know, since you insist on doing everything yourself.” He glances over his shoulder, eyebrow cocked.

“Oh. I thought you were making some sort of Star Wars reference.”

“I’d like to think I’m more original than nicknaming someone after a movie character,” he says as he turns his head forward.

“What if I don’t want to be called Solo?”

“Invite me on your hike and I’ll have to find something else to call you.” He smirks conspiratorially.

“Don’t you have work to do?” I ask, exasperated.

“Nothing that can’t be done Monday.”

“You’re incorrigible,” I mumble.

“True.” He opens the door so I can climb in.

I admit I’m enjoying this little banter we have going, but I really don’t need the distraction of a hot guy this summer, especially one I think is the welcoming committee for any man, or woman, who sets foot in the town. I need to get away from

him. I climb into the cab before he can help me with that.

“Your cousin doesn’t seem to like the idea of you leaving.” I nod toward the dark-haired guy who’s now frowning in our direction.

“Sorta forgot about him.” Cade chuckles, rubbing his neck as he peers up at me through wisps of blond hair. “He got here last week. I’m not used to having him around yet. Ah well, maybe I do need to get back to work. You know where you’re going?”

“Yes, Lupine Bluff.”

“That’s a good one, you’ll enjoy it. Watch out for the bats though.”

“Bats? ”

“Yeah, you know. Black rodents with wings.” His stomach contracts as he tries not to laugh.

“I know what bats are. There are bats in that cave?” I wrinkle my nose. I’m not a squeamish guy, but bats are... I give an involuntary little shudder.

“Sure. Their droppings are what turn the rocks all sorts of colors. Didn’t know that little fact, did ya?” He cast me another suggestive grin. “Sure you don’t want a guide?”

“I’m good. Bats aren’t active in the day.”

“Not usually, no. Have fun, Solo.” He winks and moves to shut the door.

“Wait! How do I get your keys back to you?”

“Keep ‘em.” He shrugs. “I’ll either still be here when you get back or I’ll see you tomorrow.”

“Tomorrow is Saturday. You work on Saturday?” I frown, worried I’m not going to get the two days of silence I’d been counting on.

“No, but it’s a small town. I’ll see you around one way or another.” He shuts me inside the cab of his truck with a lingering grin before turning to head back toward the construction site. I watch him go, admiring the view. He really is beautiful.

I am in so much trouble.

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Chapter two

Cade

His eyes follow me as I walk away this time, I can feel it. That makes me smile, but it also makes me a little frustrated, because I thought for sure instead of going back to work, I'd be going hiking with him. I'm still not quite sure why that is, seeing as how I saw him checking me out, and those lingering gazes suggest he liked what he saw.

In my experience, women don't say one thing with their eyes and another with their mouth, so the fact Maddox is doing just that is throwing me for a loop. Since I've never tried to pick up a guy before I don't know if this is a guy thing or a Maddox thing, which makes him a bit of a mystery. And a mystery could be fun.

Maddox. Madd . The name suits him. It's unique. Bold. Edgy without sounding arrogant, just like his personality. Fuck, I've never thought twice about a man's name and now I'm looking for a deeper meaning in his. What the hell? But seriously, our interactions have me intrigued. And not just physically.

Yeah, the guy is all sorts of gorgeous, an enticing mix of California sun and Colorado mountains. Sexy and rugged mixed into one, with a set of full lips that I've already imagined wrapped around my cock. But I'm equally curious about the man himself. Why is he here? Why does he seem to flirt back then retreat behind some imaginary wall? What will it take for him to drop his guard completely?

"Care to explain?" Deacon asks as I approach the bed of his truck where he's scarfing down his lunch.

“Explain what?” I hop onto the tailgate and rifle through the bag between us for my food.

He swallows his bite with an eye roll. “I know the long flowing hair might be confusing, but that was actually a dude.”

“So?” I feign ignorance to give myself a few more seconds to prepare for the coming conversation.

“So, you either need your eyesight checked, or you’ve got some explaining to do, Mr. I’m-Straight.” He chomps down another bite. “Which is it?”

“Dude’s hot as fuck.” I lift a casual shoulder, like the admission is no big deal, though I’m secretly bracing for Deacon’s reaction. I don’t think he’d hold my newly discovered bisexuality against me, but he might be a little offended I didn’t tell him about this development the first time I felt it.

“Is that your way of saying you’re into guys too? Since when?”

“Officially, since last night. Unofficially, around a year ago.”

“And I’m only learning this now because...” He trails off with a pointed look that suggests I better give him the truth. I would anyway, but since I’ve held this secret for so long, I understand the warning.

“Because this town isn’t exactly teeming with queer people, so there’s not a lot of opportunity to hook up with guys.”

“It’s not teeming with women either, but you don’t have trouble finding them to warm your bed.” Deacon gives me a pointed look as he sips his soda. “And you’ve never bragged to me about your exploits with men. ”

“I didn’t think you’d be interested. Plus, there haven’t been any.”

“Okay, first, I’m in my prime, so I’m interested in everything with humanoid forms over eighteen. And I do mean everything.” The pointed look he gives me suggests he’s not hung up on the gender thing either, which is news to me, but not something I’m going to hound him about since he’s giving me the same courtesy. “Second, when you say there haven’t been any, you mean any? As in this guy is the first you’ve made a move on?”

“Yep.”

“Why him?”

“I already told you, he’s hot as fuck.”

Deacon rolls his eyes. “The same thing could be said about lots of guys. But this is the first time you’ve acted on it. Why?”

I take another bite to stall while I choose my next words, swallowing thickly and clearing my throat. “You know what this town is like. How people talk.”

Though my hometown is a place most people only dream of living in, the reality is this life isn’t for everyone. Winters are harsh, there’s no fast-food chains, we have one school, and the movie theatre only has one screen. Gossip is about the only thing to do other than play in the mountains, and while it’s not meant maliciously, it means privacy is hard to come by. Incidentally, so are relationships. There’s not a ton of single people here, so vacationers looking for a good time are the best option for more intimate activities.

I don’t shy away from intimate activities, and I don’t care who knows I partake in them. But I also don’t want the town talking about what type of activities I get up to

before I've had the chance to figure out if they're a phase or a new development.

"You think they'd object to you picking up men the way you pick up women?" Deacon's question pulls me from my thoughts .

I lift both my shoulders. "I don't know. I do know that I don't see myself with a guy long-term, so if it's just a physical thing to have some fun there's no reason for the whole town to know about it."

Deacon snorts. "Pretty sure the whole town thinks you don't see yourself with anyone long-term, but you don't hide the fact you pick up women regularly."

I feel my face getting hot as I rub the back of my neck. "You got me there. I guess if I ever do settle down, I'd rather people say I had a way with the ladies than I'd bang any hole I could find."

"Your future wife will be so proud," Deacon deadpans.

"Shut up." I shove my cousin's shoulder. "You're here to enjoy the tourists who come through town, same as I've always done, don't deny it."

"Oh, I'm not denying it. I'm looking forward to it. Speaking of looking forward—" Deacon glances to where my truck is no longer parked "—I'm not sure that's what you were doing just now."

"What do you mean?"

"I'll rephrase. Have you ever loaned your truck to someone you didn't want to bang? You wouldn't even let me drive it this morning."

"I..."

Shit . Everyone in town knows my truck, and the sexy stranger driving it will get tongues wagging. Since my hospitality doesn't usually extend to loaning out my ride, unless I'm hoping for a ride of my own, those tongues are going to have a field day speculating about my motives.

Damn stupid hunk who makes me lose all common sense.

"I guess I'm coming out now?" I bite my lip and glance at Deacon.

"Sure looks that way, cousin." He shakes his head slowly back and forth. "You good with spilling your secret? "

"I'm not ashamed of it, if that's what you're asking. I'm not looking forward to an endless stream of questions about how or when I knew, but... Fuck it." I ball up my empty wrapper and toss it in the takeout bag. "It's not like I've ever given a shit what people say, and Maddox doesn't act like he's in the closet, so if I want a shot with him, I guess I can't be either."

"Pretty sure you had your shot and blew it." Deacon chuckles.

"How can you say that when he's driving my truck?" I jerk my thumb towards the direction he drove off in.

"Because you're not in it. Your truck is going to round the bases faster than you are." He smirks around a mouthful of his burger.

"Shut up."

"I thought scoring chicks was supposed to be easy in this town. Is the same not true for dudes?"

“Fuck off.” I lift a special finger in his direction. “Finish your lunch and help me get this ground level. I have a feeling if I can get this backhoe out of here tomorrow, I’ll be in his good graces.”

Three hours later, the ground still isn’t level, and Maddox still isn’t back, which has me a little worried because the hike he’s doing shouldn’t be taking this long. He seems like a capable guy—more than capable actually—but even experts have accidents, so you never know. Rather than worry aloud and give Deacon more ammo to goad me with, I bite my tongue and head into town with him for dinner.

We park on Main Street and start making our way to the bar, but as we pass our favorite outdoor patio, I notice a head of wavy hair sitting at a corner table. I tell Deacon I’ll meet up with him shortly and make my way over.

Madd’s head is buried in a book, an empty glass on the table in front of him. The light is starting to fade, and there’s a chill in the air, but he seems oblivious to it all. Until I pull out the chair next to him and he jumps, the scrape of the metal legs interrupting his concentration.

“Hey, Solo. You always do your reading in public or were you just avoiding the house?” I spin the chair so it’s facing away from the table and climb on backwards.

“Avoiding the house, it was a little noisy there. You probably want your truck,” he starts to dig in his pocket for the keys.

“If you give me back the keys, how will you get home?” I stop him.

“The bus?”

“Is that a question?” I cock an eyebrow.

He starts to answer then stops, and I know I've caught him.

"You don't know which bus to take." I can't stop the grin pulling at my lip. There are several ways to play this, and all of them will endear him to me.

"I can figure it out," he grumbles, looking around to get his bearings as a small shiver ripples through him.

"I'm sure you could. But fortunately, you don't have to. Not tonight, anyway," I shrug out of the flannel shirt I'm wearing over my t-shirt and hand it to him. He hesitates a moment before accepting.

"What's tonight?" He threads his arms through the sleeves and fastens the buttons one at a time with fingers that look both strong and gentle.

"I'd say you could join me for a drink—" I smile when he inhales sharply "—but I already know you won't. So, I'm here to tell you to keep the keys. Until next week anyway. I can't get the trailer moved until then."

"I can't keep your truck all weekend." His eyes grow dark, like the color of the sky during a thunderstorm, when he frowns.

"It's that or get a drink with me now and I'll drive you home later." I rest my forearms on the side of the chair and lean forward.

"Again with the hospitable stuff?" he grumbles despite the corner of his mouth creeping upward. My persistence is getting to him.

"Just giving you the options as I see them." Somehow, I manage to keep my eyes on his instead of dwelling on how good he looks wrapped in my clothes.

“Hey Cade, get you anything?” Lennon, the owner of this fine establishment, holds his fist out for me to bump.

“Hi Len, busy today?” I drag my eyes away from Maddox and turn to look at him as we bump fists. The smirk he’s wearing tells me he’s angling for the scoop. And so it begins . Not to be left out, Beckett picks that opportune moment to join us, looking at me with an expression which can only be defined as hero worship.

“The usual,” Lennon shrugs. “Who’s your friend?”

I’m tempted to be vague, to play with his head since he obviously doesn’t know my history with these two, and the little frown on his face is one I really want to interpret as jealousy. But I have a niggling feeling this is a guy who needs to be wooed, not toyed with, so I decide to go easy on him.

“This is Maddox, Rick Gerome’s nephew. Maddox, this is Lennon, the owner of Murphy's Pub, and Beck, the little brother I never had. You can call him Beck.”

Madd’s eyes bug out for a second before he regains his composure and shakes their hands. “It’s nice to meet you,” he says.

“You’re staying at Rick’s place over the summer?” Beck asks. “I always did like that house. It’s so imposing from the outside but so cozy inside,” he rambles, overexcited as always.

Maddox nods along almost absently. “That’s the perfect way to describe it.”

“Well, Cade and his dad do good work.” I dodge Lennon’s hand as he reaches out to slap my shoulder .

“You built the house?” Maddox gawks at me.

“My dad mostly, but I worked on it quite a bit, yeah,” I nod. “I guess this makes now a good time for you to apologize for wondering why on earth Rick would hire me to work on his latest project,” I bait him.

“I didn’t wonder that.”

Are his cheeks looking a little pink?

“Yeah, you did. But I probably would’ve too if someone blocked my car in on the first day,” I wink.

“Jeez, Cade.” Beck shakes his head at me. “Is that why he’s driving your truck?”

“How did you...?” Maddox starts.

“Small town,” Lennon answers before Maddox can finish.

“It was an honest mistake.” I look up at the guys to make my case. “I thought Maddox wasn’t getting here until next week, so I didn’t expect anyone to need the car.”

“I guess that makes sense, seeing as how it’s been sitting in the drive for so long,” Beck laughs.

“Thanks Beck. Up until just now Maddox couldn’t understand how I’d be stupid enough to block in the car.” I smirk at Madd while bumping my fist against Beckett’s in solidarity, appreciating the fact he’s always got my back. He had a tendency to idolize me as a kid since I’m several years older, but just like he’s always in my corner I’m always in his.

Glancing back to Maddox, I see our exchange register because he stops pressing his

lips together and lets them sort of fall open, an almost horrified look on his face. Fuck, I hate that having Beck defend me puts him on the spot, but seeing those plump lips slightly parted minimizes any guilt. I wonder if they're as soft as they look .

"I didn't. I mean I never..." Maddox starts to protest then abruptly shuts his mouth and looks down at the table with a heavy sigh .

"It's okay." I let him off the hook. "I should have double checked before parking the trailer."

Madd's face is so flushed it's almost the color of a cherry, visible even under the scruff on his jaw, but I kind of like it. I don't usually see men blush, probably because I don't get the chance to flirt with many, but now that I'm watching it, it's fucking adorable.

"So, can I get you guys anything?" Lennon asks again.

I cast my eyes toward Maddox, who's still averting his gaze. "How 'bout just the check?"

"You got it." Lennon turns to head toward the bar, Beck trailing after him. Thank God. Though neither of them mean any harm, they interact with a lot of people here in the restaurant, and I don't need them chatting to the whole town about my conversation with Maddox.

"So, what do you say, Solo? Are you coming for a drink or are you headed home?"

"Uh..." He gnaws his lip, looking toward the mountains in the distance. I don't know if that's to avoid looking at me, or because they really are stunning, and he's lost in the view. The introspective look on his face doesn't betray what he's thinking.

Damn, I want to cup his chin and force him to look at me so he knows I want him to come, but I suspect I've already pushed the boundaries by giving him my shirt, and I need to give him space to come around.

So, I stand up and toss a few bills on the table. If I'm short, Beck will just add it to my tab, and I'll settle it at the end of the month like I always do.

"I'll be at The Underground if you change your mind, gorgeous. See you around."

** *

Despite being in a basement, The Underground is pretty spacious, with high ceilings and a half-moon bar in the middle of the room. It is dark, there aren't any windows or anything, but I kind of like it that way.

The Underground draws a good mix of tourists and locals. There aren't any places specifically for one or the other, but there are a few places the tourists don't really know about, so if you aren't in the mood for small talk with a stranger you can go to one of those.

Every once in a while, I hit those up, but mostly I go wherever I can find some familiar and new faces. On a given day that usually makes The Underground my preferred spot, especially with Deacon in town, because he's looking for a good time. But tonight, I'm not as into it as I usually am. I'm too distracted wondering how long it will take for the pink to fade from Madd's face, and whether he'll surprise me by showing up.

I spot Deacon at the bar, slowly sipping his beer as he watches the crowd. I know he's hoping to see the bachelorette party one more time before they leave tomorrow, but chances are they won't be in until later, if they make it at all. They were pretty hammered last night.

“Find your truck?” He slides the extra beer he ordered toward me.

“Sorta.” I take a sip. “I told him to keep it through the weekend though, since I can’t move the trailer before then.”

He nods.

Dex, the bartender and owner of the joint, makes his way over to us. I have no idea if Dex is his first name, last name or a nickname, even though he’s lived here nearly a decade. He’s only ever referred to himself as Dex. He’s probably the friendliest guy in town, but he’s also pretty imposing, so no one presses him. “Who’s the guy?” he wipes the moisture from Deacon’s glass off the bar.

I knew this was coming, but sometimes it’d be nice to keep some things to myself for a change. To be anonymous.

I stare at Dex blankly.

He cocks an eyebrow.

“I’m just messing with you.” It’s pointless to play dumb, both about who he is and why he has my truck. Dex isn’t a gossip by nature, but he practically lives in this bar, so he’s surrounded by talk. I figure if I don’t make a big deal out of being into a guy, neither will he. He’s chill like that. Plus, if he knows my story, at least he can straighten out the folks who are speculating.

“He’s Rick Gerome’s hot as fuck nephew. I blocked the Subaru in the drive thinking he didn’t get here until next week, so I loaned him my truck.”

“Kinda risky, chasing your client’s nephew.” Dex grabs a lime and a knife from the counter.

I open my mouth to respond and stop short as his words sink in. It is kinda risky. Rick Gerome has given my family tons of business over the years, and he's a genuinely good guy I wouldn't want to piss off. But Maddox is legit the hottest guy I've ever seen, and something about the way he's both sexy and serious, feisty yet reserved, just speaks to me. I want to get to the bottom of those contradictions. I want to see him blush from my teasing then lose his composure and pin me down to make me stop. I want him.

I can't say that though. People will either interpret it as Maddox being my latest conquest or read into it and think I want something more than a quick romp. And while I'd be down to hook up while he's here—a summer fling if you will—broadcasting such an intention won't earn me any favor with Madd's uncle.

“Don't worry, I know he's out of my league,” I tell Dex. “But a guy can dream.” I sip my beer.

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Chapter three

Maddox

I spend the weekend locked in the house for two reasons. One, since the guys didn't work over the weekend, I had two whole days with no distractions to break my concentration, and that allowed me to make some good progress on my thesis. And two, I was too ashamed to even think about leaving.

I'm well aware how news travels in a small town, and a new person would probably draw attention no matter what. But said person driving Cade's truck after accusing the guy of being stupid enough to block his car? Well, let's just say I had little interest in facing him after that.

I felt like the biggest asshole in Katah Vista, Colorado.

Sure, I was kind of distant in the beginning because it's obvious he's trouble, and I didn't want to encourage him, but I never meant to be downright rude or condescending toward Cade.

I'm sensitive to coming off that way because of my family, too. Despite being wealthy, they aren't the type of people to look down on others. Well, with the exception of their thoughts on my career choice—hence my escape to the mountains to distance myself from their disappointment—I've been fortunate to be raised by people who taught me to treat everyone as equals. Even if others don't treat us the same way.

It's generally assumed that since we're wealthy, we're elitist and aloof. My appearance doesn't help considering I got my mother's luxurious hair and my father's athletic build, and since I'm on the quieter side—getting lost in my thoughts with too much ease—I play into the entitled stereotype without meaning to.

I try hard not to be an asshole, but sometimes despite my best efforts, that's how I come off. And now, my treatment of Cade the other day is eating at me. I feel like I owe him an apology or...something.

Taking him up on his offer to show me around could work, assuming he'd even want to after I judged him so poorly, but that idea still has me a little leery. I'm way too attracted to him to trust myself in his company for an extended length of time, especially knowing I wouldn't be the first or last person to cave to his charms. Normally, his lifestyle would be a massive turnoff—not that I object to casual hookups, I just don't view them as a way of life the way he appears to. Yet, even though I don't go for players, he tests that boundary for sure.

So, my amends can't be anything involving the two of us alone. Cleaning his truck might be a nice gesture, if this town had a car wash, or I knew where to find a hose and a bucket, which I don't. Buying something is always an option, though it requires leaving the house, and it would just make it look like I was buying his forgiveness. What else is there?

All I know about him is he works construction, drives a truck, likes to flirt, and would give you the shirt off his back—literally. I'm somewhat ashamed to say I wore said shirt all weekend because it held his woodsy scent. Still, not a single thing I've learned about him since comes close to telling me how to say sorry for acting like an entitled prick .

By the time Monday morning rolls around, I haven't come up with a solution, and for lack of any better ideas, I go with the old adage about the way to a man's heart being

through his stomach. Not that I want to get to his heart or anything, but maybe going through his belly is a good way to make an apology.

And not to toot my own horn, but I make a mean breakfast burrito.

I hear voices in the backyard just before eight, and spot Cade and Deacon walking the property. Cade seems to be pointing out different spots in the yard, maybe where they're supposed to dig, and Deacon is nodding along. I guess it's now or never.

The guys stop cold when they see me approach and give me a puzzled stare. Shit. This feels really awkward now. I blame the serving tray. I probably look like some frontier era househusband trekking across the lawn. Is that even a thing? Why didn't I just chuck the burritos in a bag? Oh, right. I made coffee too. Jesus, this is embarrassing.

"Um, hey. Thanks again for the truck and I'm sorry about the mix up with the trailer last week. I should've realized you had no way of knowing I'd need the car. So, I uh, made breakfast, if you want it." I hold out the tray of food.

Cade's blue eyes roam over me, curious and somewhat amused. His cousin is the first to recover. "Sweet, I only had cereal this morning." He comes to me and grabs one of the burritos and tears into the foil wrapper. "They're still warm. Breakfast on the job, hot coffee—" he takes a mug "—man, I love this town."

Cade creeps forward like I could pounce at him any second.

Why is his brow arched? Was it something I did? Said? Did I make this worse?

Belatedly, I realize making a guy breakfast is something you'd do when you have a crush, and with his ego there's no doubt that's what he's assuming. Fuck! Now I'm blushing. Hopefully, since it's pretty chilly, he'll attribute my color to the air and not

my mounting embarrassment.

“Thanks, Solo.” He takes the tray from my hands.

“Solo?” his cousin asks around bites.

“Maddox,” I correct.

“Deacon.” He lifts his coffee like he’s giving me a wave.

“Why don’t you head back inside?” Cade nods his head toward the door.

Wow. Okay. I feel like I’ve been dismissed from my own yard. Maybe I deserve that? But my feet won’t move. I was sort of hoping for him to acknowledge my apology, if not forgive me altogether. My words the other day must’ve been more insulting than I realized.

Cade sets the tray on the ground and turns back to face me. “You frozen in place or something?” His eyes roam over me and the wintery clothes I’m wearing.

“I...what?” I stutter.

“You’re shivering. You’re not used to the weather here. There’s no need to stay out here and turn blue while we eat. I’ll bring this back later.”

It occurs to me that I am shivering, which only adds to my humiliation since the two men are standing outside in little more than jeans and Henleys. I nod silently and turn back to the house, feeling like even more of an outsider than I did just a few minutes ago.

Back indoors, I straighten up the kitchen then fall onto the couch with my laptop with

the hope of getting some work done. But my mind won't move on from Cade's unreadable expression, and that worries me.

I'm not here to socialize or make friends. I'm here to work, ideally without the distractions I'd have if I was back home. For the most part I haven't had many, which is good. It's what I wanted. Although truth be told, the distractions Cade has provided have been some of the most interesting parts of my stay so far.

Even though talking to him sort of infuriates me, it makes me feel alive, too, since I have to consider my words carefully, and I'm enough of a nerd to enjoy the challenge. And yeah, the guy is cocky and somewhat arrogant, but he's also kind of considerate. Endearing. It's clear underneath the cocky exterior is a genuinely nice guy, and while I don't want to get too close to him, I don't want him to be a stranger either. After all, he's basically the only person I know here.

No one has been unfriendly, far from it, but no one has offered more than a few pleasantries either. While I thought quiet is what I wanted, after talking to Cade a few times I realized some conversation is nice. If the person I'm most likely to see every day thinks I'm an asshole, this could be a lonely summer. Last week, that sounded perfect.

But now...

A knock jogs me back to the present. I make my way to the back door, expecting to see the tray sitting on the stoop, but instead I find myself facing Cade, tray in hand.

"Okay to come in?" Dumbfounded, I step back to watch him carry the tray to the sink and set it down.

"Thanks for breakfast. That was a nice surprise," he says, giving me a slight up-nod.

“Sure. Yeah. I hope you liked it.” I shut the door and shove my hands in my pockets.

“I loved it. I don’t usually get a hot breakfast before work. You didn’t have to go through all that trouble over the truck.” He rests his hip against the counter.

He loved it? He didn’t seem so excited when I brought it out.

“It wasn’t trouble.” I lean against the door, trying to look as casual as he does. “And it wasn’t just about the truck. I mean, it mostly was, but I was kind of a jerk about the trailer.”

“You weren’t a jerk. I was an idiot.”

“I thought so at first, but I was wrong.” I lift my shoulder indifferently, caught between wanting to downplay my househusband moment from earlier and wanting to genuinely make up for thinking badly about him. “Sorry.”

“So, breakfast was like...an apology?” He sounds astonished.

My stomach does a little flip. I’m not sure if that’s because this conversation is making me nervous or because he’s staring at me kind of in awe.

“Yeah, I guess.” Against the door I feel like I’m on stage, so I move to the island and take a seat in one of the barstools.

“No one’s ever made me breakfast before.” He smiles, not one of those sexy ones but a genuine, appreciative smile. Then without warning he turns serious, “Wait, is that why you stayed hidden away all weekend? You thought you owed me an apology?”

“What?” How did he guess that?

“I know you didn’t leave the house or someone would’ve told me they saw my truck. Did you shut yourself in here because you thought I was upset?”

Awe. He’s definitely looking at me with awe now. Great . “No. I didn’t leave because I had work to do.”

“What kind of work?”

“Oh, um, my thesis,” I say distractedly, wondering if he’s asking to be polite or Rick never mentioned it when he told them I was coming for the summer.

“Like for a PhD?” He looks at me curiously.

“Yeah. ”

“Hmm. In what?” He leans back against the counter and crosses his ankles.

“Environmental Science.”

“And what do you do with that?”

“Study the effect of climate change and development, find alternative energy resources, monitor the health of soil and plants...” I trail off, looking to the yard outside.

“Your interests make you embarrassed?”

“What? No!” My gaze snaps back to his.

“Then why are you blushing?” A hint of a smile crosses his lips, telling me I’m busted.

I sigh heavily. “Most people think it sounds boring.”

“Is it boring to you?” he asks.

“No.”

“Then who cares what anyone else thinks.” His hair sways gently as he shakes his head.

“Easy for you to say,” I laugh without any humor. “Your family probably accepts your job and career. They probably aren’t asking you why you don’t work in an air conditioned, aseptic office wearing a suit and tie and having a catered lunch...” I inhale sharply as my eyes snap shut, as if I can pretend I didn’t just unload on Cade as long as I can’t see him.

I’m not even sure where my little rant came from. I’m not at odds with my family, we get along great, they just don’t follow why I’d choose to work outside the family business, especially in a job that doesn’t offer the same perks or pay they enjoy.

Cade chuckles. “Maybe not. But my family, hell the whole town, is wondering when I’m going to take an interest in running the family business instead of putting in my time and going to look for some fun. I know how it feels when there’s too much outside interest in your life.” He locks eyes with me and holds my gaze, his tone so casual it sounds like it’s no big deal to have people second guess your actions.

“The scrutiny doesn’t bother you?” I search his face for signs that this is one of his ‘hospitable’ moments to make me drop my guard.

“Nah. It’s my life, the only person I need to worry about is me.” He pushes off the counter and takes a step toward the island. “Besides, in a small town, people always have an opinion or think they know your business. You’ll never survive if you let that

get to you.”

“Huh.” I turn his words over in my mind.

What he says is kind of intriguing. Although my family doesn’t understand my choices, they’ve never disagreed with them. You could make the argument that they support them since they’re paying for my education. Yet for some reason, I always feel like I have to justify myself. I guess that’s why I clam up, maybe even blush, when talking about my degree. I wonder if people will respect my choice or think I’m wasting my time. But Cade’s right, it’s my time. I should spend it how I want and not worry about what anyone else thinks.

Wow, who knew the town flirt could offer such great insight?

“You seem surprised. Didn’t think we’d have that in common, did you?” He rests his forearms on the counter with a coy grin.

“Uh, no.” I feel my face heating up again.

“Why?”

“Because your conversation setting seems to be permanently on flirt. Or tease. I thought that was because you didn’t take things seriously, and I expected you to make light of my comments instead of relating to them.”

“I would never make fun of how you feel,” he says softly, studying his fingers.

“Not make fun of, make light of. You know, try to make me laugh or something.” I lace my fingers together on the counter to give my hands something to do. “But you bring up a good point. You genuinely don’t live your life for other people, and I respect it. Hell, I envy it and need to learn how to do that myself.”

Now it's his turn to be surprised.

"I'm not sure taking a page out of my book is the way to go." He shakes his head slowly back and forth. A warning.

"Why not?"

"I have no real goal except enjoying life. You probably don't want to mimic my logic, considering you're trying to earn a PhD."

"But I might enjoy my own goals more if I'm not worrying about what others think of them." I reason with a little shrug.

"Still not sure that's a good idea, Solo." He stares out the window, a distant look on his face. "The art of not giving a fuck doesn't really lead to success."

"I didn't say I wanted to stop caring, I just want to care less about what people think. Like you said, it's my life." I point to my chest. "If I'm happy with my choices nothing else matters."

"Yeah, okay," he relents. "Do what makes you happy. I better get back to work." He pushes himself off the counter and heads toward the back door.

"Wait," I bark, jogging to the table by the front door and returning with his keys. I hold them out to him, but instead of taking them he just stares blankly ahead.

"I can't get the trailer moved until this afternoon," he says flatly.

"I don't have anywhere to be today." I jiggle the keys.

He reluctantly takes them, his fingers brushing lightly over mine. I inhale sharply at

the electricity the contact elicits, holding my breath to see if he notices. If he does, he doesn't comment, just pockets the keys and turns toward the door.

“Thanks again for breakfast,” he says quietly as he steps outside.

Chapter four

Cade

D eacon and I make plans to meet at the town concert after work, leaving me just enough time to run home for a quick shower. That doesn't really make me feel clean, though. It only washes off what's on the surface. My insides are just as murky as they've been since this morning, when a beautiful guy had the nerve to tell me— me—he respects how I live my life.

What a joke. Even I know what a poor choice I am for a role model.

At twenty-five years old, most people are starting to make something of themselves. They've got some value beyond just swinging a hammer and showing tourists a good time. I don't. My priorities are to chase as much adrenaline as I can find on the mountain, fuck, and do just enough work to keep my dad's company running smoothly, in that order. If I didn't owe it to my dad not to screw up, my job wouldn't even make the top three.

I'm hardly setting a good example.

Up until today, that didn't bother me, but knowing Maddox—a friggin PhD candidate for God's sake—sees something of value in me gives me a sense of responsibility I've never felt before. The entire conversation with him has had my stomach in knots all day. I don't know if I'm feeling guilty that he sees value in me... value I'm not sure is there. Or maybe I'm just scared he'll figure out he's wrong about me. Either way, for the first time in—maybe ever—I'm questioning the way I live my life, and

wondering what I actually have to offer.

Blowing out a frustrated breath, I jump in my truck and head toward town. My thoughts don't usually run this deep, and it's stressing me out. I need to relax with good music, cold beer, and batshit crazy friends. The good thing is, they serve all of those in the park every Monday.

But first...food. Getting drunk on a work night is a bad idea.

I swing by the market on my way to town since they usually have an expansive selection of pre-made sandwiches that travel well. After grabbing one from the deli, I head for the snack aisle for some chips, nearly colliding with Maddox as I round the corner.

Again.

What the hell? I've lived here my whole life and never physically ran into anyone, but I've yet to go a single day in his vicinity without running into him. It's like he's a damn magnet. A beautiful, captivating magnet, drawing me toward him full-force.

Maddox lifts a tentative hand, drumming his fingers in the air. Not only is he smiling upon seeing me—for the first time ever—but it reaches his eyes. It's genuine. He's fucking happy to see me, forcing me to resist the urge to smile in return. Shit . “You didn't run me over this time.”

I try to keep my own expression blank—our earlier conversation and the subsequent soul searching still playing on a loop in my mind—though as per usual, my first instinct is to flirt. Maybe congratulate him on being able to find the market without my help or insist he'll need me for something else, but that would only invite more conversation. On the off chance that conversation could be as intense as the one we had earlier, the one that left him with the impression I'm a good role model, I

shouldn't encourage anything that will make him think I have redeeming qualities.

I don't.

Never have.

Never will.

There's only one thing I'm good for right now, and that's a good fucking time.

"Guess this old dog can still learn a few new tricks," I tease, finally finding my voice.

"Pretty soon I won't get in your way at all." I start to walk around him but he blocks my exit.

"You're not in my way." Maddox looks at me curiously, like I'm not making any sense.

Maybe to him I'm not, but I'm trying to be a good person here. You know, the whole turn-over-a-new-leaf thing. And I might not be currently in his way, but he's certainly in mine.

"Oh, good. Well, see you around then." I nod and try again to move past him, but he stays still.

"Something wrong? You're not usually so anxious to get going." Those inquisitive gray eyes search mine.

"Just running late." I should've realized by this point he's used to me prolonging our conversations instead of dodging them, so I probably seem like an ass, but that's better for him. Right?

“Yeah, okay. Later.” A deep line separates his brows.

He sounds disappointed. Is he disappointed? Do I want him to be? No—don’t go there.

Before my mind can fully spiral, Dex comes down the snack aisle and slaps me on the shoulder. I suddenly hate living in a town so small you can’t make it out of the store without seeing someone you know.

“Is this our new neighbor?” He checks Maddox out—not in a sexual way, more of a curious one—no doubt trying to discern what it is about the guy that has me intrigued. Suddenly, I’m regretting letting on how I’m also into dudes. “Yeah. Uh, Maddox, this is Dex.” I point to the big oaf. “He owns The Underground on Main Street. Dex this is Maddox, Rick Gerome’s nephew.”

“Welcome to Katah Vista.” Dex holds out his hand and he shakes it. “How do you like it so far?”

“Um, fine, I guess. I haven’t explored much, though.” His eyes cut to mine a fraction of a second before he focuses on Dex.

“Do you have anyone to show you around?” The quick glance Dex sends my way probably looks innocent enough, but I know him well enough to know he’s trying to put me on the spot. He may be a chill guy who doesn’t really gossip, but he’s not above a little ribbing between friends, especially when I’ve handed him something to goad me about on a silver platter. Fuck.

“I’m good. If I need any help, I can always ask Cade.” That makes me unreasonably happy, and it’s all I can do not to let my face show it.

“Ah good.” Dex’s expression remains neutral, although I hear the slight challenge in

his voice. “So, you’ll be joining us for the concert?”

Shit. I didn’t see that one coming.

Maddox looks at me, gray eyes cloudy with what almost looks like disappointment. Fuck! There’s no way around it, I’ll have to invite him, and if he comes, we’ll both be on a stage I’m not sure either of us want to be on just yet.

I muster the most genuine smile I can find, hoping he can’t see the anxiety beneath it. “There’s music in the park every Monday. You’re welcome to join.”

“Cade, you didn’t invite him already?” Dex arches his brows. Dammit! He knows I’m more predator than protector, and the more time I spend with my client’s nephew the harder it will be for me to behave. Stupid prick is enjoying this .

“I didn’t think I’d get off work in time,” I explain, more for Maddox than for Dex. “Do you want to come? I can grab another sandwich.” I hold mine up for his inspection.

Maddox looks from me to his half-fullcart to Dex, and suddenly I know exactly what he’s thinking. Rather than go home and work like he came here to do—like the good boy he is—he’s going to do the opposite of what he normally would. He’s trying to live for himself and not for other people.

God, I hope following my stupid example doesn’t take him too far off course.

“Yeah.” He gives me a subtle up-nod. “Sounds fun.”

“Great.” Dex’s grin is so wide it splits his face. “See you over there.” He heads for the register, leaving me alone with Maddox.

“You want to finish shopping?” I point to his cart, hoping the question will diffuse the awkward silence.

“I’m not sure the food will keep in the car.” He gnaws on his lip as he seems to mentally catalogue the contents of his cart. The somewhat nerdy act seems out of place on a man who looks more like a jock than a bookworm, but at the same time it’s pretty fucking cute.

Why is it cute?

I do my own scan of the items in the cart, not seeing anything that looks too perishable. “Remember it gets cool in the evenings, so everything you have will probably be fine. Why don’t you check out and I’ll get another sandwich?”

“Okay, yeah.” He nods almost methodically and turns the cart toward the registers.

“Anything you don’t like?” I ask.

“Not really,” he says over his shoulder.

“Okay. Meet you out front. ”

I find Maddox outside, groceries already stowed in his car, and lead him to my truck to drive into town. Even though it’s pretty big, with just the two of us it feels confining, like we’re sitting on top of each other, which makes my palms feel sweaty on the steering wheel. With a shaky inhale, I do my best to focus on driving.

“What band is playing?” I feel his eyes studying my profile.

“I don’t know.” I keep my baby blues glued to the road, where they should be. “I never really pay much attention to who’s playing since there’s a different band every

week, and none of them are exactly big names.”

“Are they local?”

“Some.” I stare straight ahead, deliberately averting my gaze from the thighs that fill out his jeans. “Some are from other parts of the state, but these are free concerts, so you don’t usually see a name you recognize. It’s really more of a giant community picnic with background music than an actual concert. Dex made it sound more impressive than it is.”

We pull to a stop along the road a few minutes later, and Maddox offers to take the food while I carry a blanket and a cooler. Hundreds of eyes follow us as we make our way toward my usual spot, left of center stage toward the back, where most of my friends are already seated. To Maddox they probably seem innocent, a curious glance to check out the new guy, but I’m well aware what’s designed to come off as casual interest is much more than that.

People are watching for confirmation the rumors about me are true. A flirty smile. A hand that lingers too long as I guide him through the crowd. I honestly don’t care if they want to be in the know, but it’s not fair to Maddox that he be the topic of their conversation simply because of my actions, so I’m careful not to do anything that would fuel speculation. Plus, I really am trying to behave .

As I spread out the blanket, my back to Maddox, I shoot a warning glare at my friends. While they’re more subtle about their curiosity, it’s clear to me they’re a little surprised to see me with a guy, even though Deacon and Dex undoubtedly gave them the heads up. I’m sure they’re dying to ask questions, which I’ll answer, just not tonight.

Once the blanket is set and we take our seats—a respectable foot of distance between us—I gesture to the rest of the group.

“Deacon, you know.” I point to my cousin. “Then Dex.” He raises a drink in salute.

“How did the two of you meet?” Maddox doesn’t miss a beat and I can’t help the smile that creeps up at his curiosity.

“Dex showed up here one day about ten years ago. He’s a few years older and was already out of high school, but my friends and I kept running into him on the mountain when we’d skip class, and in exchange for showing him where to ride he’d let us hang out at the bar until the big crowds came in around nine or ten.”

“How old were you?” His eyes seem to narrow as he does the math.

“Fifteen. He didn’t serve us or anything, but he might’ve pretended not to notice when we’d sneak a beer. Mostly, we just played pool and hung out somewhere other than our houses.”

Maddox nods along but doesn’t press further.

“Next, is Ryder.” I point to the average-sized guy sitting next to Dex as the band starts playing. “He lives here but he’s on the circuit, so he travels a bunch during the winter.”

“Circuit?” He leans in to speak so I can hear him over the music, but I barely register his voice over the sweet scent of orange mixed with pine that lingers on his skin.

Why does he have to smell so good?

“Yeah, he’s a snowboard racer.”

“You mean like going around the poles?” His head tilts curiously to the side.

“More like speeding down a narrow track.” I exhale to keep his scent away from me. “Blake used to be on the circuit,” I point to the tall and lean guy next to Ryder, “but he blew his knee and only skis for fun now. And mountain bikes. He works at the resort on the mountain.” I leave out how he works as a masseuse and likes to brag about all the hot women he gets paid to touch.

“Last, there’s Finn and his wife, Ally.” He follows my arm to the couple sitting to his right. “Finn works up on the mountain, and Ally has a store on Main Street. They moved here a few years back when he took over operations at the resort.”

“You manage the whole mountain?” Maddox’s wide eyes register shock. Finn is sorta young for such a big role.

“For now.” He offers a weak smile.

“The family who own the resort are selling it, so we’re expecting big changes. Any word on the new buyer?” I sit up straight so I can see Finn over Maddox’s head.

“Nothing confirmed, but I saw Carter Quinn here the other day.”

“Whoa.” Ryder whistles. “Dude’s a legend.”

“Was . Blew his knee a few years after I blew mine.” Blake sips on his beer. “You thinking he might be the new buyer?” He looks at Finn.

“Family’s got money.” Finn nods absently.

“At least he has the right background.” Ryder elbows Blake. “Guy who’s raced for a living couldn’t totally screw things up.”

“Guy with too much of daddy’s money can always screw things up.” Finn shakes his

head in warning.

I feel rather than see Maddox tense beside me, but when I cut my glance in his direction nothing looks amiss. Unless you count the pinched brow, which to me looks like he's reading into Finn's comment, and not in a good way, so I decide to give him some background.

"We've lived through new owners before. Some have money but no experience and let things go to shit, others throw a bunch of money toward the wrong improvements. You never know what you're gonna get," I say as I pass him a sandwich.

"No more work talk," Ally says in her mom tone. She isn't one, but she keeps us in line like she is. "Ideas for Pedal—go!"

The guys shout ideas as Maddox leans closer than I'd prefer so only I can hear his question.

"What's Pedal?" His husky almost-whisper has the hairs on my neck perking up the way they do when sensual fingers travel along my body, and it's everything I can do not to shiver.

That's inconvenient.

"Every year there's a bike race to benefit a local charity." I prop my arms on my raised knees to keep them from brushing against his and bringing on the goosebumps.

"But they're talking about costumes. Don't racers have to wear a uniform, or a bib?" He frowns.

"If it were an actual race yeah, but this is one of those things where people pledge amounts based on distance. If you do five laps, you'll generate less than if you do ten

laps, that sort of thing. You do as many laps as you can during the timeframe. And you can do it in teams. We usually all form a team, and since Ally has a boutique in town she likes to dress us all up to fit the theme we're going with."

Fun fact about Katah Vista, everything is done in costume. Parades, charity events, races, you name it, it's an excuse to wear something ridiculous. I'm not sure where the tradition comes from, but it's been around longer than I have and I was born here, so it's like part of the town's DNA.

"You do this race?" Maddox raises a thick brow in disbelief.

"The whole town does the race. Why do you think I wouldn't?"

"I can't picture you on a road bike." He frowns, a soft breeze sending a wayward strand of hair across his face, and I grasp my wrist in my hand to keep from reaching for it.

"You got me there." The grin I'm desperately trying to hold back makes a brief appearance—he's got me pegged already. "But this isn't a road race. Well, not entirely."

"Where do you race then, if not on the road?"

"All over." I gesture to the town around us. "Some of it's on paved road, some on gravel. And it's not a winner take all race, remember, so no one rides anything for speed. You ride for comfort. My bike has a nice comfy banana seat."

That makes him snort.

"What's so funny over there?" Dex's booming voice interrupts.

“I was just describing my bike to Maddox.” I sip my beer.

“You tell him you need an extra-large seat so it can fit your giant cock?” Ryder snorts.

Madd’s face starts to turn pink as my friends take turns shoving Ryder and telling him not to be a dick, although truth be told, I’m surprised it took this long for someone to make it weird. At least Ryder’s version of seeking confirmation I’m into a dude was posed as a typical bro insult rather than an outright inquisition.

“Is that any kind of way to talk to our new neighbor?” I pluck a blade of grass and roll it between my fingers, effectively dismissing the comment so Maddox doesn’t overthink it. I get the feeling that big brain of his would get stuck on it otherwise.

Ryder has the decency to look ashamed. “Sorry,” he mumbles.

For good measure—and a somewhat lame attempt to spare Maddox further embarrassment by painting my friends as idiots—I tell Ryder, “It’s all good. Last time you poked fun at my seat you said I was overcompensating, so at least now we’re moving in the right direction.”

“If we’re done talking about your dick,” Ally starts, “we should add Maddox to our team this year. I was thinking of a Ted Lasso theme. You’d make a perfect Trent Crimm, if your hair were darker. Would you color it?” she holds her breath, waiting for Madd to respond.

“Who are you going to be then?” I ask to save him from Ally’s attention.

“Rebecca.” She holds out a lock of her reddish hair as if to say ‘duh.’

“Rebecca’s blonde”

“I’ll wear a wig.” Ally shrugs as I feel a slight tap on my arm. I turn to look at Maddox, trying not to notice he’s close enough that I can make out a few tiny freckles on his nose.

“What is Ted Lasso ?”

Thank God I register the hint of wariness in his eyes before the laugh escapes my throat, because I’m pretty sure he’s embarrassed by the fact he doesn’t know what we’re talking about. I cover my near miss with a little cough.

“It’s a TV show on Apple . It’s about an American football coach who goes to England to coach football over there, only it’s really soccer. Ally loves it. You’ve never heard of it?”

He gives a curt head shake.

“Ally roped us all into watching, and I have to give it to her, it’s actually a pretty decent show. I’ll help you find it,” I offer without thinking.

Shit, between working at his house, the bike race, and now showing him a popular TV series, I’m going to have way more contact with Maddox than I planned to when I left his house earlier today. But how do I change course now? He’s asking questions like he wants to learn more about me, my friends, the race... And Ally’s already designing his costume in her mind, I can see it. It’d make me a huge dick to try to keep my distance, even if I’m doing that for his benefit.

“Can you make me something to keep my coat from getting in the way when I pedal?” Ally’s question brings me back to the present.

“I’m sorry, what? ” My tone catches the attention of the rest of the group, who all zero in on our conversation.

“Rebecca’s a boss bitch. In one episode she’s wearing this long black coat with this killer pillbox hat, and I found the perfect replicas, but I don’t want the coat getting caught in the wheel.”

“You’ll roast in a long black coat.”

“It’s not wool,” she retorts like I’m supposed to know what that means. “I just need like a frame or something the coat can drape over so it doesn’t get stuck. Like a hoop skirt. Can you build me something like that?”

All inquiring eyes bore into me, but one pair just looks flat-out confused. Great . Keeping Maddox at a distance keeps getting harder, because I can tell he wants to know more, which means telling him something about myself I don’t share with many people. Hell, even my friends only know because Deacon broadcast it when he came for the summer a few years back.

“I have no idea,” I tell Ally honestly, ignoring the blatant curiosity pulsing off the man next to me. “I’m not sure what a hoop skirt is, and while I could build a frame around your bike, I don’t know how comfortable it would be for you to ride. I’m not sure you could get on and off around the frame, or even if I can make that frame detachable so it’s not permanently stuck to your bike.”

“If I have to buy a cheap bike you build a permanent frame on, I can do that. I’d probably be able to reuse it with other costumes.” Ally’s eyes are about ten times bigger than normal, and a quick glance at Madd tells me his are full of wonder. Great .

“Whoa, slow down, Al.” Finn sets his hand on his wife’s leg. “This is starting to sound like a lot of work, and I’m not sure Cade has that much time to commit. The race is in a month.”

Ally's face starts to fall, but seeing as she's Finn's wife, and a friend, I hate to disappoint her. "Tell you what," I offer. "Find me a bike to play with and I'll see what I can do. No promises though, so you better have a backup costume."

"Of course, no problem," Ally beams.

She so won't have a backup. And now Ally's given Maddox another thing about me he wants to get to the bottom of.

I'm trying damn hard to be good, but I've never been known for my restraint.

Fuck my life.

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Chapter five

Maddox

Getting out of the house last night was refreshing, and I had a good time meeting new people and talking about costumes for this bike race that's apparently a huge deal. Plus, it was nice to see Cade in a different setting, one where the air between us didn't feel so charged. I'm not sure what's changed and while I'm hoping it's just an off day, something about it makes me feel like I've done something. Something beyond the scope of accusing him of being a dick and blocking in my car.

That's what I'm trying to convince myself of anyway, since I don't want to admit the alternative..

I missed the flirty atmosphere between us.

That's a dangerous statement, but a true one. It would seem I actually like, or at the very least am amused by, his playful banter, and that side of Cade was entirely absent at the concert. He didn't flirt. Not once. Not even a double entendre. Nor were there any of his godawful attempts at goading me by calling me Solo.

Instead, he was polite, reserved, and nothing but a pure gentleman. And I don't know what to make of that, because it's so unlike the guy who plowed into me when we first met. I miss that guy. The one so keen on plowing into anything with legs...

I want him to look at my legs.

Maybe I'm not being fair. I barely know him, so I'm not sure I'm in a position to judge if he's not acting like himself. But ever since he brought the breakfast tray back, he's seemed distant, not at all like the playboy I know he is.

Oh damn! That's what it is! I made breakfast, which he took as a signal that I want something with him. He did say no one had cooked for him before, so he must be reading into it. I know he's not the relationship type, and he probably assumes I am, so he must be worried I want more than he can give. Christ, that's embarrassing. And so far from reality it's laughable.

Yes, I find him attractive, and yes, I do kind of enjoy when he flirts because it's a nice change from the serious, pointed conversations I'm used to having with my family and my professors. But that doesn't mean I want to claim him as mine. It just means I find him entertaining. And maybe I like looking at him, because he's easily the most attractive man I've ever seen.

Okay that's a lie.

The man is hot. Scorching even. He's all hard angles and planes, but his skin looks smooth and his hair soft, and for as long as I can remember the combination of masculinity with a hint of femininity has been my weakness. So yes, I appreciate the view, but that doesn't mean I want an up close and personal look.

I just want things to go back to normal, or my impression of it, where he's playful and fun, and gives me a mental break by making me smile or laugh, or even internally cringe at his relentless flirting. Only he hasn't been here in two days...

The quiet I like. It's good for my work. It's the silence I'm starting to resent. Time to get out of the house.

I make the quick drive to the trailhead for Jasper Falls. It's another moderate hike,

since I'm still acclimating to the altitude, but I'm interested in it because of the water. It's one of the alternative energy sources I've been exploring, so any hike leading to water is time well spent in my book.

The trail itself is mild, because the trailhead sits at a higher elevation than the town, so there isn't a steep grade to reach the falls. But it is rocky and uneven, which forces me to look down where I'm stepping instead of at the trees lining the path.

After about forty-five minutes, the trail spits me out at the upper rim of a secluded waterfall. By the angle of the overlook, the water appears to be coming straight out of the rock, cascading down the cliffs into a little tide pool before it makes a steep drop to the bottom.

Having grown up near the water, I can easily sit for hours just watching it. Waves crashing, rivers flowing, there's a peacefulness to it, but there's a lot of power, too. I find it fascinating. And calming.

The falls are the result of melting snow, and this past winter must have seen a lot of it because this is no little trickle. I take a few pictures then find a spot on a nearby bench to have a snack and listen to the water hitting the ground below.

The reverberation gives me ideas about how to use it for energy, and I let my mind drift to different things I might be able to power with it. But after a while, I forget about work and just enjoy listening to music that only the outdoors can play.

It's different here than along the coast. There's a constant, relentless echo of water falling as opposed to the rhythmic crashing of waves. Though the air is thicker, the breeze carries no trace of sound.

I could get used to this .

Unlike the rest of my family, I feel more at home outside than in. It's one of the reasons I didn't want to go into the family business, and why I'm pursuing a career that, I hope, will help me protect places like this.

I'm not sure how long I sit, lost to the sound of the falls, before I realize the sun has moved past my bench. That's my signal to get moving. I want to be back to my car long before dark.

The descent is easy enough until I get to the rockiest portion, where the ground is extremely uneven. I have to pick my way around to find solid footing, and by going slow I'm able to do so. But despite my caution, a rock that at first feels stable, wobbles when I put my full weight on it, sending me crashing to the ground. The momentary discomfort of landing on my butt is nothing compared to the stabbing pain that shoots up my ankle.

Taking a deep breath, I probe the area that already seems to be swelling, wincing when I hit the source of the injury. It's painful but tolerable, so it shouldn't prevent me from getting down the trail. I do have a first aid kit with an Ace bandage in my pack, so I tenderly wrap my foot and put it back in my shoe. It's a tight fit, though it will have to do because the terrain is too rough to make it down the trail in my sock. I get up and take a few tentative steps.

It's uncomfortable but manageable as long as I go slow, and since there are tons of trees around it's not too difficult to find a branch I can use as a walking stick to make things easier. That's the good news. The bad news is, I still have about a half mile to go, and my progress is the opposite of efficient. I'll be lucky to make it to the car before the light disappears.

I shuffle rather than walk, making very little ground. At dusk, I can just barely make

out the parking lot by the trailhead, though I still have a big descent with several switchbacks before I'm finally down. My ankle is starting to throb from the exertion, and I'm debating whether it'd be better to hop the rest of the way when I spot a familiar figure heading my way.

"What happened?" Cade jogs toward me, his normally smooth face lined with concern.

"What are you doing here?" I inhale sharply.

"I saw your car, figured I'd make sure you got back okay since we're losing sun."

"You saw my car? What are you doing here?" I ask, still baffled.

"I went for a bike ride after work, further down the valley. I was on the way back and saw your car. What happened?" He zeros in on my ankle and frowns.

"I rolled my ankle. It's fine."

"Doesn't look fine, you can barely put weight on it." He gestures to my walking stick.

"It's, yeah... It's sore, but it's hard to walk because of the terrain, not because it hurts. Besides, I'm almost down." I take a step forward but can't hold back the grunt that comes with it when a zing of discomfort shoots up my leg.

"Stop," Cade commands as he comes to a halt before me. "You can't walk. Come here, and I'll carry you." He spins so his back is to me.

"What? You can't carry me the rest of the way." I shake my head firmly.

"It's not that far and you're not that heavy." He gives me a pointed look .

“Heavier than you.” I stay put. As far as reasons go, I know that’s weak, but I can’t think of anything else to dissuade him from carrying me.

“We’ll be fine if you climb on my back, Solo. That’s the only way we’re getting down before it’s fully dark.” He points toward my foot to support his argument.

My shoulders sink as I realize he makes a good point. Plus, he called me Solo, and even though I hate that nickname, I kind of like the familiarity of it.

“Fine.” I wrap my arms around his neck and push off with my good foot and wrap my legs around his waist so he can hold them to secure my weight, which he does with a little grunt.

“See? I’m too heavy. You’re grunting.”

“I’m not grunting because you’re heavy,” he says with gritted teeth.

He takes a step forward as I do my best to hold still, a futile attempt to ignore the fact our position has my cock pressed against the top of his ass.

Do not get hard. Do not get hard. Do not get hard.

“Then why?” I push.

“Be quiet and let me concentrate. It’s getting dark and I need to watch the trail so I don’t take us both out.” He huffs out a ragged breath, conversation clearly over.

I can do nothing but hang on as we make our way back down, only hanging on means his back is creating way too much friction on my dick. My ankle may be throbbing, but it’s only one body part giving me trouble right now.

I plead to whoever might be listening that Cade's too focused on walking to notice. Just in case there's no divine help available, I flex my legs to put about an inch of space between us, so each step isn't squeezing my denim covered length. Too bad the strain of that position, and the electric buzz filling the void between us, has my heartbeat accelerating in my chest.

It's not the first time that's happened—our banter sometimes makes my heart race—but I always assumed that was because I needed to think quickly, which always gives me a little adrenaline. Right now, I'm not doing much thinking at all, yet that pesky organ is beating in double-time, and I'm starting to suspect it's because of the man himself, who's warm skin I feel through his thin shirt.

I know I'm attracted to Cade, but I'm attracted to lots of guys who don't make my heart race. Is this... Could I be starting to like him? God save me.

The thought isn't as unappealing as it would've been a few days ago, though.

We reach the parking lot as the last of the sun fades, leaving the sky a hazy purple. Cade sets me down gently next to the car so I can lean against it, though as I reach for my pack to retrieve my keys I realize mine is the only car here.

“Where's your truck?” I swing my head around, alarmed. Katah Vista is notoriously safe, but that doesn't mean there isn't any crime.

“Deacon took it. I told him to go on ahead while I waited to make sure you were okay.” He grabs my bag and fishes through it for my keys, opening the passenger door I'm only now realizing is right next to me.

Shit . First, he carries me down the trail, and now, he's driving me home? For someone who likes his independence, both are fucking embarrassing.

We make the drive in silence, and once we're back at the house, Cade insists on helping me hobble inside. We head straight to the couch where he gingerly removes first my shoe, then the bandage. Cupping my ankle with a gentle touch, he probes for the source of the pain.

"Sorry, Solo," he says when I wince. "I know this hurts but I need to see how bad it is before I give you anything for it. Can you handle me looking?"

"It doesn't hurt when you do that." I shake my head to emphasize the point. "I just wasn't expecting it."

I'm mostly telling the truth. The area is a little tender, but it was his touch that made me flinch, since it was accompanied by an electric current that shot straight to my cock.

I'm not sure he believes the pain is tolerable, though. Cade gives me a weak smile and turns back to my ankle, having me point and flex my toes as best I can. I'm not sure what that tells him, but he concludes the injury is probably just a sprain that will heal with rest. And after grabbing me some ibuprofen, he wraps my ankle again, 'to push the swelling out.'

"How did you learn to do all this?" I ask as he grabs some ice from the freezer.

"Everyone in this town knows how to do this." He grabs a dish towel to wrap around the bag of ice. "Guarantee every one of us has sprained or broken something, and most of us have done enough damage to require surgery."

"Have you?"

He sets my foot on a pillow and arranges the ice around it.

“Yep. Right knee. ACL.” He shows me a scar lining his kneecap. “Most everyone here has a scar just like this. Or four little circles around your kneecap. These days, I think they can fix it without having to open things up.”

I shudder at that. “Why does everyone have these scars? ”

He sits on the couch, just beyond my bandaged foot. “Having too much fun, pushing the limits,” he shrugs.

“What limits?”

“All of them,” he chuckles, the corner of his lip pulling up like he’s reliving some adventure. “How fast you can go downhill... What’s the biggest cliff you can jump off... What’s the craziest trick you can throw...”

“Everyone does this?” My brows shoot sky high. He nods. “Is there something in the water I should be aware of? I don’t want to be brainwashed into thinking I can do any of what you just said.”

I may look athletic, and I know the surfing and the hiking I do counts, but in my mind both are pretty low impact. Nothing like what he’s describing.

“No brainwashing. It just comes naturally the longer you stay here.” He says it so matter-of-factly I think he believes it.

“I don’t get it.” I sink back into the cushions.

“This is the ultimate backyard.” He waves his hand, I assume to encompass the land around us. “Name an activity and you can find it here. Live here and you get better and better at those activities because you can enjoy them all the time, so much so you start looking for even more challenging things to do. More ways to push your limits.”

I'm fascinated by this... by him. Terrified, but fascinated. The only boundaries I've ever tested are mental, pushing myself to understand the complexities of the environment, the science that gives the planet life, and how we might benefit from that without damaging things in the process. Even with surfing, there's a mental component to choosing your wave that appeals to me. Here it sounds like people test their physical limits, to the breaking point, if I understand correctly. On the one hand, I get it, pushing your limits helps you grow. On the other, what he does sounds extreme .

“Let me get this straight, you deliberately try to do things you know might lead to permanent damage, just to see if you can do them? And most everyone in this town lives the same way?”

“Yep.” He smiles proudly.

“So, if I want to stay in one piece I shouldn't stay here too long?” I mean that to be a joke, but his smile fades as if I've hit a sore spot.

“You said it, Solo.” He exhales deeply.

Chapter six

Cade

Damn, he's got me all mixed up.

Maddox is a beautiful man, and yeah, I want him, the same as I've always wanted beautiful people. But no other person has given me a reason to wonder if there's more to life, more to me, than just having a good time. That's why I felt compelled to stop and check on him when I saw his car sitting all alone by the trailhead. I thought doing that would make me a good guy.

Thank God he brings out that urge in me, or he might still be out there trying to make his way back. Although, the relief I felt after finding him was short lived, since carrying him down the trail was pure torture.

Having his body pressed against mine felt right in all the wrong ways. He was injured, hurting, and I was trying not to get a hard on.

He thinks I was grunting because he's heavy? I was grunting because I liked the feel of his legs wrapped around me, his groin brushing against my back with each step. He liked it too. The way his thighs flexed with the effort of trying to hold his body away from mine gave that away, which only made it harder to keep my own reaction at bay. So, that grunt had nothing to do with his weight, and everything to do with lust.

He has no idea of the effect he has on me. How could he, when I don't understand it

myself? There's just something about those dark, intense eyes and those plump, pink lips I can't get enough of. I see them even when he's not around, and when he is, I find it hard to leave. Prolonging my time with him won't do either of us any good, but that doesn't stop me from wanting to. Doesn't stop me from wondering what it'd be like to be with him.

A man.

Would it be rough and urgent, or gentle and sweet, seeing as how a certain amount of prep has to be part of the equation? And would he like to be touched the same way I do, or would he have different preferences? What would his stubble feel like against my cheek? The hair on his legs. Would he be tighter than a woman? What's it like to be filled while having your cock stroked? Are the orgasms the same, or better?

Fuck, these questions are getting me riled.

I should get out of here. Put some distance between us since my feelings are so jumbled. But what kind of asshole leaves an injured guy alone. Though it's only an ankle sprain, he still shouldn't be putting weight on it. That means either someone has to be around to help, or he needs crutches.

I have crutches at my place. They're handy to keep around, because in this town someone always needs a pair. But I'll be damned if I'm going to leave him to go get them. I should, but I won't, because with the crutches there's no reason for me to stay. And I want to.

Sooner or later, when I don't have an excuse to help out, or the summer ends, he'll be out of reach. When that happens, I'll have to let him go. So, I'll worry about the crutches tomorrow, because tonight I'm going to take what I can get. What can I say? I'm a selfish bastard. A selfish bastard sitting so close to where his ankle is propped on the couch, his toes are nearly touching my forearm. Long toes, that are masculine

looking even though they're a little puffy.

"You hungry?" I jump off the couch. "You probably need to eat something, right?"

"Probably." He sighs. "You must be hungry too. There should be a frozen pizza in there," he calls after me as I make my way to the kitchen.

I find the pizza and preheat the oven, but instead of going back to the other room I find myself poking around the kitchen, looking for something else to do.

I'm an asshole. I'm being totally selfish. Madd's the type of person who's proud of his independence, and I'm forcing him to rely on me. I'm taking pleasure in it. I like how he needed my help to get off the trail, and how he needed me to bandage him up and needs me now to cook him dinner. I like that he'll need my help to move around, at least for tonight. And I really like how those gorgeous gray eyes are looking at me with respect and appreciation.

I'm not used to people looking at me that way. Sometimes Ally does, like when I said I'd help her with her bike, but that's only because I said I'd do her a favor. Most everyone else who looks at me does it with lust in their eyes.

For years, I enjoyed the hell out of those looks. I'd see them and my dick would twitch, knowing it was about to have some fun. It didn't matter that the one and only thing tourists saw in me was someone to play with during their vacay since I saw the same thing in them.

Truth be told, I considered myself lucky, because I thought those lusty glances were the best way a person could look at you. The raw need in a heated stare has made me feel alive more times than I care to admit. At least it did until the first time Maddox looked at me with respect, and damn if that didn't make those looks of desire feel kind of empty.

I never thought I'd say something so mature , but there it is. It just doesn't have the same effect that it used to.

The other night I saw a woman across the room watching me, and nothing happened. My dick didn't even twitch. She was hot, exactly the type of woman I'd usually consider an easy lay, and I didn't want any part of it. I feigned food poisoning and left early, wondering what was wrong with me.

It makes sense now, because a few minutes ago, when Madd looked at me like I was his hero, I felt something. Not a twitch exactly, but something . I liked it. My dick liked it. I kind of want to feel it again, which is why I'm hiding in the kitchen, cooking boxed pizza like a good little boy. A selfish, bastard, but a good little boy... with pizza.

“Did you find it?” Maddox calls.

“Yeah,” I reply as I open the fridge, looking for something to use as an excuse for hiding out in here. Lettuce. Some vegetables. Perfect. “I thought I'd make a salad to go with it. Sound good?”

“Sounds great,” he answers.

I get busy chopping things up, which keeps my mind off my weird feelings and my unexplainable dick twitches— sort of. It's a mindless task, but the fact I'm doing it at all feels strange because I've never made a meal for a man before. Or a woman for that matter. I've never wanted to.

When everything's ready, I make him a plate and carry it into the living room. I get him set up with the food on his lap, then take my seat on the couch. I'm still aware of how close we are, but at least the meal is a distraction .

“Thanks for cooking,” Maddox says when he’s done, reaching toward the coffee table with his plate. “I didn’t realize how hungry I was.”

I take it from him, so he doesn’t have to reach too far. “Tell me if you need something. I don’t want you to move any more than you have to, okay?”

“I’m not helpless.” There’s an almost defensive tone to his voice.

“Never said you were.”

“It doesn’t even hurt that bad. It’s more uncomfortable than painful. I can probably walk on it.”

“Probably,” I agree, since he’d be in a lot more pain if he’d done significant damage. “But why would you if you don’t have to? Might as well use me for whatever you need since I’m here.”

“You can’t help with what I need.” He braces his hands on the couch like he’s going to push off it, but I stop him with a palm to the chest.

“Seriously, Madd. Whatever it is, let me help.”

“Madd?” He arches a thick brow, causing me to realize my mistake.

“I uh...” I rub the back of my neck uncomfortably. “I’ve sort of been calling you that in my head, since you usually seem to be mad at me. Or annoyed.”

He fights the lip that wants to curl upward. “Well, I guess it’s better than Solo. But seriously—” he pushes off again “—you can’t help with this.”

“What are you doing?” I pop off the couch, arms splayed in case I need to catch him.

“Taking a piss.”

Well fuck, he’s got me there.

Once standing, Maddox rests his bad foot on the ground for balance and hops forward with the good one in a limp that’s so awkward it’s painful to watch. My arms, acting on autopilot, reach out to help, only he does it again, hopping just out of reach.

Is he making progress?

Sorta.

Is it pretty?

Hell no.

“Sure you don’t want help?” I trail behind him, arms at the ready.

“Pretty sure I can hold my own dick.”

“That’s not—” Is he offering? Wait, no. I’m supposed to be behaving. “I meant do you want to lean on me for balance.”

“I know what you meant. But you’re not obnoxiously flirting and it’s weirding me out, so I had to get you back on track.”

My brows pull together in a silent question before I realize he can’t see that with me trailing behind him. “I thought you hated my flirting?”

“I did, when I thought you just wanted another meaningless notch on your bedpost.”

I'll probably regret this, but I have this nagging feeling I'll regret lying to the guy even more. "That is all I wanted."

Madd stops limping and looks at me over his shoulder. "Wanted . Past tense."

"You think I don't want that anymore?"

"I don't know. But if you do, I'm pretty sure it wouldn't be meaningless." Maddox shuts himself in the bathroom, leaving me to wonder if it's better or worse that he didn't tell me it'll never happen.

** *

The room is dimly lit when I wake up, a still image of Ted Lasso on the TV screen. Blinking my mind awake, I recall watching nearly the entire first season, Madd's foot propped on a pillow in my lap, before sleep claimed us.

My back is stiff from sleeping upright, and I stretch as slowly as possible, so I don't disturb Maddox, who's foot is still resting on my lap. He looks younger in sleep—still ruggedly sexy—but also soft. For a brief second, I wish I was lying next to him so I could breathe in his orange scent, but I shake my head to clear the thought before it can stick. I should be thinking about how to keep my distance instead of wishing I could get closer, especially after staying the night.

I look around the room for a clock, curious about the time. The sun is up, but it's overcast, making it hard to guess the hour. I lean back as far as the couch will allow and fish my phone out of my pocket. Just after seven. I text Deacon to grab me some clothes and the crutches from my garage since there's no point going home before coming back here to work.

The weight in my lap shifts and I turn my attention to Maddox. His eyes flutter a few

times before he winces, telling me his ankle is still tender. I reach out my hand to calm him but think better of it and pull back since I'm not even sure he realizes I'm here, and my touch might startle him.

"Morning," I say softly. He stiffens, like he's surprised to hear my voice, then relaxes when his eyes connect with mine.

I like that far too much.

"How's the ankle?" I ask.

"Sore," he whispers hoarsely.

"Can I take a look?"

He nods .

I gently lift his leg and take off the bandage. The swelling has gone down some, and it's slightly discolored, but not the nasty shade of purple I was expecting. That's a good sign.

"Looks like we got some of the swelling down, and it's not bruised." I turn his ankle slowly to get a good look while trying not to notice how soft his skin feels beneath the dusting of coarse blonde hairs on his leg. "The sprain itself probably wasn't that bad but walking on it after didn't help. You should keep it up when you're sitting and put some ice on it throughout the day. Overall, though, it looks pretty good."

I re-wrap his foot, then stand and offer my hands. "Think you can put weight on it?"

He puts his hands in mine and pulls himself to stand, gritting his teeth somewhat when he adds a little weight to his bad foot.

“Looks like we should keep you off it another day or two,” I say more to myself than to him.

“How?”

“There’s an old pair of crutches at my place. I asked Deacon to see if he can find them before he comes over.” Taking a gamble that he’ll be more agreeable to a little help this morning, I wrap one of his arms around my shoulders and slide mine around his waist. “Bathroom or kitchen?”

“Kitchen.”

I help him hobble to one of the barstools before brewing a pot of coffee and scrambling some eggs, doing my best to stay facing the stove instead of ogling him while I cook.

“What’d you think of Ted Lasso?” I ask as I plate our breakfast.

“It’s deeper than I expected. Funny, but deep. Which character did Ally say I should be?” He takes a bite of eggs.

“Trent Crimm, the reporter with the wavy black hair.” Before I can add anything else there’s a knock at the door and I go let Deacon in .

“Wow, nice place.” He whistles, taking in the walnut cabinets and stainless-steel appliances in the chef’s kitchen. “Did you make breakfast again?” He looks at Maddox.

“You’re carrying crutches, why ?” I rest my hands on my hips.

He looks me up and down, seeing that my body is perfectly operational, then

Maddox's, seeing the wrapped ankle. "Oh, yeah. Sorry. Can't think straight when I smell food." He winks at me and slips further into the kitchen.

I dish him a plate and he digs in while I make sure the crutches are set for Madd's height.

"Ever use these before?" I ask him.

"Never. But they're pretty self-explanatory, right?"

"Yep, just try not to let them rub against your armpit when you use them, the skin can get irritated. Do a quick lap and let me make sure you're good." I pass him the crutches and help him to his feet.

Maddox does as I ask and makes his way around the kitchen, even testing a little weight since he has the crutches for balance. It's exactly what I would do, and I suddenly understand why my mom always used to mutter typical man every time I was told to take it easy and didn't.

"Great. You're all set. I'm gonna change and then get to work," I tell them both as I grab my clothes from the counter where Deacon dropped them.

When I'm done, I head back to the kitchen to find Deacon has cleaned up and is already outside. Maddox is still sitting at the breakfast bar, a distant look on his face that makes me want to blow off work. But after the whole it wouldn't be meaningless thing last night, I figure distance is best. At least until I know if that comment was supposed to be a warning or an invitation. And which I want it to be.

"Don't forget to ice." I remind him when his gaze meets mine .

"I won't." He nods.

I grab a piece of paper and pen from the kitchen desk and scribble my number on it. “If you need anything or if your ankle feels worse, call me.” I hold out the paper.

“I’m sure it’s fine. Thanks for everything.” His fingers graze mine as he takes it.

“I mean it, Maddox.” His head snaps up when I say his name, and I take a step closer, so he has to look up at me. “I want you to call me if you need anything.”

“Okay.” He blinks.

“I’ll check on you later. Take it easy today.” I rest my hand on his arm as I make my way past him, and immediately want to kick myself for it, because it was way too intimate and yet not intimate enough for the night we just shared.

Chapter seven

Maddox

Jesus . I know that little arm pat wasn't supposed to mean anything, but it sent shivers down my spine all the same, just like every other time Cade has touched me.

I know his intentions aren't sexual. That pat, or the way his fingers lightly traced over my ankle to check the sprain...those weren't sexual touches, but they were sensual, and they made my whole body tingle. I still don't know how I fell asleep with my nerves on edge like that, especially considering the way I baited him before ducking into the bathroom so I wouldn't see his response.

It wouldn't be meaningless.

I might as well have proposed marriage for all the innuendo behind my statement. And the really fucked up thing—that's not how I meant it at all. I know who Cade is. What he is. I know he's not the relationship type, and while I am, that's not what I want from him.

All I wanted to imply is how he's more than the playboy he lets everyone think he is. And since I see him, and I think he might see me, we've passed the point where we're meaningless to each other. That doesn't mean we're soulmates or some shit. Hell, I didn't even mean to suggest we're anything more than friends, but my choice of words was more loaded than I intended.

If I'm being honest though, I'm not sure my word choice was a complete accident. It

wasn't deliberate, but subconsciously, I think I might've meant it. After all, the guy came looking for me and stayed all night to take care of me, so my perception of Cade has started to shift. And given how incredible he is to look at, it's possible I've started to see him in a different light. Dare I say, I might've even developed a tiny bit of a crush.

Damn that guy for being decent underneath his sexy body.

Having a crush on a hot guy was not part of the plan for the summer, not only because I have a ton of work to do, but because I do relationships, not flings, and there's no future with a man who lives in a different state, much less one who's probably allergic to the word monogamous. I need to put Cade squarely back in the danger: outrageous flirt zone and stop thinking about what a decent person he is.

That'd be a whole lot easier to do if his voice wasn't drifting in through the open window.

"Seriously dude," Deacon grunts. "We've gone out every night since I got here, but in the last week you've only been out twice, and you went home early. What's up?"

"I've had shit to do," Cade says.

"Like what?"

"Working on Ally's bike..." he trails off.

"Pfft. Like you can't do that in a few hours," Deacon scoffs.

"I don't even know how to do it yet. I mean, what the fuck is a hoop skirt, and how do I put it on a bike?" He sounds so confused I can't help but smile.

“If you don’t know what a hoop skirt is, then you haven’t been spending time on Ally’s bike,” Deacon mutters.

“Well, do you know what it is?”

“Yeah, it’s a skirt shaped like an umbrella that starts at your waist and goes all the way down to your feet.”

“How the fuck do you know that?” Cade demands.

“I studied design.”

“Landscape,” Cade’s frustrated voice interjects.

“You still have to take other classes. And fashion was a good class to pick up girls. Or gay guys.”

“That explains it,” Cade mutters. I chuckle into my palm.

“So, why aren’t you coming out with me?” Deacon demands.

“You really need me to help you pick someone up?” Cade’s tone holds a challenge.

“Of course not,” Deacon scoffs. “But having a wingman doesn’t hurt, and I need a wingman this weekend, there’s supposed to be another bachelorette party coming through. Maybe they need entertainment.”

Bachelorette party? Entertainment? What can that mean?

“We’ll see,” Cade says.

“We’ll see? What is wrong with you? How are you not drooling over the idea of getting your dick wet?...Oh shit!” Deacon’s voice rises. “That’s it, isn’t it? You have somewhere you’re already getting it wet, don’t you?”

I don’t realize I’m holding my breath until I hear his response.

“My business cousin.” I don’t have to see Cade to know his jaw is locked tight.

“Since when? You’ve never kept your social life secret from me before. Is it Maddox? You spent the night last night. Tell me it’s Maddox,” he presses.

My breath gets trapped in my lungs as I strain to hear Cade’s response.

“Don’t talk about him like that,” Cade warns.

“Why not? I know you think he’s hot, don’t tell me you don’t want to hit that.”

“Of course, he’s hot. But he’s not like the trust fund people who roll through here. He’s got shit he wants to do with his life. He’s too good for the guys in this town,” Cade says with authority.

Too good for the guys here? I apologized for acting like an entitled prick, but does he still see me that way?

“Lots of people have stuff they want to do with their lives, that’s never stopped you hooking up with them before,” Deacon grumbles.

“Cause they wanted a hook up. Madd’s better than that. If he’s into a guy it’s for more than his dick.”

“He told you that?”

“He didn’t have to. And I’m gonna respect it.”

“Oh, I get it. He doesn’t want you, so you respect him,” Deacon goads him. Cade doesn’t take the bait.

“I respect that he doesn’t see me as just something to fuck,” he says evenly.

Huh, maybe he did take my meaningless comment correctly.

“Okay, cool. So, you respect Maddox, which means he’s not getting your dick wet, so you’re free to go on the hunt for that bachelorette party this weekend,” Deacon insists.

“Damn you’ve got a one-track mind. How the hell are you the one with a degree when you can’t even focus on work for, like, two minutes?” Cade complains.

“It’s a gift.”

Cade chuckles, a cross between annoyed and amused. “Well, ‘gift’ me a hand so we can finish this and break for lunch. I need you to take me to my truck so I have a way to get out of here later.”

“I can just take you home. ”

“I can’t leave without checking on Maddox and I don’t want to interfere with your prowling.”

“You’d rather play nurse than find someone who can deep throat? Who are you and what have you done with my cousin?” Deacon demands.

Either Cade answers too softly for me to hear, or he doesn’t have one to give.

“Come in,” I call when I hear a soft knock on the door. Cade pokes his head in, his searing blue eyes seeming to relax only after they’ve settled on me. I hate the way that makes my blood heat.

“How are you feeling?” He strides toward the couch where I’m lying down, ankle propped up.

“Okay.” I look at my puffy foot. “I still haven’t put much weight on it yet, but the swelling is down, and it doesn’t hurt as bad as it did.”

“Want me to take a look?”

His touch would only bring back the tingly feeling I shouldn’t pursue, but that doesn’t stop me wanting it. “Sure.”

I hold my breath as Cade’s fingers slide over my skin, so he doesn’t see how much his touch affects me. It’s so tender, and for a moment I imagine he’s touching me like that because he wants to, not because he thinks my injury means I need him to be gentle.

“It does look better. You’ve been icing it all day.”

“Yes.” I nod solemnly

“Good boy. ”

Whatever blood isn’t currently filling my ankle starts rushing to my dick, and I discreetly pinch my thigh in an effort to derail my arousal with pain.

How is it he can take care of me and turn me on at the same time? And since when do I want to be a good boy? Damn I'm in trouble.

"Thanks again for looking out for me," I rasp as I prop myself up to sitting. "I really appreciate everything you've done."

"You kicking me out?" He looks at me warily, almost like he's sad I'm giving him permission to go.

"No." I shake my head. "But I don't want you to feel like you have to take care of me."

"I don't mind taking care of you." His blue eyes look sincere, but I'm not sure I trust them.

"I'm sure you've got better things to do though."

"I don't." His brows draw together, like he's not sure what my point is.

"Yeah, but Deacon was expecting you--" I start to remind him, before I think better of it. I'm not supposed to know, and I cringe at my slip up when his head swivels to the window that's still cracked open.

"You heard us talking." It's not a question.

"I didn't mean to." I feel the heat rising in my cheeks.

He sits on the couch, right where he slept last night, and rests his elbows on his knees.

"I'm sorry." He hangs his head. "I don't feel like I have to take care of you, and I really don't mind doing it. I was just trying to make Deacon feel better about leaving him on his own. I didn't mean any offense by what I said."

“You didn’t offend me.”

“I was kind of crude.” I see him wince even though he’s still looking at the ground .

“Maybe, but I think you were trying to give me a compliment.” I smile so he knows I’m not offended.

“I was.” He casts a sideways glance at me, like he’s uncertain of his response.

“Why?”

“Why give you a compliment?” He looks confused.

“Why do you think I’m better than the guys in this town?” I hold my breath.

“Cause I am one,” he replies, like that makes all the sense in the world.

“Am I supposed to understand what you mean?” I frown.

“The fact that you don’t is exactly why you’re too good for us.” He shakes his head.

“I still don’t get it.” I lean forward, though I can’t get any closer with my leg propped between us.

He runs a hand through his hair, like he’s frustrated, or trying to decide what to say.

“Things are different here. People are different.”

“How?”

“Well, for starters there aren’t many, and even fewer of them are single.” He exhales as he sinks back into the cushions.

“Okay, so? I’m still confused by how that makes me too good for guys in this town.”

“Have you noticed the type of businesses in this town? They all cater to tourists. Every single one. People don’t come here for a career, they come here to enjoy the outdoors, but winters are harsh so not a lot of them stay. The ones who do... Let’s just say if you’re single you can choose from the same ten other single people, or you can sample the ones who pass through, and they don’t stay around to snuggle, if you catch my drift.”

“Are you saying you use tourists for sex?” I frown .

“It’s a...mutual arrangement.” I’d say he’s trying to justify his actions, only he’s still not looking at me.

“So, you and every other guy in town have casual sex with strangers who come through and that makes you guys not worthy of me?” I borrow his term from earlier.

“Bingo.” He picks at a speck of mud on his pants.

“Well, that’s stupid,” I blurt.

“What?” He turns to look at me and I swear his eyes are wider than normal. Blue .

“You think I haven’t had one-night-stands?” I balk. It’s not really my thing, but I’ve done it, and right now I feel like saying that might be important to him.

“Uh.” His eyes dart around the room as if he’s looking for an escape. “I think I’m afraid to answer that,” he deadpans. I can’t help but laugh, though when his mouth turns down in a guilty expression I take pity on him.

“Like you said, I’m not into one-night-stands. But just because I’m not doesn’t make

me better or worse than the people who like casual sex. Especially when those people are willing to give up a sure thing to help me.”

“Are you complimenting me now?” He cocks an eyebrow in my direction.

“I am.” It’s impossible not to grin when he looks at me like that.

“You think I’m a sure thing?” A sexy smirk tugs at his lips.

“That wasn’t the compliment.” I try to scowl but I can’t because his expression is making me laugh. “Only you could turn a genuine compliment into something dirty.”

“I’ll take that as a compliment too, since you admitted you like my flirting.” He winks just before he stands up. “And now that I know you appreciate my dirty humor as well, it’s time to go before I take it too far. Besides, as you heard earlier, I have no idea how to attach a hoop skirt to a bike, and the race isn’t too far off.”

“Why you?” I blurt.

“Huh?” He looks confused.

“Why are you building her bike?”

“Oh,” he says, and I swear he turns a little pink. “I do some welding.”

“That sounds interesting.”

“Yeah, I guess. Keeps me entertained.” He stuffs his hands in his pockets, which I assume means he’s just shared more about himself than he intended to, but now I’m even more curious.

“It’d be cool to see your work.” I hint.

“Yeah? Okay, maybe I’ll show you sometime.” He smiles, although this one is different. It’s not laced with innuendo, it’s genuine. Thoughtful.

He seems to rock forward, like he’s going to come closer, but instead he gives a little jerk of his head. “Have a good night, Maddox.” He turns toward the door.

“You too, Cade,” I call after him.

When the door clicks shut, I let out the breath I’d been holding for most of our conversation. I should be disappointed that Cade is every bit the playboy I suspected he was, but honestly, I’m not bothered. How can I be when he was so honest about it? When he let me see more of what’s beneath the surface?

And I didn’t hate what I saw.

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Chapter eight

Cade

I head straight to my garage when I get home, desperate for something to keep my mind off the things Maddox said earlier, and my little studio is the perfect outlet. There's something about the process of creating things that gets you outside of your own head, which is exactly what I need right now.

The hinges creak as I open the door, and I remind myself for the hundredth time to grease them before I leave, which I'll probably forget since the WD40 isn't in plain sight. Unlike all my welding supplies, which are everywhere.

Most people would look at my studio and see just clutter, but I see it as organized chaos. It's full of old tools, metal scraps, and discarded wood from our job sites, random things that I've collected to work with, and I pick them just as randomly when an idea strikes.

I rarely have a goal in mind when I start messing with materials. I just look at what's available and piece it together. Sometimes it turns out to be a sculpture, sometimes a piece of furniture, but I never really know what the finished product will look like until it's done.

Trying to build something specific for Ally will be a new challenge, but I'm kind of looking forward to it. First, I have to figure out this hoop skirt thing, so I google it and scroll through the different images that come up.

It really does look like a tall umbrella, and I now understand why she thinks this shape will keep her long coat from getting caught in the bike gears. But to make sure the fabric doesn't get caught I'd have to make this hoop frame just as long as the downward stroke of the pedal, which will make it difficult to even get on the bike. I have no idea how to do that just yet, but I have to admit the hoop skirt thing makes a certain amount of sense now that I understand what it is. Too bad I'm not sure I can make it look as well as I can make it function, which probably isn't what Maddox had in mind when he said he'd like to see my work.

And now my thoughts are back on Maddox...

Dammit. That's exactly what I was hoping to prevent by coming in here to work.

I'm still freaked out by the conversation we had at his house tonight. I had no idea he could overhear Deacon and me talking, and if there's any conversation I didn't want him privy to it was that one. I mean, not only did Deacon allude to my fondness for sex, he specifically called me out about wanting to have sex with Maddox, which yes, I did. Do. But I won't since he's not the meaningless fuck type.

Thank God Deacon didn't reveal I've never actually had sex with a guy—there's no way Madd wouldn't accuse me of trying to experiment on him if he knew—and yeah, since dudes are a new interest of mine of course my sexual curiosity is piqued, but not in an 'I wonder if I'm into guys' way. I'm definitely into them, I've just never encountered someone I wanted to pop my gay cherry with until Maddox.

Only now that I've hung out with him a bit and have a better sense of who he is, I don't even want sex. Or rather, I do, but not at the expense of his morals and goals and shit. That's what I was trying to say when I said he's too good for the guys in this town. Most of us don't aspire to be the relationship type, which Deacon unhelpfully pointed out.

I'm stunned Maddox wasn't pissed off about that. I'm even more shocked he doesn't seem to hold it against me.

Of all the things we could talk about, tourists using me for my dick was the last topic I thought we'd cover. It's like all he has to do is look at me intently and all my deepest thoughts pour out, and then he fucking compliments me for them, even when they reveal I'm nothing more than a good time.

That still has me all sorts of confused. Deacon all but confirmed I have a revolving door to my bedroom—what Madd so graciously referred to as casual sex—and he didn't show me the door. Hell, he basically dared me to flirt, which of course I did.

Who does that when casual sex isn't their thing? And why isn't it his thing? Did he have a bad experience with it? Is it some kind of moral or ethical choice? Or does he know something I don't, like maybe there's something better than casual sex. Like actually knowing someone, or—liking—they change the game.

Okay, now I've officially lost it. Casual sex has always worked for me and there's no need to question that now. I need to get my shit together and stop thinking about stuff I can't have.

I grab a pad of paper and a pencil and start doodling. After several false starts I hit on a design which sort of resembles an oversize birdcage covering the back half of the bike. If I could create an opening that swings on hinges, maybe there's a way Ally could open the frame and still climb on the bike. She'd have to fluff her coat thingy over the birdcage part as she climbs on, but in theory that would keep the material from hitting the gears. It's not exactly pretty, but it could work.

The problem is distributing the weight evenly, so the finished bike isn't off balance. Plus, I have to make sure the extra framework doesn't make the bike so heavy that Ally can't pedal it. This is not going to be an easy project, not only because I'm

winging it, but because I don't know if I can get the right materials to make it happen.

Ideally, I could use old bike parts, but it's not like those are in huge supply. I'll probably have to swing by the local shops to see if they have anything they can donate to the cause. It's too late to go scavenging now though, so I work on my sketch to help me pinpoint some of the materials I'll need and finally purge the gorgeous guy who's recently been consuming my thoughts from my mind.

A few days of rain kept us from getting much done at the Gerome place, which means I've successfully put some distance between me and Maddox. That hasn't stopped me from thinking about him and questioning why easy hookups suddenly don't sound so appealing, but I figure those questions are mostly harmless as long as I don't see the guy who inspires them.

Given that today looks beautiful, the issue of distance should be moot, but it's a Saturday, and per Madd's uncle we're not supposed to work on the weekend so he's got a reprieve from the commotion. So, I go for a morning ride to get outside and clear my head, pedaling one of my favorite trails that weaves through a giant field of wildflowers before dropping into the trees.

I've ridden it so many times I practically float over the terrain, which is oddly peaceful despite the fact that I'm moving at a pretty good clip. After wearing my body down, I shower and head into town for lunch and a quick beer, then hit up the bike shops to see if they have any more scraps I can pick up.

I strike out at the first shop but have some good luck at the second, scoring a few busted pieces off a frame made from carbon fiber. That's the ideal material, its durable but lightweight, and it's usually expensive as fuck, but since the bike it's on is beyond repair the tech lets me have it just to get it out of his way. I promise to

bring him a six-pack next time I swing by, a typical thank you for hooking someone up in this town, then start making my way back to the truck. But I have to pass Ally's store to get there, and she doesn't let me sneak by.

"What's that you've got?" she asks as she comes to stand in the doorway. I head up the walkway, holding out my find for her review.

"Well, Miss Ally, this here might be part of that bike you want me to build you," I tease her.

"Ooh!" She claps her hands together. "I knew you'd figure it out. How long until it's done?"

"Hold up." I put my hand up to stop her little celebration. "I'm still not sure I can get it to work, so don't get your heart set on that fancy costume."

"You'll figure it out, I know it," she insists, completely ignoring my warning as she turns to head back inside. "So, how's your costume coming along?"

"You tell me." I cross my arms and pin her with an expectant look.

"Why are you asking me?"

"Because I'm sure you've assigned everyone a role in your mind. And because I'm making your bike, so you can make my costume." I point at her and smirk.

"I thought you guys would all just order something online. AFC Richmond gear isn't hard to find."

"Where's the fun in that?" I goad her .

“Ugh, fine, I’ll get you a costume. Want to be Colin?” She sits up straight, eyes fucking twinkling with excitement. “He and Trent sort of have a moment in the show. Not a sexual moment, but a heartfelt one.”

“Colin? Aren’t I more Jamie Tarrt material?” I lean my hip on the counter, dismissing that heartfelt comment with what I hope is indifference.

“No...” She shakes her head, studying me with a critical eye. “Jamie doesn’t have a moment with Trent.”

“Why do I get the feeling you’re trying to create a couple’s costume where there’s no couple, on the show or in real life?” I give her a hard look.

“Why do I get the feeling you’re trying to pretend I don’t have eyes?”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“I saw how you looked at him at the concert. And the way he leaned into you to talk. Something’s up with you two.” She bites the corner of her lip and gives me a knowing grin.

“There’s nothing between us.” I shake my head firmly. “I’m one of about five people he knows here, nothing else.”

“I can see the appeal, obviously—he’s gorgeous—but I didn’t think you played for that team.” She goes on as if I didn’t say anything.

“Subtle.” I snort.

“I wasn’t going for subtle. I want to know why I didn’t know you were a switch hitter, because if I had, I’d have set you up with my brother.”

“Okay first, you’d never set me up with your brother because you know I don’t do relationships, and you wouldn’t do that to your brother. And second, you found out about three days after I did that I might possibly be into guys. Or a guy.”

Ally’s eyes double in size. “Are you having a bi-awakening?”

“What the fuck is that?”

“Only my favorite romance trope ever! It’s where a formerly straight guy falls head over heels for a super sexy stud and has deliciously dirty sex.”

“Whoa, slow your roll, Ally.” I hold up my hand like a stop sign. “I think Maddox is hot, but I’m far from head over heels, and I’m not trying to jump into his bed.” I leave out the part that I sort of want to.

“So, you didn’t spend the night at his place the other night?” she prods.

Damn Deacon and his loose tongue.

“I helped him out after he sprained an ankle, and I slept on the couch.” I ignore the unspoken plea for gossip, leaving out the part that Maddox slept on the couch too.

“And I bet you played nurse out of the goodness of your heart.” Ally lays her palm on her chest, mocking me. She knows me too well.

“Of course.” I deadpan without taking the bait. Beck is the only one who can successfully bait me. “When have I ever not helped a friend in need?”

“Touché.” Ally grins, because that’s actually true. “Speaking of, isn’t that your friend headed this way?” I turn as she gestures to the large window overlooking the sidewalk where Maddox is passing by. Shit. Any hope of him missing us is dashed

when Ally darts for the door.

"Hey, Maddox. Just the guy I wanted to see. Come here so we can talk about your costume." Ally beams at me over her shoulder.

Asshole. I love her, but also, asshole!

Maddox starts at the sound of his name, gray eyes softening when he recognizes Ally, and shuffles up the path to the door.

"Hey," He breathes when he steps inside and sees me for the first time in days, and I swear my breath hitches just a bit when I see his pensive gaze. Madd always looks deep in thought, and for some reason that gets me going.

"All good?" I tilt my head toward his leg since he seems to be walking just fine. Plus, those are the only words I can safely say in front of Ally.

"I think so. Better enough for a few errands, anyway." He shrugs sheepishly, like he should've got my okay before walking on it.

Fuck , that's cute.

I catch Ally watching our exchange too closely. "Good. Well, I'll leave you guys to it." I push off the counter and nod as I pass by him, almost making it to the door before Ally reaches out and grabs my arm, halting my getaway.

"No way. You have to help."

"Help with what?" I cringe, resisting the urge to yank my arm free.

"Picking costumes. I have a few options for both of you." She pushes Maddox and I

further into her shop.

I grit my teeth and head back to my spot at the counter, which gives me a clear view of Maddox taking in the shop. He wanders around, checking out the odd garment, oblivious to the wicked smile Ally's sporting as she pulls things from the racks.

"These pants with this top." Ally instructs as she hands Maddox a pair of skinny jeans and a t-shirt. "Dressing room is through there." She points to a little cubby with a curtain hanging in front of it, and he obediently takes the clothes and goes to change.

Once Madd is tucked inside Ally turns to me. "Your turn," she says brightly.

"On second thought, you can't possibly have anything for me in here," I balk. "This is a fashion store. I'll just order something online."

"You can't do that until we know what size you are." She shakes her head as she rifles through the racks, yanking a pair of twill shorts and a plain blue t-shirt off their hangers.

I hold them up with a frown. "These look a little short."

"Soccer players show a little thigh, don't they?" She gives me a once over, envisioning the final look.

I'm about to object again when Maddox comes out of the dressing room in a pair of skintight denim pants and a t-shirt that's just a hair bigger than painted on. It's not revealing in the least, but it hugs every muscle like it was made for him. I'm helpless to ignore how firm his pecs are under the shirt, and how round and plump his ass looks in those pants.

I take a deep breath and will my body not to react, though I'm pretty sure my jaw is

hanging open since my throat is suddenly dry.

“What do you think?” Ally turns to me with a triumphant grin.

It takes me a second to find my voice. “He’s missing the suit jacket,” I choke out.

“We’ll work on that. Your turn.” Ally pushes me toward the dressing room, giving me a much-needed excuse to make my exit. I offer Maddox an apologetic smile as I squeeze past him, and he gives me one back, which makes me feel a little better about this whole thing. Not good, but...better. Misery loves company and all that.

I pull the curtain closed and strip out of my clothes, trying not to focus on the woodsy orange scent that lingers on Maddox’s, or give in to the desire to press them to my face and inhale.

Where did that come from?

Shaking away the thought, I put on what Ally gave me. The shorts actually fit well in the waist, and while they ride a little high on the thigh, they aren’t obnoxious, though they’re a little snug on the ass. But the shirt might as well be made of that spandex shit girls wear for how tight it is. I have an overwhelming urge to strangle Ally as I look at myself in the mirror, and decide I’m done playing her little game. But before I can change back, she yells that I’m taking too long and demands I come out. Fuck it.

“Nice try, Ally, but there’s no way this will work. These shorts are gonna rip when I try to get on my bike, and no way I’m doing a race with my ass hanging out.”

Ally circles me, inspecting the shorts. “You’re not wearing these shorts, I just needed a baseline so I could find your size.” Her voice sounds deceptively innocent, giving me the distinct feeling I’m being played. Or paraded around for her amusement.

I chance a look at Maddox, expecting to see him fighting a laugh over this ridiculous outfit, but instead his eyes seem glued to my waist, where Ally's currently fussing with the shorts as if she's taking measurements. And instead of laughter I swear I see something like interest, or desire. It's the first time Madd's looked at me like he wants me, and even though I like how he hasn't looked at me that way before, I really like that he is now.

My pulse speeds up despite my attempt to take measured, even breaths.

I stand impossibly still while Ally scrutinizes my outfit, watching Madd's gaze linger briefly on my hips before traveling up my stomach and over my chest. I feel his stare skimming over me like he's touching me, tracing the planes of my skin. It makes me hot and tingly at the same time, like some overeager teenager with no restraint, and I fight the urge to shiver, fisting and releasing my hands in an attempt to keep my core still.

Holding my breath, I will my cock to stay limp, because there's no denying I like the way he's looking at me. A lot. And I really like the way his chest rises and falls as his gaze travels over my body, like he's imagining what it would feel like to touch me, same as I am him. And if I'm looking at him anywhere near how he's looking at me, I have a feeling we're on a collision course.

Shit. I have to get out of here.

"Can I take these off now?" I grumble, desperate to get away from Madd's gaze.

"Let Maddox go first. You can help me look at the website to pick the jersey you want," Ally says, effectively dismissing Maddox, who blushes profusely when I catch him raking his eyes over me one last time before closing himself behind the curtain.

Once he's out of sight I finally get a full breath. Holy shit that was intense. I've never

been so on edge just looking at someone, man or woman, or having them look at me, which is crazy since lots of women have looked at me before, and it never had this effect.

Given the way Ally's smirking at me, I guess I'm not the only one who felt the tension just now.

"I give it another day. Maybe two," Ally says softly.

"What?" I rest my hands on my hips.

"You know." She pins me with a look that says, don't bullshit me .

"Nope," I whisper, shaking my head. "No way. I'm not going there. He's a good guy."

"So?" She arches an eyebrow.

"So, I have no business getting involved with a good guy," I grit.

"That good guy wants you." Ally ignores the warning in my tone.

"If he does, it's because you paraded me around like a snack in front of him," I hiss.

"I don't think it is." Ally shakes her head, but before she can finish her thought Madd emerges from the dressing room .

He avoids eye contact as he makes his way to the counter, though his cheeks are still flushed. I offer a weak smile as I pass him and take my turn changing, getting into normal clothes as quickly as possible.

When I come back out, he's gone, which I'm both relieved and disappointed by. I toss the shorts to Ally and tell her I'll trade the bike for the costume, effectively ending all conversation.

Ally doesn't let me off that easily. "Good might be just what you need," she calls as I shut the door.

Chapter nine

Maddox

I 'm going to get whiplash trying to keep up with Cade's moods. One day he's flirty and mischievous, the next sweet and caring, the next virtually indifferent with an undertone of lust. I know that doesn't make sense, but that's Cade in a nutshell. Nothing he does makes any sort of sense to me.

And the worst part, instead of running away from that confusion the way I should, I find myself wanting to run to it. To figure it out.

As if I could.

I put my bags in the trunk and shut it just as Cade strolls into the parking lot, which makes my heartbeat accelerate. A quick glance down the aisle and I see his truck parked a few spaces away. Strange I didn't notice that until now, although admittedly I was a little distracted by the memory of his pecs outlined in the slightly too small t-shirt Ally put him in.

I've seen him without a shirt of course, which is a damn fine sight, but at the time I didn't take a moment to enjoy it because my guard was up. I saw a guy who knew he was hot, liked to flirt, and I assumed that was the extent of him. I judged him by how he looked and decided I didn't need to know any more, and didn't want his sights set on me .

But after getting to know him a bit, after learning some of who he is and realizing the

flirty playboy is only a part of the whole package, I'm not afraid of noticing how amazing his body is. I'm not afraid of what that might lead to. Nervous maybe, but not afraid. I'm actually a little curious about it.

Cade stops cold when he sees me, briefly, and I can't tell if the look on his face is one of relief or unease. But it's gone before I can decipher it, and he strolls slowly forward and meets me at my car.

"You survived your first costume fitting with Ally," he drawls, a hint of a smirk on his face.

I know this is Cade's way of talking without talking, because flirting is common ground for him, but I'll take it over the total lack of conversation in the store.

"That's a common occurrence?" I play along, smiling back.

"At least three or four times a year." His blonde hair sways gently as he nods.

"What can you possibly have to dress up for so often?"

"The bike race, Fourth of July, Halloween." He ticks off his fingers with a sly grin as he goes. "This town likes its costumes."

"I'm not sure if that's amusing or concerning." I worry my lip, taking in what looks like part of a bike dangling from his hand.

"A little of both, probably."

"And you dress up for all of them?" I search my brain for any memory of costumes during my past visits to see Uncle Rick and come up empty.

?Ally would have our heads if we didn't."

?What did you do before Ally?"

"Huh?" He cocks his head.

?You said she and her husband moved here not long ago. What did you do before you had a costume designer? "

?Probably wore the same costume for everything, I guess." The bike- ish thing he's holding floats up as he shrugs.

?That's part of her costume?" I gesture toward the bundle of metal in his hand.

?Maybe. I don't have it completely figured out yet. But the hoop skirt suggestion gave me some ideas, once I figured out what it was." He rubs the back of his neck, a gesture I'm becoming fond of even though I haven't decided if it's rooted in modesty or embarrassment.

?Can I see it?" I'm legitimately curious about what he's doing, but I also want to keep talking to him, since he's at least talking right now.

My request catches him off guard. I can see him debating what to say, and it makes me wonder if it's too personal. But that doesn't make any sense. He already told me he does some welding, and no one at the concert seemed surprised when Ally asked if he could build her bike. So why is he wavering?

?Yeah, sure." He finally exhales, and I let out the breath I didn't realize I'd been holding. "You can follow me."

We pull out of the lot, and I follow him to a neighborhood about five minutes out of

town. The houses are smaller here and feel homier than where my uncle's house is. That neighborhood is for vacationers, people who want space and quiet to relax, and this place has more of a community feel, with a park around the corner, and kids running everywhere.

We arrive at a cute little bungalow with a front porch spanning the length of the house, and a long drive leading to a garage in the back. Cade gets out of the truck and starts heading toward it. There's a regular door to the side of the garage doors, and he holds it open for me to walk inside.

There are high and low cabinets around the perimeter, with what looks like a butcher block counter covering the lower cabinets, although it's hard to tell under all the tools resting on it. There's also a massive table in the middle of the space, with several stools underneath it. I recognize the mask you wear when welding, and what I think is the welder itself, but nothing else looks familiar. It's just a random bunch of parts and pieces, although it does look like things are grouped together by size and shape.

In the corner closest to the garage door, it looks like there are several finished pieces. One resembles something like the tin man from Wizard of Oz, only rounder, because it's made with mostly gears and pipe and standing on a block of wood. It also looks like there's a bench of some kind. A bike frame with a cage-like thing on it is resting against the center table, and I'm guessing this must be his creation for Ally.

"It's, uh, kind of a mess." He clears a space at the table. "I don't have many people in here."

His statement makes my heart thump soundly in my chest, but I try to ignore it. He's obviously trying to excuse the chaos, not implying there's anything special about me being here.

"Shouldn't it be a mess?" I ask as I take in the clutter. "I mean, a clean workshop

would mean there wasn't much work, right?"

The corner of his mouth ticks up like he's fighting a smile. "True, but this isn't work. This is just messing around."

I wander over to the man made of gears and look to Cade for permission. He nods, and I pick it up, turning it over in my hands to see all of it. It's not overly large, a little over a foot tall, but it's heavy. Solid. There's one large gear for the torso and a smaller one for the head. Straight rods are used for the arms and legs, but they're put together at angles that suggest movement, like the little man is waving his arms as he strolls along, or maybe dancing. Even though there's no real expression coming from the gears it feels like this portly man is happy .

"You like it?" Cade asks.

"I do," I mutter, tilting it to look from another angle.

"Why?"

"He looks like he's enjoying life," I say without thinking, then immediately backtrack when my words register. "I mean, I know that sounds stupid, it's just a bunch of gears. But he looks sort of fat and happy." I shrug as if the comment was said offhand, though when I finally meet Cade's eyes, I find he's staring at me intently.

"What?" I brace for one of his indifferent replies, sure I've somehow offended him, but that's not what I get.

"This reminds me of my grandpa." He takes the sculpture from me and turns it over in his hands, studying it. "Fat and happy is a good way to describe him." Cade shakes his head, almost like he's confused. Or amused. I can't tell which. "He was a tinkerer, hence the gears, and the older he got the fatter he got, which he blamed on my

grandma's cooking. But he was always moving. Always smiling. He's the one who taught me how to weld."

"He sounds interesting."

"He is. He lived here until he started to have trouble breathing and had to move to a lower elevation... Left me this house and his workshop when he moved..." Cade trails off, looking around the room before his eyes come to rest on the sculpture in his hands, then me.

Suddenly, the air around us is so thick with emotion I can't breathe. The way Cade's looking at the sculpture—at me —reeks of an intensity I don't know how to interpret, and rather than try, I panic, grasping at the first thing that comes to mind.

"Show me the bike," I blurt.

His gaze lingers on me for a few seconds before he puts the fat man down and turns to the bike. "I was going for sort of a birdcage, like a frame that drapes over the back half of the bike, but it didn't leave much room for Ally to get on. I thought about a door that would swing open on hinges, but that could trap her on it."

He rubs his hand over the back of his neck. I'm starting to wonder if that's his way of working through what's on his mind as he speaks. It's cute.

He sighs heavily, looking at his work. "Right now, I've got the frame going from behind the seat and over just the back tire so she can drape her coat over it. That way she can get on and pedal like normal since it's behind her. I still think I need something for the side of the bike to keep it from getting caught in the gears."

"I think it looks good so far." I inspect the frame. "Like a bustle."

?A what?" He looks at me curiously.

?A bustle. It's a thing that makes it look like a woman's butt juts out behind her." I mime the silhouette of a bustle with my hand, but all I get is a curious and slightly intrigued look.

"You know, Cinderella," I prompt.

Still nothing.

"You don't have sisters, do you?"

He shakes his head.

I pull out my phone and google bustles, showing Cade the images that come up. He looks between those and the frame he's added to the bike and cracks a smile. "I guess it does kind of look like that. And now your little," he waves his hand behind his butt, "makes sense." He laughs.

?So, what's left then?" I gesture to the bike.

?Ah, I guess a few more supports for this bustle, but maybe lower so Ally's whole leg isn't caged in," he rubs the back of his neck again. "I won't really know until I get something on there."

?Can I watch? I mean, if you're going to do something now? "

?I'm not ready to put anything on the bike yet, but I can show you something else, if you just want to see how it works," he offers.

?Yeah," I grin.

"Ok, gimme a sec to see what I have to work with." He digs through different drawers, picking out some gears and what looks like pieces of thin metal pipe. One long piece he leaves straight, but the shorter ones he puts through some sort of press so they start to bend.

When he's got everything where he wants it, he grabs a stool and sits down as he places the mask on his head.

"Best not to come any closer." He warns as he gives his head a little jerk and the mask falls over his eyes. The movement is so casually sexy I kind of want him to lift the mask up so he has to do it again, but before I can embarrass myself with that request he turns on the welder, and it's hard to see anything else.

He positions two pieces of metal together and holds a third tiny sliver of metal above them. The welder seems to melt it, binding the separate pieces along the seam he's creating. He repeats the process over and over, attaching smaller curved pieces of metal to the one longer piece.

The garage heats up as he goes, but I don't notice the temperature because I'm so focused on his hands. They're covered with bulky gloves, but they're steady, moving almost delicately to avoid missing a spot or straying off course. He's absolutely still except for his hands, and I don't know if that's how it always is or if it's because he's working with small materials, but it makes me appreciate the concentration needed to create.

The process is slow, but not so slow that I can't see it come together. The smaller pieces sticking off the large straight rod sort of resemble leaves, and I'm guessing he intends to use the large gear as a flower .

When he raises his helmet, I'm almost disappointed, because I really want to see the finished product. Then I notice the spark in his eye, and I feel my heartbeat pick up.

"Want to try?" He holds the tools out.

"Me?" I point to my chest. "I'm not really good with tools. I don't want to mess up your flower."

"You won't mess it up, I'll help you."

He hands me a pair of gloves and an apron of sorts and adjusts a mask to fit my head. Then he guides me to the stool and stands behind me, placing the welder in my hand. I try to breathe normally with him pressed against my back, but there's no stopping my heartbeat from accelerating, which it seems to do every time he gets close.

"We're going to attach the stem to the back of this gear. The gear is our base metal, and this is our bond." He gives me a sliver of metal like what he was melting earlier. "We're going to bond the stem to the gear. Hold the bond metal where we're going to connect the two, and we'll melt that to join the two pieces together. Got it?"

I nod, and the mask drops down to cover my face. It wasn't intentional, but it makes him laugh. "Why do I get the feeling you're going to be a natural at this?" I catch his grin right before his own mask falls into place.

Cade turns the machine on and positions his hands over mine to help keep them steady. Together we move the bond metal to the parts we want to stick together. The heat coming off the welder makes the room stuffy, and it's kind of nerve wracking to see sparks flying around as we work, but welding is kind of a rush, and I'm sort of amped when I see that the two pieces we forged together do resemble a flower.

"Wow." I lift the front of the mask for a better look .

"Nice work." He admires our effort while I take off the gloves and flex my hands. "I've never made a flower before, but it turned out pretty well."

"What made you try it now?" I hold up the flower.

"You study plants and shit, right?" His tone is nonchalant, forcibly so, but that only gives the words more impact. And even though he's not exactly right about what I study, the fact he made the effort to choose something that would be personal to me is endearing.

So much so, I set the flower down as I choke out, "What do you usually make?"

"Whatever comes to mind." He takes his own mask and gloves off and goes to hang them on the far wall. "I just take what I have available and piece things together for fun. The bike is the first thing I've done with an end goal."

"So, this flower just came to you from looking at what was lying around the shop?" I marvel.

"Yeah." He shoves his hands in his pockets.

"I can't imagine looking at a bunch of different parts and putting them together to make something new," I compliment him.

"They don't always turn out this nice," he chuckles. "Half the stuff I throw out because it never turns into anything. But sometimes I get lucky and things fall into place."

"Like your grandpa sculpture?" I tease, realizing too late that sculpture triggers something serious in him since his expression turns thoughtful. Somber.

"Exactly like that," he says softly, almost distantly, except the look in his eyes is anything but distant. It's penetrating, seeming to look inside me instead of at me. I feel self-conscious under his gaze, but not because of its intensity. Because of its

uncertainty, like he doesn't totally understand what's happening, and doesn't know what to do about it.

I'm helpless to do anything but return his stare. I don't know what's happening either. I can't explain why I feel a connection to him, why his past doesn't scare me, or why he seems to open up to me in a way I don't think he does with others. So, we stand there, suspended in time, just watching each other. Waiting.

It's too late to pretend this hasn't turned into a moment, but I don't know what to do about it. So, I wait, until he finally takes a step. And another. And another. Until he's standing right in front of me, and I have to look up from my spot on the stool to see into his cloudy blue eyes.

"You know, you're the first person to see a happy guy in those gears." He lifts the mask off my head and sets it on the table.

"I am?" My heart is beating so loud I barely hear my own response. He's so close, towering over me. I almost feel like prey. But the look in his eyes isn't menacing. It's gentle.

"You see a lot of things other people miss, don't you?" he says, more to himself than to me.

"What do you mean?" My voice comes out raspy.

"Situations, people." He tucks a stray lock of hair behind my ear. "You see into them. Just don't be fooled by what you think you see in me. It's not real."

"What do you think I see?" I murmur, searching his murky gaze.

"Something that isn't there," he says softly. "I'm not as good as you want me to be."

"You want me to believe a man who's honest and fun, who looks out for the people around him, including a guy he just met, is bad?" I dare him to explain away his attributes .

"A guy who's only ever used people for sex is bad." The words are spoken without emotion, but the look on his face is sad. Almost regretful.

"That's not who you are." I shake my head.

"It is," he insists, fingering my hair again. "You just don't want to believe that about me."

"I believe using people for sex is something you've done. It doesn't mean that's all you are," I say softly.

"How can you be sure? You barely know me." He searches my eyes, looking for the lie, I think.

"I know enough," I whisper.

"Saying shit like that about me makes me want to believe it." He rests his forehead against mine. "It makes me want to kiss you, even though I shouldn't."

"I won't stop you." I breathe, because right now, even knowing it could backfire, there's nothing I want more.

Cade pulls back slightly and cups my face in his hands, brushing his thumbs over my cheeks. His blue eyes are filled with a mixture of wonder and lust so powerful it steals my breath, and in this moment, I know only his lips on mine will restore it.

But the kiss doesn't come.

Instead, he traces his thumb gently over my lower lip, back and forth, eyes locked on the gentle movement. Then he leans forward.

I close my eyes and sigh just as Cade's lips meets mine, soft and sweet and impossibly chaste for the man known as a playboy, yet utterly perfect.

His kiss is tender, almost reverent, like this is a dream he doesn't want to wake from, so he's careful not to move too quickly.

"Fuck you taste good," he mumbles against my mouth. "So sweet. So fucking soft."

The words are dirty and endearing at the same time, and hearing them makes me gasp. Cade takes advantage, flicking his tongue against my lip to coax mine out, brushing them together in a slow dance that makes my chest literally ache from the delicacy.

His strokes are light, the barest of friction, yet this is the most fulfilling kiss I've ever experienced.

I assumed Cade would be a good kisser, but I expected those kisses to be passionate. Hungry. Not slow and gentle, like he's savoring the contact. Savoring me .

Cade's mouth brushes affectionately over mine as his hands caress my cheeks, my jaw, my throat. His touch is sensual, patient, like he could spend hours doing nothing more than exploring my mouth, learning my taste.

I've never been kissed like this before. Never been made to feel cherished, like my touch is a precious gift, but that's exactly what Cade's doing to me right now, making me feel as though kissing me is the most profound sensation he's ever experienced.

It's profound for me too, so intense and intimate I can't contain the emotion building

inside me. I sigh, a throaty, lust-filled exhale that makes Cade freeze and pull back slowly.

His jaw is locked tight as his eyes roam over my face, lingering briefly on my lips before meeting my gaze, searching. Waiting. His breathing is shallow, like it's taking all his energy to stay in control, and while the gentle exploration we just shared was perfect on so many levels, it's no longer enough. I want more. I break our stare to look at his lips, and his restraint evaporates.

Cade hoists me off the stool and sets me on the table, putting my face level with his. He casts my apron aside and spreads my legs wide so he can step between them, pressing our bodies together as he crushes his mouth to mine. He moves urgently, hungrily, threading his fingers in my hair and tilting my head where he wants it so his tongue can slide against mine. This is the passion I expected from a man with his experience, and while I don't want to think about how he got that experience, I'm not complaining about its benefits.

Whereas our first kiss was sweet and tender, this kiss is carnal. Demanding. Lips and tongues and teeth clashing together furiously now that we've given into our desire. Both kisses are intense in their own way, but while Cade had me melting earlier, he now has me burning up.

His mouth clings to mine, his tongue stroking feverishly against my own, coaxing a moan from deep in my throat. He responds in kind, deepening the kiss.

I slide my hands up his arms, over his shoulders, into his hair, relishing the feel of the soft strands sliding through my fingers. I swear he growls under my touch, clutching my head in his hands and pulling me closer.

Heat explodes through my body, traveling from my mouth, past my chest, and settling between my legs. It's been several months since I felt the sweet ache of

desire, sensed the press of a man's erection against mine. I rock my hips forward to relieve the pressure building there and feel the extent of Cade's need. Flames shoot through me as I grind against his length, the friction causing me to moan against his mouth. I want more of that.

I rock forward again and...

Cade utters a strangled groan and steps back so our bodies are no longer pressed together, although he's still holding my head in his hands, forehead pressed to mine.

"Fuck, Madd," he pants. "I wasn't supposed to do that. You shouldn't have let me touch you."

"I wanted you to touch me." I heave, just as breathless. "I want you to keep touching me."

I feel his head shake slightly. "Don't say that to me. It's hard enough to resist you as is."

"Why resist?" I gasp.

"You know why." He traces his fingers along my cheeks.

"I don't." I shake my head.

"Yes, you do. Your first instinct about me was the right one." He drops his hands and takes a step back.

"What are you talking about?" I frown.

"You thought I was an outrageous flirt. Don't deny it," he adds when I start to shake

my head. "I know what you saw. It's what everyone sees. And you were right. Just because you see more than a flirt doesn't make me good for you. I fuck people for fun, nothing more. You deserve better."

"You didn't kiss me like it was just for fun," I protest.

I can tell I've tripped him up because he doesn't answer right away. He seems to be reliving that kiss, what it meant. But either it meant nothing, or he doesn't want to acknowledge it did, because he shakes his head dismissively and says, "It was just a kiss. I've got a lot of experience with that," he adds for effect.

His comment was meant to sting, but it doesn't make me hurt as much as he intends. It makes me sad, because I know it's his way of trying to make me see him like he sees himself. What he doesn't understand is how I can't unsee the good parts of him. It doesn't matter what he says to push me away, I'll still see the whole picture instead of the parts he thinks I should focus on.

I want to make him understand that, but I know years of being regarded as a plaything have conditioned him to believe that's all he is, and it will take time for him to trust that I really do see more than what's on the outside. If I push him tonight, he'll just retreat further, so while it literally pains me to see him doubt himself, or think that he made a mistake by touching me, the best thing I can do now is leave. But I won't leave quietly.

"If you have so much experience kissing then you should recognize the difference between simply touching your lips to someone else's and tasting them. Getting lost in them. I know the difference. Make sure you do before you make decisions about what I deserve."

Cade's eyes track me miserably as I head for the door. I don't know if my words make any sense to him, but I do know that was not the kiss you give someone for

casual fun. Now, I have to help him understand that.

Chapter ten

Cade

As soon as he's gone, I lean back against the counter and rub my hands over my face. That was... I have no fucking idea what that was.

Impulsive.

Insane.

Perfect .

I've kissed before, lots of times, but it's usually a meaningless prelude to other things. A warm-up to get the blood flowing. Once the clothes start coming off it's done, because there's other things to do with your mouth. And let's be honest, casual hookups aren't about kissing, they're about coming, so it never meant much to me.

Until now.

I never knew kissing could be so intense, especially the soft, slow kind. I totally got lost in it, forgetting all the reasons I shouldn't be doing it and focusing only on the feel of Madd's lips on mine, soft and plump and perfect. I think I could've left it like that, slow and sweet, all night. It was hot, yeah, but not in the sense that it made me want to race ahead to the good stuff. I didn't know kisses could be like that, and in some ways, I liked it even more than the urgent, hungry kissing we shared.

And that was one hundred percent everything I hoped it would be.

If I thought slow and sweet was hot, well, urgent and needy was hot as fuck. That one did make me want to get to the good stuff, but only because it got me so hard so fast, not because I wanted to skip the kissing and go straight to getting naked.

Usually that's the way it works for me, a little hot and heavy necking to get things running and then plunging deep into whoever I'm with. But with Maddox I liked feeling turned on without the urge to take it further. Just feeling aroused, feeling his hard cock pressed up against mine while we devoured each other, I could've done that all night too and been totally satisfied.

Speaking of satisfaction, that hard cock of his was a perk of kissing a guy I hadn't been expecting and abso- fucking- lutely loved. I mean, with women you never fully know if they're aroused until you slide inside, but with Maddox... The guy was a steel pipe, and all we did was kiss. That's a heady experience my body would like a repeat of, but it can't happen, because as Madd pointed out, it wasn't just a kiss.

There were feelings behind it. I can admit that now, since he's not right here tempting me. What I can't figure out is why he didn't storm out when I said it wasn't anything special.

That was shitty of me, but it was the only thing I could think of to get him to take me off the damn pedestal he put me on. I tried telling him it was a mistake to think of me as a good guy, but the stubborn man didn't listen, and for a second, he made me believe he was right.

Being the selfish prick I am, I don't regret that, because it led to the hottest kiss of my life. Hell, I think it ruined me. But I'll just have to consider myself lucky I got to touch him at all, because it can't happen again. And that's what really scares me .

Maddox said he wanted me to touch him, and that's a temptation I'll be hard pressed to ignore. I'm actually shocked I was able to stop myself just now, and I'm not sure I can do it again, which is why I can't even let it start.

I have zero idea how I'm going to accomplish that since I'll be seeing him again in just a few short hours, and every day, for the rest of the summer.

Fuck my life.

There's a ton of work happening at the Gerome house today. Deacon has a few guys working on the new patio, and I've got a crew framing the garage and laundry room, which we're trying to have done by the end of the week. We're not off schedule, but it's not impossible to get the occasional snow in June, and the faster we work now the better we can accommodate weather delays that might come up.

The activity is good because as long as I'm moving or concentrating on the job I can't think about Maddox. Plus, I suspect the increased number of bodies on site is keeping him inside. I know this reprieve won't last indefinitely, but for today I'll take it.

These are the kind of days when I love what I do. Sunny but not scorching, a group of guys laughing and joking while we work, and music playing in the background... It's part social while still getting shit done. These are also the kind of days that make me dread taking over the company one day.

If I'm the guy in charge, I won't get to have these days often. I'll be checking in at different job sites to make sure things are going smoothly, spending more time in my truck than outside. I'll have to manage paperwork shit, like insurance and payroll and scheduling. At some point, I'll even have to be the one trying to solicit work.

I'm not afraid of those tasks, but I'm afraid of them taking the fun out of what I do. I actually like building stuff, whether it's houses or the tinkering I do in my studio. I like working with my hands and making something out of parts and pieces. I especially love doing that outside and with a group of guys who keep me entertained. The boss doesn't get those perks, so if I have it my way, I won't be stepping into that role anytime soon.

I know the town thinks I'm either too lazy or too focused on having fun to take work seriously, and they assume that's why I haven't taken an interest in running things. That's not entirely true, but their opinions didn't bother me enough that I felt like I had to correct them. I've never had anyone to answer to or impress, so what was the point? Let them confuse my preference for working with my hands as a lack of motivation, it didn't matter to me. Still doesn't, truth be told. Except when it comes to Maddox.

He makes me want to care, because even though I know I'm not good for him I don't want him to think I'm a total fuck up. I don't want him, a guy who comes from money but is busting his ass to build a career, to think I got my job handed to me and I'm going to ride my dad's success for a living.

I don't know why it's important to me that he doesn't see a total screw up when he looks at me. Maybe I don't want him to be embarrassed about being attracted to me. Who knows? But for some reason I don't want to be the lazy local guy in his eyes, which means I'm actually starting to think about what comes next. I need to start considering whether I'm ready to give up days like today in order to take a bigger role in the company .

Fuck, this guy has me in knots, and all I've done is kiss him. I need to get it together. Nothing is going to change today, or tomorrow, or maybe even this summer. I just need to concentrate on the job and try to enjoy it like I usually do.

By the time four o'clock rolls around, we've made enough progress that I feel comfortable letting the guys go. There's enough daylight left that they can do something outside, and since that's why we live here I want to give them the opportunity to enjoy it. Besides, it makes for a happier crew when you give them a break here and there.

We get everything packed up and I head out with the last of the guys, so I'm not left on site alone. I do a quick ride myself, because floating over the trail on a bike has a way of quieting my mind, then head into town for the weekly concert.

I make my way to the crews' usual spot and come to a halt. Maddox is sitting on a blanket next to Ally, and now I really am fucked.

Why did I ever introduce him to my friends?

I take a seat between Deacon and Dex and we shoot the shit about which trails are open—since some of the higher ones aren't accessible until enough snow melts—and which we've ridden recently. This is usually one of my favorite conversations, but I'm only half listening, because the rest of the time I'm trying to eavesdrop on Maddox and Ally.

For the most part, they aren't saying anything interesting. Something about going on a hike later in the week, and... Did Ally just mention her brother? The gay one she said she'd have hooked me up with had she known I like guys. Fuck!

Then Ally has to go and bring up the bike race. "Okay guys, only two weeks left until the race. Did you all finish your registration?"

There's a chorus of yesses .

"We have to register?" Madd's thick brows draw together in a way that makes him

look part confused, part distinguished, and seriously fucking hot.

"Of course, it's a race," Ally replies.

"I thought it was for charity, not a real race."

"It is, but you still have to register. I think that's where most of the money comes from because the town's too small to really get a bunch of people pledging money for laps. Most of them ride in the race anyway, so they aren't going to pledge money toward someone else's laps."

"Makes sense. How do I sign up?" He looks around the group for input.

"I'll take care of it," Dex offers, and I feel my whole body constrict.

"You don't have to do that," Maddox says.

"I don't mind. You register at the post office and that's right next to the bar. I can do it tomorrow," he says casually as Madd gives him a curt nod of thanks.

Okay, that makes sense, but it still has me on edge. Maddox is my— friend —so I should be registering him, right? But I can't object without causing a scene, so I pick up a blade of grass and pretend to study it while I stew quietly.

"Perfect." Ally claps. "I've ordered stuff for the costumes. Finn and Ryder have coach's uniforms, and Deacon, Dex and Blake get soccer uniforms. And I'm still good on the bike?" she prods, brows arched in my direction.

"I'm on track. But don't get your hopes up that it'll be comfortable or pretty. It's strictly for function," I warn, because if there's one thing I know about Ally, it's that she likes things to look good, and this will not meet her standards .

"I thought it looked good," Maddox volunteers, and I swear you could hear a pin drop even with the band playing in the background.

Great . Of course he had to mention that.

"You saw it?" Ally gasps.

"Yeah, why?" Maddox is oblivious to the eyes pinned on him.

"Cade doesn't show his stuff to anyone," Deacon says. Traitor . "Not unless it's finished, and even then, he might not."

Though technically true, I don't keep people out because I'm sensitive or embarrassed about the work, I just don't invite them in because it's my place to unwind when I can't get outdoors, or when I need quiet. It's not off limits, but I don't encourage visitors either.

Maddox looks at me with wide, guilty eyes, like he just divulged some taboo secret. He didn't, but the others will make a big deal of him being inside the studio. I want to be pissed, because I don't need that drama, but it's not his fault. All I can do is try to diffuse this.

"I don't show you my stuff cause none of you have ever asked to see it," I say dismissively.

"Not true." Dex shakes his head. "I've asked if several pieces in your house were your work."

"You have." I nod, my jaw firm, a silent warning to drop it. "But you never asked to see what I'm working on."

?Semantics,” he huffs.

?None of you like the studio.” I try a different tactic. “You think it’s hot and cluttered.”

?That is true.” Ally chews on her lip, throwing me a bone. “It’s stuffy and kind of smells.”

And now Ally’s bike has earned some more of my attention, to see if I can make it look a little nicer.

?Well, what if I want to see it then?” Deacon puts me on the spot.

?You don’t need an invitation. ”

?How come Maddox got one?” Damn, he’s ornery today. I wonder what’s got him so hung up on this.

I sneak a glance at Maddox and find him staring at the ground, hair hanging around his face so you can’t see his cheeks, which I’m betting are probably flushed since I suspect he hates having all the eyes on him.

?He didn’t. He asked to see it. And he had a suggestion on how to build the damn thing anyway, so it made sense for him to take a look.” I pin Deacon with a glare that says, back off.

“So, the bike is almost ready?” Ally gets us back on track, but I don’t miss the way her eyes study me and Deacon.

?Yeah, almost ready,” I soften my tone. “When you get your fancy coat come over and you can try it.”

Ally squeals and claps her hands, and it's hard not to smile at her excitement. She may be nosy, but she's good for a laugh.

"Hey." Finn waves his hand to get my attention and jerks his head toward the sidewalk. "Is that who I think it is?"

Deacon, Dex and I all turn in the direction he indicated. A dark-haired man is walking hurriedly past the park, giving everyone in his path a wide berth and avoiding all eye contact. Since no one is ever in a hurry in this town, there's only one explanation. He doesn't want to be noticed. But as a former professional ski racer and rumored new owner of the resort, he's out of luck.

"Sure, looks like it. I guess the rumors are true, huh?" I shoot Finn a questioning look.

"Don't look at me." He holds his hands up in front of him. "They don't tell me anything."

"You're the Director of Operations," Deacon calls bullshit.

"That means I make sure the lifts are running, the mountain gets groomed each night and enough employees are scheduled each day. They don't include me in anything else, including whether they're really gonna sell the place."

"I don't think we have to speculate about that anymore." I watch Carter Quinn as he fades in the distance, hoping he's up for the task ahead.

Everyone's mood sours a bit after that. Fear over the fate of the resort that employs the bulk of the town weighs heavily in the air, but once the concert is over, Dex bribes us all with a free drink if we go to the bar, so he doesn't have to go by himself.

I know he loves his job, but I'm sure it's hard to go off to work by yourself after hanging out with friends, especially when the night is still pretty young, and especially on a Monday, which usually isn't a busy night.

We all take seats at the bar and sip on our drinks while Dex does some housekeeping, washing glasses and stocking bottles. It's pretty laid back for about thirty minutes, when out of nowhere a group of twenty or so comes in. It's a mix of men and women, all in their early twenties, and no sooner do they step inside than Deacon cozies up to the cutest ones in the bunch. Without thinking, I jump behind the bar to help Dex with the rush, something I've done before when he unexpectedly gets slammed.

"Crap, the photography club," Finn moans. "I totally forgot they were in town. Sorry, man," he tells Dex.

It's not unusual for different organizations to have conferences or meetings in town, although it is a little early in the season for that. Finn usually gives Dex a heads up, since he works on the mountain and knows the big events coming up, but this one must've slipped his mind. It's no big deal, I don't mind slinging drinks once in a while, and it's good business for Dex. I do hope they make it an early night because that was my original plan.

The first several orders are easy, guys asking for beers, but the ladies are more indecisive. That doesn't bother me except for the fact my idiot cousin is pushing some of them at me and making absurd suggestions about what they should order.

"My cousin makes a great Sex on the Beach," he tells one brunette.

"We aren't on the beach," she giggles.

"He could give you a Quick Fuck if you prefer." He winks at her.

"That's actually a drink?" A nearby blonde asks.

"Is it?" Deacon grins at me, daring me to object.

"Maybe the lady would be more comfortable with a Cosmo," I say, because it doesn't suggest anything, and it's easy to make.

"Where's the fun in that?" Deacon scoffs. "But you've made me rethink, cousin. We should make sure these ladies have Wet Pussys before we give them a Quick Fuck."

"Are we still talking about drinks, or what comes after?" The brunette bites her lip suggestively.

"Either. Or both," Deacon grins wickedly.

Dammit . A few weeks ago, I would've been totally into this scene and gearing up for what comes next, but right now I couldn't be more bored. I suppose the two women Deacon's entertaining are good looking, but neither of them do anything for me. Nada. Zilch...And honestly, I don't feel like flirting with them. With the way Deacon's throwing out sexy drink names it certainly seems like that's my goal, and the blonde's looking at me like she's into it.

Fuck .

"Tell me when you're ready, I'm going to see if anyone else needs anything." I jerk my head towards the rest of our group sitting further down the bar. Before I head in that direction, I sneak a quick peek at Maddox. He's deep in conversation with Ally, but suddenly looks up at me like he can feel me watching him .

He doesn't smile or laugh or give any sign of what he's thinking. I hold his gaze for a second, trying to understand if it means anything, before Deacon interrupts.

?The ladies will start with a Pink Panty Dropper, and we'll see where the night goes from there."

I groan inwardly and make the drinks, doing my best to be polite without encouraging them further.

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Chapter eleven

Maddox

“Disgusting, isn’t it?” Ally says.

“What?” I sip my drink, a plain old vodka tonic, just like my grandpa used to drink.

“You know.” Ally rolls her eyes. “No wonder these guys are perpetually single, women literally fall at their feet.”

I look down the bar to where two women are blatantly throwing themselves at Deacon and Cade. If Cade weren’t standing behind the bar the blonde would be climbing him. I think under normal circumstances he’d let her, but according to Ally he’s not acting normally.

I want to believe that’s because of me, but I can’t let myself go there right now. Things are too fragile after last night, and I’m resolved to give him the space he needs to figure his shit out. Although, if I want him to realize that he’s worth more than a good time, these women certainly aren’t helping my cause.

“Do they do that to everyone, or just Deacon and Cade?” I’m slightly afraid of the answer.

“I think Deacon and Cade are the first choice, and let’s be honest I get why. I mean, Finn’s hot and I love him, but those two are on another plane entirely.” She looks at the two men in question.

I nod, agreeing with her.

“But really any attractive guy in this town will get hit on by the women coming through. And they’re only too happy to be noticed since there aren’t many women here year-round.” She gives me a sad smile, almost like she’s apologizing for their behavior.

A flirty laugh pulls my attention toward the women, and I see one smiling and batting her eyelashes at Cade. He’s smiling back, but it’s not the flirty one he wore the first few times I met him. It’s not even a genuine one. It’s polite. Forced. It’s not easy to watch women throw themselves at him after what we shared last night, but it’s marginally better knowing that he’s not enjoying it.

“Now this is interesting,” Ally says, following my gaze. “Cade doesn’t look like a man on a mission tonight.”

“No?” I inquire.

“No. And I gather, based on the tension between him and Deacon earlier, that he hasn’t been on a mission in a while.” She pulls the straw between her lips, letting that little hint linger.

“By mission you mean...”

“Yes,” Ally interjects. “That’s exactly what I mean. And that’s not like him at all. Neither is bartending.”

“He doesn’t bartend? He seems to be doing a good job of it. Whatever drinks they wanted he knew how to make.”

“He’ll help Dex out when needed, but he doesn’t usually stay behind the bar, and he’s

usually close enough to be groped.” She seems on the verge of elaborating but takes a sip of her drink instead.

“Women do that?” I gasp, my gaze shooting around the room. “Here?”

“I’ve seen it happen more than I care to admit. That’s why I usually only go out when town is a little quiet. My eyes don’t see things they don’t need to see that way.” She shudders.

I swallow a laugh. Ally in no way strikes me as prude, but she definitely doesn’t like watching her friends get manhandled.

I look up to find Cade studying me. Apparently, I didn’t do as good a job at containing that laugh as I thought. I watch him thoughtfully, curious about the almost pained look on his face, which Ally latches on to.

“Okay, that’s like the third time I’ve caught you two staring at each other, not counting what happened in my store yesterday. Spill,” she commands.

“Spill what?” I take another sip of my drink.

“Why Cade isn’t acting like himself. He’s practically stopped flirting. Deacon seems upset with him, which I’m guessing is because Cade is no longer acting as his wingman, and he’s looking at you like some abandoned puppy. What happened?” She looks at me pointedly.

“Nothing happened,” I insist. Unless you count a couple of mind-blowing kisses, but as much as I like Ally that doesn’t feel like her business.

“So, he’s acting pussy-whipped without getting any pussy?” Her mouth drops open.

"Jesus, you sound just like Deacon." I swirl my glass on the bar, recalling the conversation I overheard between him and Cade.

"What can I say, their caveman language has rubbed off on me. But seriously, you haven't...you know." She leans in closer, expecting some juicy details no doubt.

"No. We've mostly just talked." I shake my head.

"Mostly?" She arches her brow. Of course, she'd pick up on that .

"Well, he did have to help me down the trail after I sprained my ankle, and he made me dinner and slept on my couch after." I huff out a frustrated breath since those were details I never intended to share. "But yeah, mostly we've just talked." I sip my drink, not sure what else to say.

"Well, I wouldn't have expected it, but maybe that's his kryptonite." She shakes her head, bewildered. "And here I thought it was dick."

"What?" Since the last part of her comment was muttered, I'm not sure I heard it correctly, but she clearly assumes I was asking about the kryptonite thing since that's how she responds.

"Kryptonite. Achilles heel," she offers when I don't react. "Downfall. Jeez, I really am adopting their language. Anyhow, I wouldn't have thought anything could take Cade off the casual sex bandwagon, but apparently conversation does the trick."

"I haven't tried to talk him out of casual sex," I protest.

"That's not what I mean, and besides, I don't think Cade can be talked into anything he doesn't want to do. What I mean is you just talked, didn't you? No flirting, no games, just talking. And apparently, he likes that, or he'd be staring down the front of

that blonde's shirt. Lord knows it keeps getting lower every time she leans against the bar." She shudders in disgust.

I can't say she's a hundred percent right, although her observation has some merit. Cade did flirt in the beginning, and I know flirting is his way of talking without saying anything meaningful, so he can keep people at arms-length. But we've had some conversations that went beyond flirting, and I think he enjoyed those. I know I did. So maybe actual conversation is what draws us together. Well, that and him being incredibly nice to look at.

I look over to where Cade's standing upright behind the bar, admiring the way his t-shirt hugs his chest just enough to hint at his physique without looking glued on. Despite the blonde practically laying on top of the bar to push up her cleavage he has a somewhat bored expression, but that doesn't detract from his piercing eyes and full lips.

The blonde rocks forward, pushing her boobs almost out of her shirt. I catch Ally's eye and she dissolves into a fit of laughter, which grabs Cade's attention, and he excuses himself under the guise of needing to check our drinks.

"What gave you two the giggles tonight?" He rests his forearms on the bar and leans toward Ally conspiratorially.

"The peep show you were getting. I bet if you go back over there, she'll show her nipples." Ally smirks.

"I should probably cut them off." Cade exhales heavily. "They were forward enough before Deacon got them all riled up on sex shots."

"Sex shots?" My eyebrows shoot sky high.

"Yeah. Shots that are named after sex." He looks down at the bar top, and I swear I see a little pink in his cheeks.

"That's a thing? And you know how to make them?" I'm intrigued. A little confused, but intrigued.

"It's sort of a game we play to mess with tourists. They think it's hilarious." He gives a guilty shrug.

"Give him an example. Tell him what they ordered," Ally commands before closing her lips around her straw.

Cade takes a deep breath and lets it out while shaking his head slowly. "Pink Panty Droppers, Wet Pussys and Quick Fucks. You string the names together in a sentence that sounds raunchy but is actually a drink order. "

"Jesus," I snort.

"That's not all." Ally grabs my arm and leans closer, giggling. "These morons compete to see whose sentence amounts to the biggest order."

"Who's winning?" I ask.

Ally nods toward Cade.

"Ok, give me your best order." I lean closer so I don't miss a word.

"No." He stands up straight and crosses his arms.

"Please?" My tongue snakes out to lick over my bottom lip, an unconscious gesture, though he tracks the movement before shaking his head with an audible sigh, like

what comes next will physically pain him.

Finally, he rests his hands on the counter and leans forward, speaking in a gravelly voice. “I’m looking for a Nympho to Tie Me to the Bedpost with The Leg Spreader and give me her Hot Pussy for a Quick Fuck, and after that Kinky Orgasm we’ll have a Slow Comfortable Screw.”

“Is that the winning sentence?” My jaw hangs open.

He nods.

“How many drinks was that?” I try to count them in my head as I tick them off on my fingers.

“Seven,” he says evenly.

“That’s all? There have to be more sex drink names.”

“There are, but you can’t just string a bunch of random drink names together. They have to make a real sentence.” He exhales.

“Who’s in second?”

“Ryder, with five.” Cade wants to leave it at that, but evidently, he can tell I’m not going to let it drop because with another sigh he says, “I’m looking for a Clit-Licking Cowgirl to take me in her Deep Throat and give this Cock-sucking Cowboy a Blow Job to get rid of these Blue Balls. ”

I’m laughing so hard I can feel tears threatening to fall. “Holy shit, I had no idea drinks could be so filthy.”

"We're talking about an industry that encourages a lapse in judgement, of course it's filthy." Ally scoffs, trying to contain her own laughter.

"I would've thought Dex would be in the lead," I muse. "He is the bartender."

"He's the scorekeeper. He has to make sure the drinks we order are legit," Cade says reluctantly.

"Have you ever played this game anywhere else? I mean, if you went to a different bar would they know what you're ordering?"

"I don't know." Cade seems surprised by the question. "Most of them are shots so a good bartender would know them."

"And let's not give these guys too much credit. I'm sure there are hundreds if not thousands of horny guys out there who play the same stupid game." Ally adds with an eye roll.

"That should be a bar game, or a theme night. Dex could host the sex drink championships and people from all over could compete for the title." I grin when Ally collapses into another fit of giggles.

"Jesus," Cade mutters. "Between your game show antics and Deacon's half-dressed new friends I'm going to have to cut off everyone in this bar."

"I think Deacon's half-dressed friends want you to undress them." Ally nods towards the group of three down the bar. Deacon's wearing a 'get your ass over here' expression while the blonde is visibly pouting that Cade isn't watching her.

"Huh?" he grunts.

"Those girls aren't...I mean, he won't take advantage, right?" I ask.

"What? No, he'd never do that," Cade insists. "I haven't served them that much, and he wouldn't cross a line. But trust me, if those girls weren't interested, they would've walked right past him when they first came in. He's not giving them attention they don't want."

"Okay," I concede, because it does certainly look like they're enjoying themselves. Well, the brunette anyway. The blonde is still looking at Cade like she wants to lick him from head to toe, and it's not a good look. It's too desperate. If that's how women usually look at him, it's no wonder he's convinced he's got little more than a good romp to offer.

The thought sours my carefree mood.

"You aren't going to partake?" Ally goads Cade, and I feel my cheeks turn pink because I know she's using me to try to force Cade to talk. Not maliciously—I get the sense she'd like to fix us up—though I'd rather not be present while she tries to do it.

He shoots her a pointed look. "It's already past my bedtime on a work night."

"I didn't know you had a bedtime." Ally pokes him further.

"I wouldn't expect you to, since you don't share my bed." He glares at her.

"Touché!" Ally laughs, letting him off the hook.

"Need anything else, or can I clock out now?" he asks dryly.

"I'm good," Ally sing-songs like she's proud of having pushed his buttons.

"Me too." I've got just the slightest buzz going on, and that's my cue to stop since I have work to do tomorrow.

"How are you getting home, Madd?" Cade asks, his tone suddenly gentle.

"My car is still over by the park." I pull a twenty out of my wallet to pay the tab.

"I'm parked that way too. I'll walk with you." He waves away my money and puts his own in the register.

"Okay." I stick my twenty in the tip jar instead, earning another frown from Cade. He comes around the bar to meet me and we say our goodbyes, earning a sly smirk from Ally, and an annoyed glare from Deacon.

"So, who came up with the drink game?" I ask as we step into the chilly air.

"Ah, that was me." He rubs his hand over the back of his neck.

"You can't just leave it at that. What made you think of it?"

"I had to look up the recipe for a drink one time when I was helping Dex." He exhales. "I jumped behind the bar because he was swamped, kind of like tonight, and even though I didn't know how to do much else than pour beers I figured another set of hands would help him. Then this girl comes in asking for a fancy drink I'd never heard of, and Dex was too busy to jump in, so he told me to look it up. I found a book of drink recipes, and as I was flipping through, I found a couple that were..." He shakes his head, searching.

"Suggestive?" I supply.

"Yeah, you could say that." He chuckles. "The next time I was in the bar I grabbed

that book and started reading it, then ordered these drinks just to piss Dex off. One time a girl overheard, and instead of being offended she seemed curious. So, I upped the ante and started ordering multiple drinks at a time, but instead of rattling them off like a list I dropped them into sentences. It sort of caught on. Been using it to pick up women ever since.” He shrugs sheepishly.

“The sexy shot game doesn’t work as a pickup for men?”

“I’ve never tried it on a man.”

My feet come to a halt of their own accord. “You’ve never... So, this...” I draw an imaginary line between us. “Never? As in... ever?”

Cade faces me, a wary expression on his face that I can’t decipher, which makes it infinitely harder to reconcile what’s happening. Did the notorious flirt just admit he’s a baby bi? There’s no way. He’s too self-assured, too fearless.

“I’ve never been with a man, never picked up a man, never looked twice at... Actually, that’s not true. I’ve been looking a lot recently, I just never felt the urge to act on it.”

“So that kiss...?” The one he abruptly cut off.

“Yeah.” He shoves his hands in his pocket and rocks back on his heels as my heartbeat slows to a crawl.

Oh my God, I ruined his curiosity. “That’s why you stopped.”

“What?” His blue eyes darken as his brows draw together.

“That’s why you stopped kissing me. You didn’t like it. You tried it and hated it and

gave me some excuse about your past to spare my feelings. How did I mis-read that?" I run my hand through my hair with a groan.

"I didn't hate it, I fucking loved it." Cade's narrowed brows morph into a full-on frown. "And I wasn't using my past as an excuse, it's a legitimate reason for you to stay away. I'm the definition of a player, and for that alone you should steer clear, but add my bi-awakening bullshit and you better believe I'm too much of a risk."

I'm so stuck on the loved it part that I almost miss the rest of what he says, and while I'd like to focus on the fact I didn't turn him off guys, his desperate expression tells me now isn't the time.

"A risk how?" I press.

"The better question is how am I not. I don't know how to do anything other than hook up, which we both know isn't in your nature. And don't even get me started on the bi thing. Aside from the fact it's new to me, it's new to the whole damn town. They'll all be curious about you because of me, and I don't want to put you in that spotlight."

That's a fair point, but not a deterrent considering who made it .

"Being gay I've been in the spotlight my whole life. Besides, didn't you tell me you won't survive in a small town if you focus too much on what people think?" Cade's mouth snaps shut at my retort. "And as for your past hookups, you keep talking about them as if they define who you are, and maybe for you they do. But I define you based on what I see, and I see someone who loves life, loves his family and friends, and loves his town. Those are hardly bad qualities."

Cade stares into the distance, at what I don't know, though I'm not sure he's seeing so much as thinking. When his gaze finally meets mine, he says, "What about the bi-

awakening thing?”

“What about it?”

“You aren’t afraid you’d be just an experiment for me?”

Back home I would be, but here, where I’m pushing some of my boundaries, it’s less of a concern. Here I have the opportunity to step out of my comfort zone to become a man who’s as self-assured as the one standing before me. And even though he’s right that hookups aren’t in my nature, after that kiss, I’m seriously considering the benefits of doing whatever feels right in the moment, cause God knows that kiss felt incredible.

“Everything’s an experiment, until it becomes more. And we both know since I’m just passing through, it could never be more.”

Cade’s blue eyes drift downward, lips pressed firmly together as he nods. Whether that’s in agreement or merely acknowledgment I don’t know.

I wonder if I ever will.

Chapter twelve

Cade

It's another busy day of work, which normally makes the time pass quickly, but since I can feel the frustration boiling off Deacon it's making things move extra slow.

He hasn't said anything to me, but he doesn't have to. I know he's pissed that I didn't play wingman last night, even though my absence probably meant he had both ladies to himself. He's not mad about having to soldier on as a party of three, he's mad that I left with Maddox, who he knows I'm not sleeping with.

Okay, I may be slightly to blame for his attitude. For years, I talked up how great it was to live here, probably sharing a little too much detail about how easy it is to score in this town. Now that he's here, he wants to live that way, with me by his side. That was the original plan, but when Maddox rolled into town, things changed. I'm probably more shocked than Deacon is about that, but whereas I'm not opposed to the change, my unwillingness to participate in the pickup game has to make him feel like I falsely advertised.

I don't blame him for feeling like that, but he could drop the snark down a notch. Jeesh .

By the time three thirty rolls around, I'm over his attitude. With the exterior framing complete I send everyone home and go to inspect the patio Deacon's been working on, hoping to clear the air.

"Looks good, cousin." I survey his work. "How long will it take to build the fireplace?"

"Couple days," he says stiffly as he straightens, clutching the broom in his fists.

"You doing the plants after that?" I squint to see him in spite of the bright afternoon sun.

"Depends on the weather. I'd rather wait until July so there's less chance of snow." He sweeps the last of the dirt off the patio.

I nod my head, agreeing with that logic.

"You ready to tell me what's on your mind or you gonna keep sulking?" I confront him, wanting to get this over with.

He seems to think about it for a second before turning to face me. "You talk a lot about none of the guys in this town being good enough for Maddox, which honestly should be a moot point since only you and I swing that way sometimes. But since we're overlooking that I feel the need to point out you're one of those guys you're talking about, but you're chasing after him like some lovesick puppy and ditching me to do it. You're being a hypocrite."

I chew on my lip, pondering his words. He's not wrong, but he's not right either.

"Not trying to be a hypocrite." I shake my head. "I know I'm not good enough for him. I keep trying to tell him that, but he doesn't seem to agree. Doesn't judge me either. I'm not used to that, and it's kinda nice. Makes it hard not to enjoy being around him."

"What do you mean doesn't judge you?" Deacon leans on the broom, studying me .

"I told you, he doesn't look at me like some boy toy who exists for his pleasure."

"That's a good thing?" He frowns, clearly confused.

"I think so, yeah. It's never happened to me before." I shrug helplessly, because I don't have the words to explain it any better.

"He doesn't look at you like a play-thing and you're happy about that? Seriously?" He arches a brow as he leans the broom against the house.

"Yeah."

Deacon shakes his head with another huff, clearly unimpressed with my reasoning.

I try another angle. "When was the last time someone looked at you like you might be interesting? Outside the bedroom."

"Fuck, I don't know," he grumbles. "Probably in school. I hit it off with a girl I worked on a project with. We went out a few times."

"See," I tell him. "You grew up in a big city, went to college. You probably had your fair share of ladies, or guys, who were interested, but did they treat you like the only thing you had to offer them was sex?"

"Are you kidding? I would love it if they treated me like the only thing I have to offer is sex. That's living the dream, all the fun parts of a relationship without any of the work. That's why I'm here." He gestures towards the landscape around us.

"I hear you." I lock my jaw and nod. "I lived like that for years, and you know how much fun I had. But that was before anyone looked at me like I'm more."

?So, you're telling me since Maddox doesn't want to jump you, you're fine to hang out with him and not try to screw him? Or anyone else for that matter?" He rests his hands on his hips .

He's trying to piss me off to make his own anger justified, but I'm determined to keep the anger out of my voice. "Yeah," I admit, "Surprised the hell out of me too, but yeah."

?Don't you want to though?" Deacon presses. "I mean, he is hot."

?He's gorgeous. And yeah, I'm attracted to him." I rub the back of my neck. "But I like just talking to him, too. It's interesting."

?You're gonna do that all summer? Just talk to him? You're not even going to try to suck his dick or get him to touch yours?" His eyebrows rise as he lowers his head, making it seem like he's looking down on me.

?I don't know. I keep trying not to do anything, but I keep plowing into him, and it's hard to walk away." I rub my hands over my face. "I know what I should do, but I can't make myself do it."

?So, come out with me. Have fun, take the edge off. Get Maddox out of your head," he pleads.

?That's just it, cousin." I sigh heavily, willing him to understand. "Taking the edge off has no appeal anymore. I know, I used to live for the thrill, but now it doesn't seem as fun."

?Are you seriously trying to tell me sex isn't fun?" Deacon recoils.

?No. I just don't think it sounds fun with a random stranger who comes through

town.”

“Random strangers are what we were supposed to do all summer.” He throws his arms wide, like he’s got nothing to show for coming here. No reason to stay.

“You still can.”

“Yeah, but it was fun to do together. Tell me that bachelorette party wasn’t amazing.” I swear his eyes are pleading for me to see reason.

“It was amazing.” I placate him, though he’s right. At the time it was. Those girls had some kinky games to play, and we both enjoyed every minute of it .

“And you want to give that up?” Deacon balks.

“Just because I’m taking a break from picking up tourists doesn’t mean you have to. And it damn sure doesn’t give you an excuse to be mean to Maddox.” I point an accusing finger at him.

“I haven’t been mean to him.” He crosses his arms defiantly.

“Deacon, he’s not blind,” I groan. “He sees you glaring at him.”

“I was glaring at you, not him.”

“Well, he doesn’t know that.” I throw my hands up. “He’s still the client so you can’t treat him like shit.”

“Speaking of, I thought we agreed it was a bad idea to get too close to the client?” He scowls, throwing my own BS back at me.

That's the other part of this fucked up situation I've been trying to avoid. I said that earlier, and it still makes a lot of sense, though a part of me doesn't care anymore.

But I can't just ignore it. This is my dad's business, my future business we're talking about. And the Gerome's are good clients. I don't want to mess that up because of my interest in Maddox. Yet each time I'm with him, I feel my resolve fading a little more, and I don't know how much longer I can hold out.

I'm still shocked I didn't screw up and start kissing him last night when we walked to our cars. I'm even more shocked he enjoyed hanging out at the bar and hearing about our stupid drinking games.

Seeing him smile, laugh, and even throw down a few jokes made him that much more appealing, and when we were alone, I realized he once again didn't judge me for my immature antics. That made me want to push him up against the car and kiss the hell out of him like I did in the studio.

I think about doing that every time I see him, because I'm dying to feel him again. But between me being bad for him and him being the nephew of our client, Deacon's right, getting too close is a bad idea. I know that. I just haven't been able to keep my distance.

"Yes, getting close is a bad idea." I rub my face again. "I don't feel like I have control over it though."

Now that I've said it, I realize it's the truth. I keep trying to avoid him, but he keeps materializing everywhere I am, and when that happens, I'm powerless.

"That sounds fucked up." Deacon whistles.

"It is. It's all kinds of fucked up." I drop onto the retaining wall surrounding the

patio, exhausted. “I see him, and I’m tempted to forget how I’m bad for him or that it’s reckless to get close to him. I’m trying to fight it, but...” I trail off.

“Okay, now you’re freaking me out.” Deacon’s brow furrows. “You’re talking like you’re whipped, but there’s no way that’s true, right? I mean, you’re the ultimate bachelor. And you haven’t even been with a guy yet, so you can’t possibly be holding out for this one. This is just, like, a phase or something, right?”

“I have no clue, cousin.” I squint up at him.

“Maybe you just need to do this. Hang out with him, bang him, whatever, just get him out of your system so you can go back to normal.” He sits next to me, a peace offering of sorts.

I take a moment to think about the merits of this idea. He’s clearly in my system right now, and the harder I fight it the worse it seems to get. Maybe I do need to stop fighting this and see where it goes. Maybe that’s how I get him out of my head. We do have all summer, which should be plenty of time to get my fill, and it’s not like we have to be inseparable or anything, so it’s possible I won’t become his distraction.

The only thing I get hung up on is the fact he’s not a casual sex person, and I don’t know how to be anything else. I’m not opposed to being monogamous, hell I’ve already thought about doing that for him, I just don’t know if I’d want that long-term. But as he pointed out last night, he’s leaving at the end of the summer, so there’s a limit on this thing, and maybe that’s a good compromise.

We’re both obviously attracted to one another, and I don’t see that going away. I think it will only get worse, and I am getting tired of fighting it. I’m not sure I can do it the rest of the summer. I’m also not sure I could be a boyfriend type for longer than that, so having an expiration date could be the perfect solution. It would make us more than a casual hook up but less than a couple, I think. Friends with benefits, if

you will. Best of all, an expiration date means it won't affect our relationship with his uncle, because I can't mess something up that can't be permanent to begin with.

I'm still not worthy of someone like Maddox, not by a long shot, but if he's okay to slum it with a guy like me for a few months, who am I to object? We could hang out, get our fill of each other, and go our separate ways at the end of the summer. He'll move on to a successful career and I'll go back to my carefree lifestyle. This could work.

"Hello. Earth to Cade. What the fuck?" Deacon waves his hand in front of my face.

"Shit, sorry. I was thinking."

"Yeah, I got that," he grunts. "So, what are you gonna do?"

"I think you're right." I nod absently. "I think I should just do this and get it out of my system. Then when he leaves at the end of the summer I'll be back to normal."

"Okay, yeah. I mean, it sucks to go it alone for a while, but it's only temporary, right?" he reasons, looking as scared as I feel.

"Of course. It has to be. He's leaving."

"Okay." Deacon puts on a brave face. "I mean, I still don't get it, but if this is what you gotta do, then do it. "

Just then, as if I need a sign, Maddox comes out of the house with his hiking gear. "Okay. Right." I exhale. "Let's see if this works."

“Solo, are you really heading out to hike all by yourself again?” I grin as I approach.

“Solo,” Maddox muses. “I haven’t heard that name in a while. I thought you’d given it up.”

“Can’t give it up until you stop doing things by yourself.” I fall in step with him as he heads to his car.

“What’s wrong with doing things by myself?” He casts me a curious glance.

“I won’t be there to rescue you.” I wink.

“Oh.” His shoulders slump forward. “And here I thought you wanted to keep me company.”

“Who says I don’t want to keep you company?” I lean against the driver’s side door, blocking his escape.

“You.” He tosses his pack in the back of the car, barely sparing me a glance. “You think I need a babysitter.”

“I didn’t say that.” I hold my hands up in surrender.

“You implied it. If you want to come, come. But don’t do it because you have some backward notion that I need a guide or a babysitter. I’m not helpless.” He reaches for the door, determined to get past me.

His sass is kind of hot, but he’s damn defensive about his independence. I wonder why.

“I know you don’t need a babysitter.” I step back and pull the door open so he can get

in. “I was only teasing about the rescue thing. What trail are you doing? ”

He studies me for a moment, like he’s trying to decide if I really am teasing. I must look convincing, because he finally relaxes. “Highline.”

“That’s one of my favorites. Can I come with you?”

His stormy eyes search mine. I’ve never asked to hang out with him before and doing so now seems to have made him suspicious. Eventually he relents. “Fine.”

I swap my work boots for a pair of tennis shoes and grab a water bottle from my truck, then jump in the car with him. He’s focused as he drives, never taking his eyes off the road. I don’t know if that’s just his personality or if I’m making him nervous, so I try to ease the tension.

“Why are you so determined to do things on your own?” I ask.

He grips the steering wheel tighter. Maybe that wasn’t the best topic to bring up right now, but I am curious.

“Is that a bad thing?” He glances briefly at me before turning back to the road.

“No. I’m just not used to that. People here are always helping each other out so I don’t understand why having help makes you think you’re helpless.”

He takes a few deep breaths before answering. “I guess I’m sensitive to people assuming I can’t do things on my own.”

“Why would they assume that?” I frown.

He exhales heavily. “You’re probably well aware, but my family has money, and that

makes people think I get everything handed to me.” He casts another quick glance in my direction, and my expression must pass some sort of test because he continues. “It doesn’t help that I could have the handout if I wanted it. Most of us go into the family business, and while we have to earn our place to a degree, there will always be a place. Growing up, people resented me because they thought I didn’t have to work for anything, and I hate being seen like that.”

That totally fits what I know about him, and in a way I can relate. My future has been handed to me, so I know how easy it is to just take it and not find your own way. It couldn’t have been easy to turn all that down, and if I’m honest it makes me respect him even more. I hate how he worries about that though.

“You don’t have to prove yourself to anyone.”

“What does that mean?” A cute little wrinkle bisects his eyebrows.

“It means people who assume you’re getting a handout are just jealous that they aren’t, and no matter what you do they’ll assume you had it handed to you. So, don’t waste your time trying to prove them wrong. Prove yourself right. Chase your dream.” I shrug.

“Speaking from experience?” He regards me warily.

“Not really. I’m the guy that’s going to take the career my family’s giving me. I’ve never considered doing anything else. What didn’t you like about your family’s business?” I change the subject.

“I don’t dislike the family business. Managing money means evaluating the different places to invest in, and that part is really interesting. But I thought building something instead of financing it would be even more interesting. And I’d rather be outside than behind a desk. Fewer people.” A slight smile tugs at his lip.

"What made you pick environmental science?" I ask as he pulls into the trailhead.

"An intro-level science class in college. There was a unit on the environment, and we covered climate change, alternate sources of energy... I got hooked." His smile looks almost wistful, just like my expression gets when I think about riding a trail. What would it be like to think about work that fondly ?

Once we're parked, I grab his bag from the car, but instead of handing it to him I strap it on. He glares at me, I assume because his mind went to that whole helpless thing again, but this isn't about helping him, it's just good manners.

We walk in silence for several minutes before he finally gets over my chivalry, if that's what it's called, seeing as how we're two guys. "You hike this trail a lot?" he asks.

"Bike it, usually."

"You bike this ? These rocks are more like steps. How can you possibly bike this?"

"Years of practice." I chuckle, forcing myself not to reach for his hand to help him over a big rock. "If you know where to place the tires all you have to do is keep pedaling and the bike rolls over the rocks. And the whole trail isn't like this, just a few sections, so most of the time you're pedaling on even terrain."

"So, when you bike this, you ride up and then turn around and come down?" He looks over his shoulder at the trail we've climbed so far.

"Sometimes. I usually do the whole loop though, which is about ten miles. I prefer riding the back part of the trail down."

"Why?"

?Well, this section is fun with the big drops—" I gesture to the rocks we're stepping over, "--but it's more technical so you have to watch your speed. If you ride the trail the way we're hiking it you have a steep but short climb to start, and more of a rolling hill to finish, so you get more speed and sort of float down the trail."

"Floating?" He snorts. "Over dirt?"

"Don't knock it till you try it."

"I'll stick to surfing. I like softer landings."

"Fair enough, although if you ever want to trade surf lessons for bike lessons, I'm game."

?Hmph," he grunts. "So, you bike this trail all the time, do you ever hike it?"

?Not for years, no." I shake my head.

?Why now?" He glances at me sideways as we trek along.

?Uh, because you're hiking now?" I thought that was obvious.

He stops and looks at me. "No, I mean why did you ask to spend time with me now? You've never done that before. I didn't think you wanted to."

?I wouldn't say I didn't want to." I rub the back of my neck.

?Were afraid to, then," he presses.

I nod, because there's no point denying that. "I told you why."

?What changed?"

I'm not really sure what he wants me to say here. All I know is I'm tired of fighting this, and that I won't stop him from taking a risk on me if I'm what he really wants.

?You told me not to make decisions about what you deserve." I lift my shoulders.

?I told you that days ago, why are you listening now?" His cloudy gray eyes bore into mine, but I can't tell if that's because he's confused, upset, or just plain curious.

I was hoping the fact I listened would be enough, but I guess I have to admit everything. Fuck it.

?I like you. I think you like me. I'm tired of trying to ignore that or tell you it's a bad idea." I hold his stare, hoping that makes it easier for him to believe me after I spent so long trying to push him away.

?You don't think you're bad for me anymore?" His round eyes narrow to slits .

?Of course, I'm still bad for you," I tell him honestly. "I'm still the selfish guy who lives to have fun and has no idea how to be with just one person, and has never even been with a guy. I can't for the life of me figure out why that doesn't bother you, but I don't think it does. You know what you're getting with me, and if that's what you want, I won't stop you, because I damn sure want you."

?You want to sleep with me," he concludes.

?No. I mean yes, I do, ever since the first time I saw you. And I admit back then I was focused on getting you into bed, because that's all I've ever focused on, and I really wanted to explore getting it on with another dude. But that's not my end goal now."

Madd cocks his head to the side, giving me a suspicious once-over. “What is?”

“Honestly? I’m not even sure. I just know you make me want to be a better person, so if all we do is hang out and never fuck, I’d be cool with that. Full disclosure, I’ll probably jerk off to the fantasy of it, but I wouldn’t act on it if that’s not what you want. And if you do—” I rub my neck “—I just want to be around you. Only you. For however long you’re here.”

By the look on his face, he’s just as stunned by my admission as I am, though I meant every word. I want him, and if he feels the same, I’m not going to block it anymore. The question is, does he want me, or did I screw this up already? I can’t tell.

He’s too quiet beside me, staring out over the landscape with his trademark pensive expression that tells me nothing. What is he thinking? The silence is eating me alive and I’m not sure I can take it much longer.

Just as I’m about to snap, Madd’s hand shoots out, grabbing my shirt in his fist and yanking me to him, crushing our mouths together.

Chapter thirteen

Maddox

Pleasure. That's all I feel right now. Cade's lips are just as soft against mine as they were the first time, and it feels so good I can barely breathe. Barely think. If he wasn't sturdy enough to help me stay upright, I'm sure my knees would've given out by now.

He's kissing me like he's trying to commit my taste to memory. Touching me like he's not sure he believes I'm real. For a brief moment I panic that this is too intimate too soon—things could never be meaningless between us, but they aren't supposed to be meaningful either—then my body takes over, and I moan my consent.

That sound seems to bring him back to the present, and he pulls away.

"Shit. Sorry. I shouldn't have kissed you." Despite the distance between our lips, his hands still linger on my face.

"I kissed you." I glance down to where my hand is still fisted in his shirt.

"I..." His gaze flits between my hand and my face, dazed. "Wait, you want this? Me?"

I nod slowly, never taking my eyes from his.

"Oh, thank fuck." His relief makes me chuckle, but it's quickly cut off when he

presses his lips to mine. Though I feel the tension in his limbs, taste his desperation, he handles me gently, his full, soft lips caressing. Savoring. Claiming. It's a stark contrast from the crazed desire I was expecting, but if anything, it endears him to me even more.

Cade's keeping his word, treating me as someone he's privileged to kiss rather than someone he can get off with. It makes me feel respected and desired as opposed to merely coveted for my looks alone, and to me, that's the sexiest affirmation I could receive.

The rest of the hike is comical. We're both too high with lust to do much besides look at each other and grin, like we're smitten teenagers on a first date. And for Cade, who's never really dated, much less dated a guy, this might actually be his first.

That thought makes me unreasonably happy. To think, he may never have experienced the shortness of breath, the racing heartbeat, when the accidental brush of a hand evolves into clasped fingers, the way ours are now. He may never have felt the butterflies that accompany such an innocent but sensual touch. The selfish part of me hopes that's true, so I can be his first. So he'll remember me fondly after the summer ends, long after we've parted ways.

When we get back to the car, Cade comes around to my side to open my door, but before I get in, he presses up against me, pinning me between it and his body.

"I don't want this day to be over." He brushes his lips over mine.

"Me, either." I gasp for air.

"I want to take you to dinner, but I don't want to see anyone besides you tonight." He

plays with a strand of my hair, making me grateful I keep it to my shoulders.

“Not ready to ruin your playboy rep?” I waggle my eyebrows.

“It’s not that.” He shakes his head, an almost pained look on his face. “It’s that it won’t be just us anymore. This town is too curious to leave us be, and I want you all to myself.”

If we were anywhere else, I’d find this weird, a lame excuse to keep me as some sort of dirty secret. Given the quirks of a small town, I think I know what he’s saying.

“What are you asking?” My whisper comes out husky, making his eyes flare with desire.

“Come home with me? We could order dinner and just hang out.”

“What if I cook? It’s probably my turn, since you made dinner the last time we ate together.” I do my damndest to look at his eyes and not his mouth, so I’m not tempted to capture it again.

“Frozen pizzas count as making you dinner?” He seems amused by the idea. “All I did was turn on the oven.”

“You still fed me. Now, it’s my turn to feed you.” I let my fingers slide from his chest to his stomach, and it’s only after I see the mischievous smile on his lips that I realize the alternate interpretation of my words. But instead of being embarrassed by it, I’m intrigued. Turned on .

We stop by Cade’s long enough for him to shower and change, then head back to my house so I can cook dinner. I get out all the ingredients for spaghetti with meat sauce and a side salad, then set a pot of water to boil while I brown the meat.

I've never been so grateful for my mother's cooking lessons in my life.

"What can I do?" Cade asks.

"Chop vegetables for the salad?" I hand him a cutting board .

Cade gets to work dicing peppers and tomatoes while I stir the sauce. We work together silently for a few minutes before he abruptly stills. "I forgot to get wine."

"Rick keeps a bunch here, it's over by the bar," I nod toward the wet bar between the kitchen and living room.

"I should've thought of that." He rubs his head, eyes cast downward.

"It's no big deal."

"It is, though? I'm already screwing up." The knife angrily hits the cutting board.

"Why would you think that?"

"Because you're cooking our dinner instead of me taking you somewhere nice, and on top of that I forgot the wine. It's only the first date and I'm already fucking up." He looks at me with a sad smile.

"It's our first date, yeah. But isn't it your first date ever?" I arch a knowing brow in his direction while I stir.

"You know it is."

"Well, it's not mine and I didn't think of wine either, so stop beating yourself up about it." I point the spatula at him in mock anger.

"I can't help it. As more of a hookup guy I'm totally out of my element." He wipes his brow with his forearm. "Serious question, why is casual sex not your thing? I mean, you're so hot I sometimes forget how to breathe when I look at you, so you must've had tons of offers, right? What made you decide it's not for you?"

I keep my back to him as I shrug. "None of those offers were about me, they were about my body. My image."

"Is that not flattering? That's the way women seem to take it."

"For some people it is. For me it's kind of insulting how people assume I'm only interested in a quick screw because I fit some visual ideal."

"Well, fuck," Cade mutters. "No wonder you didn't like me at first. And here I thought it'd be easy to pick up a guy since I am one."

"Taking notes for next time?" I glance at him over my shoulder.

"What?" His eyes get so big the white drowns out the blue. "No. I just...don't want to keep screwing up."

It hits me then, Cade isn't just dipping his toe into dating, he's jumping in with both feet, trying to do what he thinks is expected. And he's nervous.

It's sweet. And kind of hot.

Setting the spatula down, I step into him and wrap my arms around his waist, bringing us face to face. His is tan and smooth and perfect, except for the tiny little crease between his brows. Whether that's because he's beating himself up or confused about what I'm doing I'm not sure, and at this moment, it doesn't matter.

Leaning forward, I brush my lips against his, hoping to put him at ease. He stands absolutely still, only moving his mouth in response to mine. Though he's letting me control the pace, I feel the restraint behind the stillness, like he's just barely holding on. It's thoughtful. And endearing. And not enough.

I trace his bottom lip with the tip of my tongue and am rewarded with a strangled growl as he finally caves and reaches around my waist to haul me against him, crushing his lips to mine.

What started as a slow burn, turns to an inferno as he devours me, teeth and tongues clashing desperately as we try to get our fill. Apparently, I'm just as desperate for him as he is me because my body is reacting before my mind can catch up.

He grips my ass firmly, tugging me to him in a way that slots our cocks next to each other. The pressure of his body flush with mine takes me from half-mast to full almost instantaneously, the friction so heavenly I can't stop my hips from rocking back and forth.

"Jesus, Madd," he heaves. "I'm trying to be good here. I can't hold back if you do that."

"Don't hold back." I nip at his bottom lip.

"I thought you'd want to go slow. What about dates? What about dinner?" he says through gritted teeth.

"Turn off the stove. Food can wait."

A wave of lust washes over his face, and I know in that moment he's done fighting. "What are you suggesting?" He reaches around me to turn off the burner.

“Mmm,” I groan as my hard cock brushes against his. “What do you want?”

“Damn, that feels good.” His head falls back as he groans. “I think you could make me come just like this.”

“I could come like this too,” I grunt. “But I want more.”

“More?” The gleam in his eyes says I’ve piqued his interest. “What sort of more?”

The question doesn’t dull my desire, but it does give me pause. Cade may have an infinite amount of experience with women, but he’s never been with a man, so everything we do from here forward will be an entirely new experience for him, and I don’t know what he’s ready for.

So far, he hasn’t shied away from kissing, and he doesn’t seem to have an issue with feeling our covered cocks pressed together. That doesn’t mean he’s ready to see one, hold one, or take one inside him. If he’s even into bottoming at all.

I should’ve considered this before suggesting things get physical, because pumping the brakes now is likely to send the wrong message, and the guy is nervous enough.

“You tell me,” I rasp, hoping that by giving him the final say we won’t bump into any lines he’s not ready to cross .

“Can we rub our dicks together?” He flexes his fingers on my ass.

“We are,” I whisper in his ear as I swivel my hips.

“I mean without anything between them.”

I pull away and take his hand, leading him to the couch we slept on the first time he

spent the night.

“Sit,” I command with a gentle push to his chest. He obediently falls to the cushion, eyes locked on mine.

Standing before him, I tug my shirt over my head and undo my pants, letting them drop to the floor. His gaze tracks the movement, pausing on the bulge trying to escape my briefs. I hook my fingers in the waistband, pausing to admire the way his Adam’s apple bobs in anticipation, then drag them off my hips.

My cock slaps against my stomach and bounces before coming to rest pointed right at Cade. He licks his lips, eyes raking over me. “Every inch of you is spectacular, Madd. I’ve never seen anyone so beautiful.”

He says it softly, almost reverently, and while it sounds like the sort of line Cade would feed anyone standing naked before him, there’s no trace of insincerity in his gaze. Only awe.

“Come here,” he rasps.

“What about you?” My gaze wanders over his frame.

Cade seems to register for the first time that he’s still fully clothed. He pulls his shirt over his head and tosses it to the floor before standing up to shed his pants. When he sits back down, his erection springs upward and stays pointing toward the sky.

Holy. Crap.

If I thought Cade was beautiful shirtless, he’s a masterpiece naked. Broad shoulders, muscled chest, lean stomach that showcases a smooth six pack, and a sexy V pointing toward his long, thick cock.

He reclines into the couch and beckons me to him, wrapping his hands around the backs of my thighs to help me straddle his legs. Our dicks graze one another as I get into position, pulling a throaty sigh from his mouth as his head falls against the cushion.

“You’re gonna want to see this.” I grin as I settle my weight on his lap, nestling my length against his.

Cade picks his head up and looks at his lap, mouth parting on a gasp when he takes in the view.

I can’t blame him. It’s not the first time I’ve seen another dick pressed against my own, but none of those instances look as good as this.

We’re both rock hard, so much so the skin around our erections seems to be stretched completely taut. Despite similar, fair, coloring, we’re both flushed, the heads a slightly darker pink than the shafts. I’m a little thicker, and he’s a little longer, but we’re otherwise well-matched, so much so, we seem to fit together seamlessly.

Without lifting my weight off him, I rock my hips back and push forward, dragging my length along his. It’s a subtle movement, so minute you wouldn’t notice it if you were focused on anything else, but we’re both engrossed, and even that tiny bit of friction has us shivering with barely contained desire.

“Holy fuck,” Cade groans. “That feels unbelievably good. Like, my toes are tingling good.”

“It feels even better with lube.”

“Have you got any?”

“Not on me.” I shake my head as I repeat the motion with less restraint.

“Me neither.”

Before I can register his intent, Cade leans forward to spit on our cocks, and I smear it between us on the next pass. The effect is instantaneous. We slide together with ease, the moisture enhancing the friction between us.

“Oh, God,” Cade groans as the head of my cock slides along the underside of his length, notching against the ridge of skin below his crown. “I don’t know which I like more, feeling your dick on mine or watching your abs tighten when you roll your hips.”

“Are you an ab guy?” I exaggerate my hip roll so he gets a good view.

“I kinda want to lick yours, so...maybe?” His hands clench around my thighs as I brush along his length. “But I kind of want to lick your cock too, so maybe that’s my weakness.”

The idea of Cade’s mouth on my dick has my rhythm faltering, my balls drawing up tight. But it’s way too soon to finish, so I try to distract myself.

“So, which triggered your bi-awakening? Abs or cocks?”

“Neither.” Cade seems to grit his teeth as I make another pass.

“That’s all I get? Neither?”

“You’ll laugh.”

“I won’t.” I rock my hips again, spreading the precum from my tip along his length.

“Fine.” His throat bobs on a heavy swallow. “Jaws.”

“Jaws?” I parrot back to him. “What about them?”

“A square jaw is the sexiest part on a man’s body, hands down. Especially if it’s got a little scruff on it.” His eyes fall closed as if he’s picturing the perfect jawline, a tiny little shiver rippling up his torso right before those blue orbs snap open and find mine. “Just like yours.”

The heat in his gaze has me ready to rut shamelessly against him, chasing my release like some sort of feral animal. No one has ever looked at me with such naked desire, and it has me ready to act on instinct alone. But this is his first time with a man, and I owe it to him not to rush it. Using willpower I didn’t know I possessed, I slow my momentum and take us both in hand.

Chapter fourteen

Cade

“Holy shit,” I gasp as Maddox traps my cock between his own and his fist.

“Too much?” He relaxes his grip, though he doesn’t let go completely.

“Not even close. Do it again.” A relieved moan rumbles up my throat as his hand contracts, fissures of electricity sparking everywhere I feel his touch, which is basically along my entire shaft.

Clearly, this is not the first time someone else had held my dick, but feminine hands are smaller, often colder, and if I’m being honest, the pressure is usually a little off. Sometimes it’s too soft, others too tight. It never feels bad—we are talking about having someone pump your junk, after all—but a large, warm palm that’s firm without being restrictive is a dream.

Add the feel of Madd’s steel length rubbing against mine and I’m ready to combust far sooner than I’ve ever been in my life. I won’t, I’ve waited too long for this to reach the finish before we’ve barely gotten started, but if I gave myself over to it I could .

“Oh, fuck yes.” I sink deeper into the cushions, partly because my body feels like a limp noodle—except for my cock obviously—and partly so I can see better.

The view is incredible.

At the risk of sounding smug, my dick is a thing of beauty. Long, smooth, and decently thick, it's sort of the perfect size and shape. I'm stupid proud of it, and the fact my partners tend to love it as much as I do. But Madd's cock... It might be even nicer.

It's about the same length, definitely fuller, and just a shade darker since his skin tone is a fraction more golden than mine. But that little hood that covers his crown on the upstroke and pulls back to reveal his sexy little slit on the down is mesmerizing.

"Can I..." My finger hovers over his tip, eager to feel that thin layer.

His eyes flare with heat. "Yeah," he says on an exhale.

My fingertip barely makes contact before Madd's guttural moan echoes around me. I don't even have to move, I just rest the pad of my pointer finger against his foreskin and let the motion of his fist drag the digit along his crown while he groans his pleasure.

I don't know what's hotter, the sounds he makes, or the fact I slide so effortlessly over his tip I feel sparks of arousal in my finger. My finger .

It's hard to tell whether it's the silky layer of skin or the precum seeping out of him that makes the glide so smooth. Either way, the friction has him so blissed out his hips are starting to punch forward to chase his fist, which means he's basically humping my dick, and it feels so good my pelvis starts rocking in time with his.

A chorus of grunts echo around us as we rut together. Feeling brave, I let my finger wander over his crown, working its way under the lip of his foreskin so I can massage his head. Apparently, that's like the key to nirvana since he braces one arm on the back of the couch and changes the angle of his hips so he's driving his cock against mine, his thrusts bordering on frantic.

Yes, please.

My dick is on fire, flames of rapture mounting and receding with each stroke, the heat of impending detonation steadily climbing from root to tip. It's agony and ecstasy swirling together in a vortex of pleasure that consumes my senses, robbing me of sight and sound and taste—everything but the thrill coiling in my groin.

For one brief second, time stops, and all I know is the sweet sensation of floating.

Then I erupt.

Wrapping my hand around the back of Madd's neck, I pull him to me, crushing our mouths together. My tongue licks into his mouth once, twice, before all I can do is hold him to me and breathe his air while my cock pulses in his fist.

The shuttling fist comes to a stop as moisture spills over my dick, and Madd's hips slow to a leisurely roll before falling still. For several long minutes, we stay like that, panting, foreheads pressed together, cocks snug in his grip, and truth be told I don't find it uncomfortable. His weight is sort of reassuring, his woodsy orange scent calming. And the fingers that move from the back of the couch to sift through my hair...they're downright soothing.

"You okay?" he asks softly, pulling back just enough to see my face.

"Are you asking if I'm on the verge of freaking out because my dick is touching yours?"

"Yes."

"I'm okay. In case it wasn't obvious, I like having my dick touch yours. A lot."

“I like it too.” Madd’s full lips part slightly with that admission, and before I can consider the implications, I find mine touching them softly. It’s not a thank you, not really, although I do feel gratitude for what we just did. And it’s nice how he’s checking in even despite the fact it’s not necessary. More than that though, I just wanted to taste him without the air of lust influencing the moment.

That’s a first.

Before I can dwell on this development, a stomach growls. Whether it’s mine or his I’m not sure, but the sound makes me realize I am hungry.

“Should we finish making dinner?” I look up into the gray eyes that skew a little silver on his now sated face.

“Yeah.” He climbs off me with a timid smile and hands me my clothes before dressing himself, and we make our way to the kitchen to finish cooking.

After washing our hands, we work in silence, but once we’re done and seated at the table with a bottle of wine, the conversation flows.

We talk about everything and nothing at the same time. Favorite movies, favorite foods, favorite books... Well, his, since I’m not much of a reader. We talk about why we love the outdoors, and our families. Though our backgrounds are wildly different since he grew up privileged and my childhood was nothing but average. Still, we both seem to have parents that are genuinely supportive, even if they don’t understand us.

For him, that makes it even more important to prove himself and make his parents proud, which contributes to his independent streak.

For me, my parents’ support is an excuse to act like a kid longer than I should. I leave that part unspoken, though, since he’s so determined to think I’m a better person than

I am, and I don't want to ruin that right now—not entirely. I don't think we'll ever come to an agreement on that topic, anyway.

After we're finished eating and cleaning up, I'm struggling with whether I'm supposed to stay or go when Maddox suggests a movie. He picks something on live TV, a comedy, I think. I'm barely paying attention to the screen because as soon as he sits down, he leans into my side, and I can't focus on anything except the sensation of his body next to mine. His hand resting on my thigh.

I'm not a cuddler. I've never had an occasion to just hold someone, and it's not something I ever expected to do. Maybe that's because holding someone never seemed like it would feel anywhere near as good as sex, and in my mind, if it wasn't as good as sex, there wasn't a reason to do it. Now, I have to admit, his warm body curled against mine is pleasant. Comfortable. Except for the fact, I'm not sure what I'm supposed to do in return.

Do I just sit here and let him lean against me? Hold his hand? Put my arm around him? The latter seems like it'd be the most natural in this situation. Taking care to jostle him as little as possible, I lift my arm and rest it on the back of his shoulders, which makes it so his head is propped against my chest.

The extra weight over my lungs makes me hyper aware of each breath. I try to keep them shallow, so I'm not moving too much, but that only seems to make my heart beat faster. It doesn't help that I can smell the lingering evidence of us on his skin, but I'm determined not to do anything to suggest I'm just biding my time until I can get him naked.

I really am content to just have him close.

Madd isn't, though.

That is, if his wandering hand is any indication.

I try my hardest to focus on the movie, to make this time with him about him , not sex. But as his fingers hesitantly glide over my thigh, my cock starts to swell, and as soon as he notices the traitor at half-mast underneath my shorts, he hyper-fixates on it, tracing the outline from base to tip and back again. He even outlines the divot of its mushroom head and that sends a thrill up my spine he doesn't ignore.

I'm not used to other people taking the lead, though when they do, in my experience it was always aggressive. Desperate. Not slow and curious and sensual. Not like this.

This is torture. Slow, gentle, blissful torture.

The thoroughness of his movements create a whole new sensation I've never felt before. It's relaxing, yet wave after wave of desire crashes through me as Maddox's delicate fingers explore my body. .

I'm torn between doing nothing and letting him have his way with me. I'd let him make me beg if he felt so moved. As it is, I'm struggling not to take over and do as I please. To release my hips that I've pinned to the couch with the last shred of my remaining will, let them thrust into the warmth of his mouth. It doesn't help that he's teasing me with his breath, ghosting the delicious heat of it over my cock. And it's just mere inches away.

My head flops back against the couch as I trap a groan deep inside my throat.

No. What I should be doing is discouraging this so he knows I'm not hanging out with him just to get off.

I am trying—desperately trying, and failing... hard —to turn over a new leaf. To be a better person. For him. For me. Fuck. Who am I kidding?

He wants this.

He initiated this.

Right?

Maddox stops his clever perusal and runs a full palm down the length of my dick, causing it to jerk inside my shorts. It feels so good , the pleasure borders on pain, but in a needy, achy way. I want him to grab me, to squeeze hard and relieve the discomfort, or at the very least take me out so my shorts aren't pinching me, but at the same time he's got me hovering on the edge, and the sweet agony feels phenomenal.

Fuck .

I try to sit still, to not rock my hips up into his touch, but I'm losing control over my body. The need to fuck him until our limbs forget how to work is too great and growing with every second that ticks by.

"Do you like torturing me?" I clench my teeth together.

"Am I? I thought this would feel good." His hand stills and he looks up at me, guiltily. Shit .

"It feels incredible, it's just getting a little tight down there." I tip his chin up so I can kiss him and disabuse him of the notion that I don't like what he's doing. He's pretty much told me several times before not to make his decisions for him, so even though he's moving faster than I expected him to, if he's comfortable enough to make a move I won't stop him.

I said I was trying to be good, not that I wouldn't let him talk me into being bad.

?Well, that's easy to fix, right?" Maddox reaches for my pants and pops open the button before reaching for the zipper. He slowly drags it open and pushes my boxers out of the way, my cock standing up as soon as it's free, but rather than take it in hand he simply stares at it.

"What?" I grunt.

My question has his eyes snapping to mine, though he immediately lowers them with a slight shake of his head. "I'm sorry."

"For what?" I reach down and stroke myself, needing to take the edge off, loving how it makes his breath catch. Then he shakes his head again.

"I shouldn't have done that without asking."

"Done what? Taken my dick out? "

His head bobs curtly.

I give myself another stroke. "Does it look like I'm unhappy about that?"

A head shake.

Letting go of my dick, I place my fingers under his jaw and tip his head up so he's forced to look at me.

"Do you always ask people you've hooked up with if you can touch them again or is this because it's my first time with a guy?"

To his credit, he holds my stare when he answers. "The second one."

“Well, I appreciate the concern but cut that shit out. No one’s forcing me to be with a man, so you don’t need to worry about me panicking. And as far as touching me goes,” my voice takes on a husky tone, “you can do that whenever you want.”

Madd licks his lips as his eyes drift lower, back to my exposed cock. He reaches for me, finger gently circling my tip. My cock lurches toward his touch.

“You like that?” He smiles at me, almost like he’s proud of my reaction.

“Yeah,” I say through gritted teeth.

He trails his finger from the tip down to the base. “And this?”

“Yes.” I have to breathe through my nose since my jaw is locked tight.

He wraps his hand around me and gives a gentle squeeze before sliding his fist up and down.

“And that?”

“Fuck yes,” I growl. “I like all the ways you touch me.”

He smiles mischievously and I watch, captivated, as he explores me without abandon. Gentle glides of his finger up and down my length, occasionally circling or flicking the tip. Fisting me in his hand to stroke me slowly. Gently tugging my sac before moving back to my rigid length. My cock has never been handled so thoroughly. So affectionately, like it’s giving him pleasure just to touch it.

Fuck, is that even possible? Usually when people—women—have touched my dick, it was about getting it hard enough to ride. A means to an end. Maddox seems turned on just by discovering how his touch affects me, and it makes me want to return the

favor so I can see what turns him on.

Whoa. That's messed up. Or, not messed up exactly, but intense in a way I've never experienced. Am I really getting excited about the idea of learning how to touch him, like that's just as rewarding as the actual finish? I need to find out.

Before I can take charge, he drops to the floor so he's kneeling in front of me, takes my shaft in his fist, and places a tender kiss on my tip. Once again, his actions leave me reeling.

No one has ever kissed my cock before. Plenty of women have put their mouths on it, but they either slobbered all over it or sucked like they were trying to Hoover my brains out. And until right this second, I wasn't dissatisfied with either scenario since I happen to like wet, aggressive blow jobs. But having Maddox kiss, and lick and friggin savor my dick is an experience that will be seared into my soul.

The way his eyelids flutter as he licks over my length, and how he exhales contentedly when his plump lips circle my crown, have my heart beating so hard I can feel it in my dick. Tiny little pulses of ecstasy ripple over my shaft one after the other, a series of successive explosions that he teases to the surface then soothes with his tongue before they tip me over.

The TV is long forgotten, erased by the image of Madd's sultry mouth lapping at my dick. It's the most glorious torture, and despite the leisurely pace, I'm starting to think he can pull an orgasm from me just by looking so blissed out.

My balls draw up tight, spurred on by the idea of filling his throat with my release, then abruptly deflate as Maddox pulls off me with an audible pop.

"Nooo." A needy whine I didn't know I could make escapes my lips. "Don't stop," I beg.

“I have to if you want to come in my ass.”

My eyes blink furiously, trying to reconcile the words I just heard with the man kneeling before me. Did he just...?

Maddox holds out his hand, and I take it without a second thought. But the walk to the bedroom gives me a few minutes to come to my senses.

“Are you sure about this?” I ask as we cross the threshold.

“Do you ask everyone you hook up with if they’re sure—” he arches a coy brow as he strips off his clothes “—or is this because I don’t usually have casual sex.”

“The second one.” I try not to smirk as we throw our earlier words back at each other.

“Well, I appreciate the concern but cut that shit out. I know what I’m doing.” He pushes me to my back on the bed and climbs on top of me, and once again my heart threatens to beat out of my chest, although this time I don’t think it’s because I’m so turned on. I think it’s because he’s radiating this confidence I’ve only gotten the occasional glimpse of to this point, and even though I never intended for him to feel confident about being with me, I’m sort of proud of him for it. Confidence looks good on him.

The squelch of lube Madd’s coating his fingers with snaps my attention back to him.

What the actual fuck just happened ?

My dick’s out, a gorgeous guy looks like he’s getting himself ready to ride it, and I’m more focused on his internal growth than getting laid.

Who even am I?

That question goes unanswered as Madd leans forward to touch his lips to mine. Then he lines my cock up with his ass.

Before I pout about not having the opportunity to stretch him, he sinks onto me, and every thought in my head is erased by the sheer bliss of feeling his slippery walls engulf me.

“Oh God,” I groan, arching my hips up to feel more of him. “Fuck.”

“This feels good?” He starts to rock his hips slowly, those incredible washboard abs flexing enticingly.

“Fuck yes. It feels amazing. It...” I strain to get the words out. “God, it’s so tight...” I’m so overcome with the pleasure of having my dick strangled by Madd’s heavenly ass it takes a full minute or two to register his perfect cock sliding over my stomach as he swivels his pelvis. For reasons I don’t understand, my hand shoots out to grab it, holding it against my torso and rubbing my thumb over the thin skin on his crown, feeling unreasonably proud when I catch Madd’s eyes fluttering.

“Keep doing that,” he rasps, eyes still closed.

“This really does it for you, huh?”

“You have no idea.”

“I thought prostates were supposed to be the magic button.”

“They can be.” He grinds down before punching forward, moaning when the pressure on his tip increases. “But what you’re doing right now feels just as good.”

“You’re kinda making me jealous of your dick right now.” I tease my thumb between

his foreskin and his crown. “And here I thought I had nothing to be ashamed of. ”

He clenches around my shaft, making my vision hazy. “You don’t.”

I let his foreskin fall back into place and circle my thumb around his crown, preening when it makes him gasp and wail. “I feel like I’m missing out though. No one’s been able to pull that particular sound out of me.”

“We’ll see what happens when I find your prostate.”

Prior to this moment, I hadn’t worked out whether I wanted a turn on the bottom, but if Maddox thinks he can get me to sound like he does by milking my prostate, I’m game. Not that my cock doesn’t feel spectacular right now, but if there’s a better high than this, I want to experience it.

“Looking forward to it.” I smirk.

Maddox rolls his eyes. “Shut up and fuck me.”

Oh, hell yeah.

With those three simple words all my control evaporates. I crush my mouth to his as I flip us over and plunge deep, intent on finding the spot that will make him scream. Despite my rapid pace, I’m trying not to take him like an animal, but fuck, the feel of his slick walls rubbing against me, the sound of our skin slapping together, his needy moans... I’m so lost.

“Damn, Madd. You feel so good. I want you with me, but I can’t hold back.” I’m rambling as I thrust, rolling my hips with each pass to peg his prostate. And when he wails again, I know I’ve found it.

The term jackhammer never made sense to me until just now as my body moves on autopilot to chase its release. Thrusting as fast and hard and deep as physically possible, I'm spurred on by Madd's increasingly anxious moans. And then I feel it, the tiny kiss of his ass starting to tighten around me, and time stops.

I hover over Maddox as I come apart, my dick twitching almost violently in the tight confines of his ass. Each tremor sends a jolt of bliss throughout my body, pleasure so acute I'm not even sure how I remember to breathe.

My toes curl and cramp as my cock finally stills, and it's only then I register the feel of Madd's release painting the space between us, and realize I've collapsed on top of him.

Oh. My. God.

My body is utterly spent, limbs stiff from exertion. I couldn't move if I tried, and I don't have to, because without a condom I can linger inside... Holy shit!

I pull back like I've been scalded. "I didn't... We didn't... Fuck, Maddox, I'm so sorry."

"Sorry? For what?" He regards me warily.

"We didn't use a condom. I didn't... I've never..." I run a nervous hand through my hair. "I've never done that before. I've never forgotten. Shit ! I'll get tested tomorrow. I'm sure I'm clean, but I'll get tested anyway. I... Fuck !"

Madd's tired eyes look almost silver in the dim light as he holds out a hand. "It's okay."

I take his hand, letting him pull me so I'm lying beside him. "It's not okay. I'm not

the most responsible guy, but I've never been that reckless. I'm so sorry. You deserve better."

"Stop putting this on you when we both got carried away." He swipes what looks like his t-shirt over my stomach and then his to clean the mess. "Get some sleep."

"Get some—You want me to stay?" I roll my head to look at him, mouth ajar.

"It'd make me feel less like a booty call if you did."

"That's not how I see you. That's not—" Maddox silences me with a finger to my lips .

"I know. And I know things might not have gone this far tonight if I didn't start it. But since they did, stay."

Staying is not something I've done, or even had any desire to do. Yet, the idea of leaving now makes my chest feel sort of hollow.

"Okay," I agree, placing a kiss on his soft lips before I put that thought into words.

Chapter fifteen

Maddox

My eyes are still closed when I register the pleasant tingle running from my lower belly all the way to the tip of my cock, and while I can't recall the dream that inspired this feeling, I'm content to lay here and enjoy the delightful sensation of sparks running along my shaft for as long as my body will let me.

A sense of weightlessness engulfs me, giving off the illusion that I'm floating. At the same time, the pressure on my cock increases, morphing from a faint line to a fat stripe traveling my length. It swirls around the crown, light and soft, before traveling back down to the base and starting all over again. It feels phenomenal, so much so that I'm pretty sure I let out a guttural sigh as I drift deeper in ecstasy, relishing the subtle heat.

I'm not sure how long I lay there, greedily enjoying the hedonistic pleasure, but without warning the teasing, lazy flame erupts, and I'm immersed in wet heat. This time I know I moan, the bliss too overwhelming for my mind to contain.

Warmth surrounds me, wave after wave crashing and pulling on my length, driving me closer and closer to the edge. But I don't want to go over. I want to stay right here, in my euphoric stupor, for as long as my body will allow. Then I feel a tender pressure on my balls, and my eyes snap open.

The room is mostly dark, a tiny sliver of light between the curtains is the only sign morning is near. Since it's too early to get up, I squeeze my eyes shut and try to re-

enter my dream, only to realize the flame didn't go out when I woke up. I still feel it, surrounding my cock in molten heat.

I look down the length of my body to see Cade, head bobbing rhythmically as he sucks me off.

A strangled groan escapes me, and his eyes find mine for a brief, intense instant. Then he closes them and sucks me, hard. Oh shit!

I'm panting now, chest heaving as I watch my cock disappear between his full, pink lips. I squirm beneath him, desperate for release but wanting to watch him work my shaft with his lips, his tongue, marveling at how perfectly he works me over despite his self-professed lack of experience.

The man is a natural.

He doesn't just look content, he looks downright exhilarated, even when he takes me so far to the back of his throat I feel him fight back a gag. But he doesn't slow down. If anything he redoubles his efforts, licking and sucking as if I'm a meal he'd like to consume.

I've never been so turned on in my life.

No sooner does that thought cross my mind, I feel my balls draw up tight. I tap Cade's arm to warn him of my imminent release, but he bats my hand away as I lose control, hips straining upward of their own accord. Breathless shouts tumble from my throat as my cock pulses inside him, filling his mouth faster than he can swallow. But he makes a valiant attempt, gulping twice before he can't keep up, and I spill from between his plush lips .

The second I'm empty, Cade rises to his knees and vigorously pumps his shaft with

one hand while wiping the cum from his mouth with the other. It only takes a few strokes before he's painting my stomach with a strangled groan, then collapsing on my chest.

I fold my arms around him and rub his back, since I don't have any words left in my brain. It must end up putting us both to sleep since the room is bright the next time I open my eyes.

Cade's managed to shift most of his weight off me while still using my chest as a pillow, but one of his legs is slung over mine and his stomach is pressed to my side. It's an intimate position. One I actually like, except for the fact we didn't clean up earlier, and we're now somewhat stuck together.

Good thing neither of us has a lot of hair on our torsos.

I try to stay still so he can sleep, but dried cum is the worst, and soon my subtle attempts at scratching wake him up.

"Ugh, maybe it wasn't such a good idea to come all over you," he mumbles against my neck as he tries to pry us apart without wincing.

"I thought it was pretty hot in the moment."

"Yeah, I did too." He sighs as he frees himself and flops to his back. "Just remind me to clean up next time."

"Speaking of next times, I want to be awake when we do that again."

"You didn't like it?" I swear his voice wavers, though he's too focused on the ceiling for me to see any worry in his eyes.

“I loved it. But I wanted to watch you give your first blow job.”

“That’s exactly why I didn’t wake you up first.” Cade absently rubs at his chest. “I wanted to practice without any pressure.”

“Do you really think I’d judge you?” My hand finds his and I link our fingers together to give his a reassuring squeeze. Neither of us let go.

“No,” he draws, “but I wanted to impress you anyway. ”

“You did,” I half-rasp, half-chuckle.

“Good, because blow jobs are harder than they look.” I turn my head to see him rubbing his jaw and stifle a laugh. “Any idea what time it is?”

I glance at my watch. “Eight.”

“Shit, I better clean up and get out there before Deacon gives me hell about leaving him to do all the work. But maybe after I’m done for the day we can hang out?” He rolls his head to face me, an almost shy smile on his face, and my stomach does this unnerving little flip.

Coy, bashful, confident... It doesn’t matter the expression, this man can make me melt with a single look.

“I’d like that,” I give him a smile in return.

The following Saturday begins, bright and early, with Cade nuzzling my neck until I open my eyes.

“Morning.” I roll over and stretch, and he takes the opportunity to run his hands over my naked body, which he seems to do whenever he has the chance. On the multiple occasions he’s stayed over during the past few weeks, and while this would usually turn into something more, today we’re on a schedule.

“Morning.” He grins, planting a quick kiss on a puckered nipple. “We have to stop at my house to grab the bikes, so if you don’t want to be late you better put some clothes on.”

True to his word, Cade has had zero issues jumping into his new bisexual role. He doesn’t shy away from touching me, and his appetite for trying new things borders on voracious. The only thing we’ve yet to do is switch roles, which he’s anxious for, but I’m trying to ease him into that since I want his first time to be more pleasure than discomfort.

It’s taking more restraint than I expected since I’m just as ravenous for him as he is me.

“What happens if I don’t put clothes on?” I trace a finger over his firm pec.

“I’ll have to ravage you, which we’d both thoroughly enjoy, but then the whole town would know we were late because I was balls deep in my man.” He licks his lips and gives me a wicked grin, winking at me to seal the deal.

“Your man?”

“Yeah. Mine,” he says as he hugs me to him and affectionately bites my neck. I groan and roll out of Cade’s reach to head for the bathroom.

Even though I know he doesn’t mean anything by calling me his, it’d be way too easy to get swept up in the fantasy, so I default to finding amusement in his

possessiveness.

Or trying to.

We haven't really defined anything, and I don't think either of us intends to since we know this is only for the summer, but it feels an awful lot like we're dating. While it makes me smile to know Cade wants to be with only me, it's also a heavy burden, and one I'm doing my best to navigate without anyone getting hurt.

Cade has never had anyone take an interest in him, for him. And though I find it difficult to keep my hands to myself now that I've finally touched him, I'm careful to make sure sex isn't the only thing we do. I want him to know he's worthy of more than a good time.

So, in the last few weeks, we've been on several hikes together, we usually cook together, I've watched him in his workshop, and I try to get him to talk about himself when we're alone. All of which is so he knows I don't view him as the tourist attraction he thinks he is. Yet, it also means I've gotten to know him on a deeper level, and I really, really, like what I see.

Cade is observant, almost wise—almost—in terms of how he sees and understands the world around him. He's not afraid to admit what he doesn't know or ask questions, like he does on the rare occasions we talk about my work. My first instincts about him being a flirt and a tease were correct, but not entirely. He's playful, and has a mischievous side that he shows me when we're alone, particularly in the bedroom. But he doesn't use it as a defense mechanism to keep me at arm's length anymore. Rather, he simply uses it to make me smile and laugh, or turn me on.

And damn, can that man turn me on.

I only have to look at Cade and I feel my body trying to react. That's why I roll my

eyes at his flirtatious antics. If I let my body be in charge, I'd be down for the count. And to give myself fewer opportunities for my body to claim control, I sometimes insist he do his own thing. Partly, so he isn't ignoring Deacon, but also to keep myself in check. It feels so natural to be with him I could easily get hooked on that, and when it's time for me to go home at the end of the summer I'd prefer not to leave a piece of myself behind.

After I clean up, we have a quick breakfast and throw our gear in the truck since we'll be in town all day if not longer, then swing by Cade's to load up the bikes. When we get to town we park behind The Underground, and as I round the front of the truck, Cade clasps my hand as we walk inside.

It's a simple gesture, but it makes my heartbeat accelerate and my mind short circuit. This is boyfriend level stuff, and Cade doesn't do boyfriends. We aren't boyfriends. Right? So why is he making a statement like we are ?

Cade likes to touch me when we're together, such as guiding my head to his chest when we lay on the couch or putting his own in my lap. It's not the fact he's touching me that's strange. It's the fact he's touching me when others will see it. Deliberately.

Dex cocks an eyebrow when he notices our clasped hands but otherwise doesn't say anything. Ally is less discreet. "I knew it," she accuses with a perfectly arched brow.

Finn clears his throat, for our benefit or Ally's I'm not sure, and Ryder slips a twenty to Deacon, who's smirking knowingly. I swear Dex says something about a dumb bet under his breath.

"I thought he was messing with me," Ryder protests as he flicks Deacon off. "I mean, Cade dating? That's absurd, right?"

"Was the bet about Cade dating, or dating a guy?" I straighten my spine out of

instinct.

“Dating, obviously,” Ryder huffs. “I knew he was into you since that first concert, I just didn’t expect him to still be into you since he doesn’t do repeats.”

“Dude, do you hear yourself? Show some respect,” Cade barks at him.

“Sorry,” Ryder grumbles as his eyes dart to the floor, and I find myself biting back a snort because he really does look guilty.

“It’s cool, he’s trying not to laugh.” Cade smirks at me. “He knows all about my sordid past and likes me anyway. Go figure.” He squeezes my hand affectionately, and I elbow his arm, only because he knows I hate it when he puts himself down.

“Ow. Save that for the bedroom.” He winks.

I know what he’s doing, resorting to his flirty, nonchalant manner in order to stave off serious questions about us, and while I normally hate when he does this as a defense mechanism, right now I’m on board with it. I’m not ready to explain this any more than he is, so for now I’ll hide behind this wall with him.

“So, are you really going to parade me around half naked for this race AI? My guy might not like showing me off like that.”

Okay, wow . I know the possessiveness is part of the act, but the more he says it, the harder it is for me to dismiss. I mean, I’m already taking a gamble on whether I’ll be able to walk away unscathed after our time runs out, and that’s without him trying to claim me.

I’m all sorts of mixed up right now. It’s barely been two weeks since we decided to explore this thing between us. And while I know it’s supposed to be temporary, the

fact we've been virtually inseparable makes the temporary label hard to remember. Then there's the hand-holding and him calling me his guy . Rationally, I know why he's doing it, but emotionally...

I like having Cade hold my hand. I like hearing him refer to me as 'his.' And even if those gestures are for show, I find myself wondering if any part of him thinks this is real, the way a tiny part of me is starting to.

"Oh please," Ally scoffs, bringing me back to the present. "He'll be too busy fending off his own admirers to worry about you."

"Wait." Cade frowns. "I don't like that idea any better. Give him a baggy pair of jeans or something so people can't see his fine ass."

He says it jokingly, but there almost seems to be a little panic in his eyes. I squeeze his hand, though when he turns to look at me whatever I thought I saw is gone.

Ally passes out costumes and we all get dressed. I'm still not overly familiar with the show, but it seems to me she's done a great job with the costumes, right down to the wigs some of the guys are wearing. Out of all of us, I think I look the least like my character, because the black spray in hair dye makes my hair look sort of gray, but Ally seems satisfied and Cade swears that's all that matters.

Ally makes us all pose for pictures, snapping the first one Cade and I have taken together, and when she's satisfied with the results, we all head out to grab our bikes.

Cade lifts the bikes out of his truck, his lean muscles rippling under the thin fabric of his jersey, and I can't help notice the passing stare of several women walking by. The way they're ogling him has me on edge, possessive almost, which quickly fades when Ally screams in delight.

?Oh my gosh, Cade! It's amazing. This is the perfect solution to keep my coat from getting tangled." She launches herself into his arms and squeezes the life out of him before climbing on the bike. She fluffs her coat over the bustle frame and starts riding around the parking lot in circles, squealing as she goes. "It works!" Cade shakes his head and laughs, amused by her excitement, and I have to admit it is infectious.

Cade hands me a bike, one he was able to borrow from a neighbor, and then we all make our way to the starting gate a few blocks away. We collect our bibs and pin them to our clothes, then line up for the start.

Just as Cade warned me, this isn't a typical race. Not only are we counting laps instead of time, virtually everyone is in costume, most bikes are decorated or re-engineered like Ally's, and entire families including kids on training wheels are taking part. I've never seen anything like it, unless you count Halloween, but even that is mostly parents escorting costumed kids, not entire families dressed in a common theme.

There's so much going on, I'm not sure where to look. One family is dressed like Raggedy Ann and Andy, their kids in matching outfits. A group of twelve or so are all dressed like Waldo, and another group is dressed like Mario Kart characters complete with bikes decorated to resemble the vehicles each of the characters use in the game. The creativity surrounding me is amazing, and I'm starting to see why these events are so much fun.

Once the race begins and we start weaving our way through town, people line the streets to cheer us on, clapping, shouting and ringing cowbells. We wave to the crowd as if we're in a parade, which I guess in a way we are, as we do lap after lap.

It's clear the entire town is involved one way or another, and that sense of community is almost overwhelming. Not in a bad way, just different. Where I come from, you might have a neighborhood or a school come together for a common goal, but you

certainly never get the entire town, and while this feels sort of like a big party, it's also a little emotional to see how supportive people are of each other.

I knew from the first moment I stepped into this town that the sense of unity outweighed anything I'd ever known, but I didn't understand the sheer magnitude of that until today.

Katah Vista isn't wealthy. Wealthy people come here, have second homes here, but the town itself doesn't have money. It has blue-collar, hard-working people. Yet, every single one of them is digging deep for this charity event, whether by raising money, donating food or staffing the event. Everyone has a role and is doing their part.

Yes, it's social and kind of like a giant street party given that most everyone is in costume, but at its core this is an event with a purpose. You might find events like this in bigger cities, though you won't find the entire city participating, and the fact everyone here is involved calls to me in a way I wasn't expecting. At the same time, it's familiar since it's reminiscent of how I got involved with environmental science.

It makes me feel more at home here than I do in my actual home .

Yes, the town is small, and that comes with typical small-town issues like a lack of amenities and an abundance of gossip. Yet looking around me, I don't see a single disingenuous smile.

Throughout the race, we stop at different houses for snacks and drinks, chatting with other racers and spectators while we take a break. At each stop, we're ushered inside as if we've been expected, although from what I can tell there is no schedule. There are hugs, toasts, picture taking, and smiles all around. Even for me, despite the fact I don't know anyone. It makes me feel like I belong, and for a guy who's always felt like a bit of an outsider, that's huge.

Although we travel as the ? Ted Lasso' pack, I'm introduced to dozens of new people as Cade's guy instead of Trent, which unfailingly results in looks of confusion and curiosity. Still, since everyone is so nice, I know that only reflects their surprise, not disapproval. In fact, I'd say most people are accepting, almost happy to see him with someone. And by with someone , I mean the way Cade is making it evident we're together.

Each time we get off our bikes, he immediately reaches for my hand, brushing his thumb back and forth over my knuckles. Before we get on again, he gives me a lingering kiss, one that says he wishes we were alone.

Showing this much open affection should give us pause, because it suggests a closer connection than either of us want to admit. Instead, it's starting to feel natural. Just as it's starting to feel natural to be here.

Chapter sixteen

Cade

I 've spent my whole life in this town, twenty-six years, and I've done this bike race every single one of them, to the point the monotony of this day was wearing on me. Until this year.

Even I'm not dense enough to question why that is.

I fucking loved having Maddox next to me all day. Putting aside the fact he's so beautiful and so genuine, he makes everything better just by being there. I don't think he stopped grinning all day long. I couldn't stop myself from smiling when I looked at him, nor could I stop touching him. What's even weirder is that I wasn't touching him to tease him or make him aroused or anything. I just liked the feel of his skin against mine, introducing him as my guy and seeing the way he tried not to blush each time I said it.

Plus, I got to experience this day through his eyes, which kind of made me love it again. He was so awed by all the costumes, so impressed with how the whole town got involved, so humbled by how nice everyone was. He didn't tell me any of that, not verbally anyway, but I could see it in his eyes. I could see him falling in love with this town, and the selfish bastard that I am makes me wonder if he might like it enough to stay .

I realize that's an absurd thought. He's got big goals for himself, and I'm not sure they can be met here. I'm also not sure he'd be content with the small-town life or

could deal with the winters we have. Beyond all that, the thing I'm most unsure about is whether he'd be willing to stay here for me , which I find myself thinking about as we drive back to his place.

It's a thought that's crossed my mind with increasing frequency.

Being with Maddox feels right in a way nothing else in my life ever has. I'm not trying to imply I've had it rough—by most accounts my life is the stuff other guys dream about— and I'm grateful for that. But it was my life alone. I didn't have anyone to share it with.

A few weeks ago, that didn't bother me in the least. I thought being alone was the ideal way to go through life, or at least life in my twenties, and any thoughts of being with someone started and ended with the notion of having a good time between the sheets. The idea I could commit to one person, in and out of the bedroom was... absurd.

Yet instead of feeling confined in this arrangement, like I kind of expected, I feel relaxed. Happy. And while the sex is off the charts, I don't feel like that's all I have to offer Maddox since there are times we hang out without fucking. Yes, I chased after him because I wanted to experience the raw, primal urges I thought only another man could give me, but I ended up finding someone who gets me on a deeper level. Someone who makes me think and laugh and contemplate my future. Makes me want to be a better person.

I wonder if that means I'm starting to fall for him? Or maybe I already have?

That's why a part of me is hoping he falls in love with this town, because if he does, maybe he'll fall for me too.

I hold on to that fantasy for the drive home, Madd's hand linked in mine. But reality

sets in as I pull onto his street and spot the familiar silver truck parked behind the Subaru. I had hoped to put this off a bit longer seeing as how my folks have been on vacation the past few weeks, but they should've got home earlier today, so I'm actually lucky they waited until now to confront me.

Maddox notices the car as we pull into the drive, but he doesn't press me for any details when I tell him I'll meet him inside, which is a welcome relief. I give him a soft kiss and whisper that I won't be long, pointing him toward the back door.

That nagging feeling that I might want him to be more than a fling intensifies as I watch him walk away before rounding the front of the house to meet my dad on the porch. The casual way he's leaning on the railing doesn't hide the look of concern on his weathered face.

"He's got a pretty look about him," he begins as I take a seat in one of the rocking chairs.

"Wait til you see him without the hair dye." I push up on the balls of my feet so the chair starts to sway, an outlet for my restless energy.

"This been going on since you lent him your truck?" Dad watches me closely.

Whoever spilled the tea didn't spare any details.

"No, I really did do that to be nice." He doesn't need to know I was hoping the gesture would help me get closer to Maddox.

Dad nods his head. "Were you hoping to keep this a secret?"

"No. But I was hoping I'd have a chance to tell you before you heard the rumors." Dad's brow lifts as he cuts me a knowing look, implying I should know better.

“Yeah, yeah. I still thought people would give you at least one night home before they start jabbering about me.”

“Considering the nature of what they had to say I’m surprised we didn’t get a phone call on vacation.”

“Fair enough.” I rub the back of my neck, dreading where I think this is going. “You here to tell me this is a bad idea? ”

“Maybe.” He cocks his head. “But not for the reason you think.”

I’m not expecting this, and I don’t have a response for it. The rocking chair stills as I go tense, bracing for what he has to say next.

“You’re expecting me to tell you it’s a bad idea to get involved with the client’s nephew since it could jeopardize business?”

“Isn’t that why you’re here?” I felt pretty certain my folks wouldn’t care about me taking an interest in a man—they’re hippies at heart—but I feel a bit of relief knowing his issue is about Madd’s relationship to our client, not his gender.

“That’s why I came here, but not what had me concerned.” Dad shakes his head slowly.

“What has you concerned?” My heartbeat slows, wondering what else could make him look so grim.

“That you’ve fallen for him,” he says matter-of-factly.

“I...what?”

"I saw the way you looked at him just now, son." He exhales deeply.

The rhythmic beating of my heart that nearly stopped seconds ago now echoes in my chest. "I...well, I like him, yeah," I stutter.

"Give your old man some credit, Cade. I know love when I see it. Now, I admit I came over here expecting to tell you to be careful about having a little fun with the wrong person, and I'm glad to see that's not what this is. I'm glad to see you happy." He smiles, although it looks more sad than pleased. "But that raises a whole new set of concerns for me. If I remember right, he's not staying here past the summer, and I don't want to see you get your heart broken. Does he know how you feel?"

"I don't know how I feel," I admit, which seems to shock both of us. I love my dad, and I know he loves me, but we've never really had the kind of relationship where we talked about feelings. Not that we don't talk, we just never really got into the emotional stuff, and we especially didn't talk about guys. I don't know how to have this conversation. I don't know what to say.

"You aren't sure if you love him?" Dad asks hesitantly.

"How would I know that?" I throw my hands up. "I've never had a boyfriend before. Until Maddox I never even went on a date."

"You went to prom." Dad's brow furrows in confusion.

"In a group, not with one specific girl. I was always more interested in playing on the mountain or playing tour guide than hanging out with one girl. Or guy." I rub my hand over my face. "Until these last few weeks, I still was."

Dad nods thoughtfully. "So, now you'd rather spend time with him?" he guesses correctly.

"I still play on the mountain," I protest, thinking about how Maddox makes me ride while he finishes his work, and then we hang out after.

"Why are you smiling?" Dad asks.

"I'm smiling?" I wasn't aware I had been.

"You're doing it again," Dad says.

Huh. I lean against the back of the chair and look up at the stars. "Maddox makes me ride a few times a week," I admit. "He doesn't want to keep me from doing my own thing."

"But you would, to spend time with him?" Dad's gaze drifts toward the house.

"Yeah." I nod, keeping my eyes on the sky.

"Then you need to tell him."

"Tell him what, exactly?" I meet his gaze.

"How you feel. That you want him to stay. I assume him staying is what you want..." he trails off, waiting to see if I'll agree or object.

"He's got plans that don't involve staying here, and I don't have plans to leave. I'm not going to mess up what he's worked for by asking him to stay here." I gesture to the space around us.

"What's wrong with here?"

"He's studying for his PhD, Dad, what could he possibly do with that here?" I shake

my head.

"I don't know. But if he knows you want him to stay, maybe he'll try to figure it out." He makes it sound so simple.

"And why would he want to figure that out? Because I ask him to stay? I don't know if he feels that way about me." I can't afford to let myself think he might. To get my hopes up.

"He makes you bike a couple times a week," Dad says.

"So?" I set the chair rocking again. Why can't he just drop it?

"So, he doesn't want to get in the way of the things you love, same as you don't want to get in the way of the things he loves. You don't make that effort for another person if you don't care about them."

"Care about me, sure. I know he cares about me. I don't know if that's enough to stay here, though," I exhale.

"That's why you have to tell him how you feel, Cade. Give the two of you a chance."

"You really think he'd stay?" Dammit, now he's got me wondering.

"Only one way to find out, son." He steps to me and claps my shoulder. "Talk to him."

"Yeah, okay," I nod absently. "I'll...I'll do that."

Dad gives my shoulder a firm squeeze. "And bring him over for dinner. Mom will be pissed if you hold out on her much longer."

?True,” I chuckle as Dad makes his way to his truck. “Night, Dad.”

?Night.” He climbs in the cab and drives away .

Well, that was unexpected. Instead of a lecture about being reckless and immature I get a lecture about going after Maddox for real. But is it that easy?

Deep down, I suspect my dad could be right about me loving him. I’m still not ready to call it love since it happened so hard and so fast, but hearing him say it out loud... I realize it’s probably true, or on the way to being true. There’s no other way to explain this need to be near him, this desire to have him stay.

Fuck if I know what to do about it though.

I appreciate my dad’s perspective, but this thing was always supposed to have a time limit and changing the rules in the middle of—whatever we are—seems like something the old me would do. Not to mention the fact it’s still hard to believe this is happening even though it’s happening to me . And who knows what Madd thinks of all this.

Could he feel the same? Would telling him how I feel make it easier for him to stay, or harder to leave? I’m not exactly a catch for a guy like that, and I’d never forgive myself if I distracted him from the career he’s been working toward, so until I have a better sense of how he’ll respond, I should probably keep my thoughts to myself.

“Everything good?” Maddox is toweling off when I finally make it to the bedroom, his hair back to the dusky blond that makes his tan skin glow.

My eyes rake over his gorgeous body, catching on a stray water droplet that rolls

down his sexy abs. “It’d be a whole lot better if you drop the towel. ”

Madd studies me with the pensive expression he gets so often, and while I’m no better at deciphering it today than I was a few weeks ago, I feel pretty confident saying tonight he’s pondering whether I’m trying to use sex as a diversion from the conversation I just had outside.

He wouldn’t be wrong, but he wouldn’t be right either. Naked Maddox is just too great a temptation to pass up regardless of anything else I have going on, which he must conclude since he drops the towel and shows me his mouth watering cock.

I close the distance in three steps and drop to my knees, pressing my face against his groin to inhale the fresh scent of soap that lingers on his skin. Then I lick a fat stripe from root to tip and seal my lips around his crown.

“Jesus.” He threads his fingers through my hair, more so to hold himself steady than to keep me in place.

I hum in response since my mouth is otherwise occupied, wedging my tongue underneath his foreskin to lick around his tip before slurping on the head. The moan that spills from his lips is indecent, and for the millionth time since we first hooked up, I’m envious of his dick. Not the size or the shape, but the thin little flap of skin that seems to drive him out of his mind when I play with it, which is my new favorite thing.

Sometimes I simply run my finger over it, using Madd’s own skin to massage his crown. Other times I pull it back and deny him the extra friction. Once I even sucked so hard I swear it stretched over his entire cockhead. His release had filled my mouth so quickly afterward, I swore I had to be dreaming.

Ever since, it’s become my favorite fucking way to torture him, to tease him, to drive

him mad until lust clouded his eyes and my name fell from his beautiful lips. Today would be no exception .

Madd's hips rock gently forward as I lap at his cock, his soft groans echoing throughout the room each time I take him deep and slowly retreat. It's a sound I don't think I'll ever tire of, not only because it's so sexy, but because it's so gratifying to hear the effect I have on him.

Looking up from my knees, I can see how tight his stomach is coiled. How fixed his jaw is. How hard he's straining to hold still, and let me have my fun when the urge to move verges on overpowering.

There's only one thing I want more than to see him lose control and come down my throat.

"Fuck me," I rasp as I pop off his shaft.

Maddox stares down his body, chest heaving, pupils blown so big his eyes look more black than gray. "On the bed. Clothes off."

I shoot off the floor like a rocket and strip down, flopping onto my back spread eagle.

"Someone's anxious." Maddox chuckles as he grabs the lube from the nightstand.

"You've been prepping me for weeks," I grumble, since he's been annoyingly careful about not wanting to hurt me with his generous dick. "I'm not giving you a chance to change your mind."

"A bad first time can be the difference between going vers or strictly topping."

"So you keep reminding me." A contented moan rumbles from my throat as the first

finger goes in, bringing with it the full feeling I've been chasing more of.

His second finger brings forth a happy sigh when it starts to scissor deep inside me. "Remember, the prep is just as much for me as it is for you."

"How do you figure?" My hips arch upward as he works in a third and starts to pump .

"I'd like to actually fuck you, but if I don't loosen you up first, I'll blow on the first thrust."

"Fine, be super thorough," I grunt. "Just don't hit my prostate. Save that for your dick."

Maddox gives me one of those eye rolls that's supposed to signal he's annoyed when really he's amused. I pull that expression from him a lot.

Eyes closed, I take deep, methodical breaths as Maddox swirls his fingers inside me. It feels incredible, though by concentrating on my breathing I'm able to keep my body from getting too stimulated. Finally, after what feels like forever, he withdraws his fingers and lubes his cock.

"Ready?" He holds himself poised at my hole.

"Seriously?" I bark.

Madd's lip quirks up before he leans forward to give me a chaste kiss. "Tell me to stop if I hurt you."

"Yes, Dad." That earns me another eye roll right before the pressure on my hole intensifies, and my body tenses involuntarily.

“Relax,” Maddox says gently.

“Yeah, I...” I grunt as my mind wars for control with my body. “I got it.” It takes a minute for my mind to claim victory, but once it does the tension leaves my muscles and Madd pushes inside.

The invasion is... not pleasant. It doesn't hurt exactly, but I feel overly full and that's not at all what I was expecting. I huff out a frustrated breath right as I come to another startling realization.

“Nooo, why is my dick going soft?” I whine.

“It happens sometimes before the burn switches to pleasure.”

“Make it stop. Pump my cock.”

Maddox shakes his head curtly. “I can't move, or I'll blow. Just hold still for a second. ”

He pinches his eyes shut while I silently beg my dick to wake up, and when that doesn't work, I try subtly rocking my hips to fuck myself on the cock buried inside me.

“You are shit at following instructions,” Maddox grunts.

“Take it out on my ass,” I snip, which is maybe the wrong response since he pulls out and slams home in a thrust that has starbursts exploding behind my eyelids. For a brief second all I see is a blinding white light, though as it fades, I register the fissures of electricity coursing through my body, and the blissful weight of my cock filling.

“Like that?” Madd growls.

“Just like that.”

The Greek god above me rears back and snaps forward again, only this time he doesn't pause, he just keeps ramming into me with reckless abandon, panting and grunting each time he bottoms out. It's not at all what I expected, given that he's been so worried about not hurting me during my first time, so I can only assume this animalistic version of Maddox has appeared because I told responsible Maddox to check out, and he's lost to his baser urges.

I fucking love it.

He's driving into me with single-minded focus, cock nudging my prostate with each thrust. The ecstasy I feel each time he makes contact with that sensitive bundle of nerves doesn't have time to dissipate before it's mounting again, sending me into a pleasure spiral that has no beginning and no end, just a prolonged, seamless sensation of bliss.

I'm vaguely aware of my toes curling, and since I can't place the sounds surrounding me, I'm forced to acknowledge they might be my own incoherent babbling. A garbled intent to beg for more.

And damn, does he give it to me.

Madd's stomach ripples enticingly with each thrust, glistening with the effort of his relentless pace. The tendons in his neck stand at attention, jaw locked tight as he valiantly tries to deliver what I've asked for.

My now hard cock slaps against my stomach in the same pattern Madd's balls smack against mine, the filthy soundtrack making the moment sexier.

I'm in literal heaven. Erotic, unparalleled heaven.

“Pump your cock,” Maddox grunts from above me, and since that’s exactly what my poor aching dick wants, I waste no time taking it in hand and stroking it in time with his thrusts. “Come with me.”

As if on cue my cock erupts, pulsing in my fist as cum shoots over my chest. It’s a familiar yet foreign sensation since it’s not just my cock pulsing, but something deep inside me. Something that magnifies my release tenfold, wave after wave of bliss coursing through me like a supernova that leaves me wondering if all the atoms in my body are still intact or if the force of that explosion sent them spiraling into the air around me.

Above me Maddox straight up roars, his whole body seeming to freeze though I distinctly feel a spasm inside me that I’m pretty sure isn’t coming from me, which sends a whole new wave of tingles ping-ponging throughout my spent limbs.

Maddox collapses on top of me, his weight making it hard to breathe yet at the same time grounding my wayward thoughts about being fucked into another plane of existence.

“What the hell just happened? I don’t think I’ve ever fucked anyone so hard before, and that’s the opposite of what I wanted your first time to be.”

My eyes drift shut as I wrap my arms around him. “That’s exactly what I wanted my first time to be.”

“I didn’t break you?” I sense actual fear in his voice .

“You totally did, but in the best possible way.” I suck in a breath as he pulls out, and I feel rather than see him wince.

“That doesn’t make any sense, Cade,” he says softly.

“It does if you understand what you broke is the belief that I’d had some epically good sex in my lifetime.”

“Still not following,” he grunts as he flops down next to me.

I roll to my side so I can look at him. “You fucked me into another realm, Madd. I’m officially enlightened.”

“Great,” he mutters. “You’re enlightened, and I’m officially unhinged.”

“What does that mean?”

He rolls to face me, an almost haunted expression on his face. “I was totally out of control. You should be pissed at me right now.”

I roll my eyes. “Keep fucking me like that and I might fall in love with you.”

“So, I didn’t hurt you?” He still sounds doubtful, but he also doesn’t sound freaked out, so either he thinks I was joking about the whole falling in love thing or it didn’t register.

“You didn’t hurt me.” I lean forward just enough to give him a lingering kiss. “Now get some rest because we are definitely doing that again once I have my strength back.”

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Chapter seventeen

Maddox

“ M mm, my favorite,” I roll over and stretch as Cade sets a steaming cup of coffee and a toasted bagel on the nightstand.

“I know.” He takes a seat on the bed and plants a lingering kiss on my lips.

This is an... interesting development.

“What’s the occasion?” I ask, as I pick up a bagel. “Is this your way of trying to keep me in bed all day?” I lick my lips before taking a bite.

“Think you could handle that?” Cade drags his finger up the inside of my thigh, stopping just before the point my dick would take notice.

“I want to say yes.” I close my eyes, remembering how good it felt to be buried inside him last night. “But you probably need a break. And I know I do. I’m still worn out.”

“Rain check then,” Cade laughs. “Besides, I have to meet with my old man to go over the projects we have going on.”

I lick a drop of cream cheese off my thumb. “Is that who was here last night?”

“Yeah. My old man just had to give me shit for being the last to know about you.” Cade grabs my hand and licks a similar blob off my forefinger.

“You didn’t tell them?” It’s a struggle to keep my jaw from dropping completely. “We were on display for the whole town to see and you didn’t give them a heads up?”

“Relax.” Cade’s warm hand rubs over my thigh. “They’ve been out of town for weeks and only got back today, so it’s not like there was this big conspiracy to keep you a secret. And all will be forgiven if I bring you over for dinner. Think you can do that tonight?”

My whole body seizes up, the coffee that’s halfway to my mouth sloshing dangerously close to the rim of the cup. Did he really just invite me to a family dinner?

“Isn’t that...I mean...What?” I sputter as I set the mug back on the nightstand.

“Small town, Maddox.” He exhales heavily, letting his hand fall away from my leg. “As soon as we went out together word spread. They’re curious.”

“Fuck. I mean... you told me this happens in small towns, but... seriously? They want me to come to dinner?” The room suddenly feels way too hot.

“This is part of why I was so content to spend most of our time here or on the trail.” He offers a weak smile. “The town sort of takes over and makes it hard to have any sense of privacy. But we don’t have to do it. My folks will understand if I tell them it’s too much.”

“It’s not that,” I blink, “I’ve just never met anyone’s parents before. I’m not sure what to expect.”

“You’ve never met a guy’s parents before?” Cade looks confused .

?Well, I didn't really date much in high school, and in college no one's parents were around so, no." I lift an exasperated shoulder. "I don't really know how this works."

?I've never brought anyone home before, so I don't know how it works either. And I know it's...weird to do this already, but, seeing as most of the town has already met you, it's kind of weird how my parents haven't, if that makes sense." He rubs his neck, looking adorably flustered.

?I guess." I bite down on my bottom lip. I know word travels in a small town, but what sort of word has made its way back to them? Does the town see me as his latest conquest? Do they worry I'm using him for the summer? Do they know I'm a man?

It sounds silly to ask, but my shoulder length hair has fooled people before.

?What's wrong, Madd?" Cade threads his fingers through mine. "You got sort of pale there for a second."

?What do you think your parents have heard about me?"

?Nothing bad." He gives my fingers a squeeze.

?No, I mean... Do they know about me?" My hand floats over the length of my body, pointing out the obvious.

"Do they know I'm sleeping with a man? I assume so, since my dad watched me kiss you then walk in here last night." Cade smirks.

"And?"

"And what?" He has the audacity to look confused.

“Their formerly straight son is sleeping with a man, and the first thing they said is bring him to dinner?”

“Pretty much.”

I don’t even know how to respond to that. Even my parents, who have been endlessly supportive, had questions. When did I realize I liked men? Did I still identify as a man? The usual. And while those questions might seem offensive on the surface, I knew they were my parents’ attempt to support me to the fullest extent. The idea that Cade could just blurt out he’s with a man and no one bats an eye is totally foreign to me. I don’t know how to roll with that.

“Do they know I’m only here for the summer?”

“Yeah, why?” Cade regards me warily.

“They won’t disapprove of us sleeping together when I’m leaving?” For a second I swear he winces, but when I focus on his expression it’s the same sheepish one he always wears when talking about his past.

“I’m no saint, remember?” He brushes a strand of hair back from my face. “Besides, they’d probably rather have me sleeping with you than with a bunch of random tourists.”

Oh wow. That’s an angle I hadn’t thought of before, and it kind of knocks the wind out of me. I don’t care about his past, though I do care that people might make assumptions about me because of it. Especially his parents.

“Your parents know your… history?” I swallow.

“They don’t know details.” He rolls his eyes. “But it’s no secret I spent lots of my

time with the visitors who came through town.”

“Won’t they think I’m another visitor?” I regret the question as soon as it leaves my mouth. We haven’t had any conversations about what’s happening with us, and it sounds like I’m fishing for confirmation I’m somehow different. Even though I know I am, at least in the sense that I’m a man and he’s spending time with only me, I wasn’t trying to push him for anything more. Not deliberately anyway.

Do I want to mean more to him than the people he’s been with before? Yes, without a doubt. But this is Cade we’re talking about, so there’s a good chance I already do even though we’re not together together. I have to be content with that, no matter how much I’m starting to envision a different outcome once the summer ends .

“You’re...I...Maybe this is a bad idea. I didn’t mean to put you on the spot.” Cade’s eyes drop to the floor.

“You didn’t.” I sigh heavily, hoping I didn’t just push him away. “My first instinct is still to worry about what people will think instead of living for myself. It’s a byproduct of always feeling like the black sheep in my family. I’m working on it.”

“Cool.” His wary expression eases into a smile. “And don’t worry about my parents. They won’t think anything one way or another. They just don’t want to be the only people who haven’t met the sexy guy I’m sleeping with.” He arches his brows suggestively.

“Well, when you put it that way, what am I worried about?” I roll my eyes.

“Exactly.” Cade leans in to kiss me, more tenderly than I expected given the way he was just teasing me, then heads out to meet his dad, giving me some much-needed time alone. Not that I’m tired of having him around or anything, the opposite actually, which is why it’s good for me to have a little space to sort things out.

He hasn't said anything specific, but between his actions at the bike race, breakfast in bed, and now dinner with his parents, I get the sense things have taken a more serious turn. I mean, small town gossip aside, if I was just the summer fling would he really bother introducing me to his parents? My gut says no. But if I'm not a summer fling, what am I?

I know I'm putting my heart at risk by immersing myself in him so completely. But I can't seem to pull back, which is why dinner with his parents scares me.

Cade wouldn't go through with dinner if I was just a fling, but just because I'm not a fling doesn't mean he's falling for me the way I'm falling for him. After all, this is the guy who's never been on a date, who I'm not even sure has been with the same woman twice, so believing he could actually fall for the first man he tries a relationship with is a stretch.

He may care about me in a way he didn't let himself care about the women before me, but as much as I want to believe that makes this thing with us real, unless he says otherwise I have to operate under the assumption Cade is simply living in the moment. That he isn't reading anything into the fact he's stayed here every night for the past week, or that he's going to introduce me to his parents. He's simply making the most of this experience while it lasts, because we still have an end date.

I'm tense as we make the drive to Cade's parents, but not because I'm about to meet them.

Well, not entirely.

I still think meeting his parents is kind of a big deal, though what really has my mind spinning is something Cade himself told me, about not worrying what other people

think. Granted, we are talking about his parents, so it makes sense they'd be the exception to that mantra, but the Cade I've come to know doesn't do anything he doesn't want to do, so if he's bringing me to meet them, is there some part of him that wants this?

Part of me thinks the answer is yes. The question is why.

We pull up to a ranch-style house on a flat plot of land next to a stream carrying the snow melt off the mountain. It's clearly an older house, though it's well maintained, and with the wide walkway up to a large porch it looks inviting.

"You grew up here?" I ask as the truck rolls to a stop .

"Yep. This was one of the first houses Dad built here, and Mom loved it so much she claimed it as hers instead of letting him sell it. Come on." He exits the truck and meets me at the front of the cab like he always does, then guides me to the front door.

From the front entry, you can see straight through the house, past the living room to a wall of windows framing the mountain range in the distance, and I immediately see why Cade's mom fell in love with this house. Right now, the view is a lush green dotted with reds and yellows and purples from all the wildflowers. In the winter, I imagine it's a pristine white surrounded by a rich blue sky. It's breathtaking.

He takes my hand and leads me through the living room to the deck out back where his parents are lounging on a couch. A coffee table holds a few plates of snacks, and a grill sizzles off to the side with what smells like burgers.

Cade's parents turn to look at us as we enter, and I notice right away he's the spitting image of his dad. An inch or two shorter and slightly thicker, his dad has the same strong jaw and blue eyes that first drew me to Cade. His mom is also tall and slender, her sandy brown hair matching her son's, perfectly. Both of them have lines around

the mouth and eyes, the kind you get when you smile often, which puts me at ease.

They rise off the couch to greet us as Cade makes introductions. “Maddox, these are my parents, Charles and Jessica. They go by Chuck and Jessie.”

“It’s nice to meet you.” I shake their hands. “Thank you for having me.”

“It’s nice to meet you too,” Jessie says. “Can we get you something to drink?”

“Whatever you’re having.”

Chuck hands me and Cade a beer, then Cade leads me over to the couch where we all sit, his fingers loosely intertwined with mine. I know our joined hands don’t go unnoticed, but I convince myself if Cade’s comfortable with it then I should be too.

“How are you enjoying your stay so far?” Chuck asks.

“Oh, it’s great.” I smile, hoping I don’t sound overly enthusiastic. “The weather’s been cooperating, and the scenery is unbelievable. Even better than I remembered.”

“You’ve been here before?” Jessie seems surprised, although I can’t imagine why. Maybe Cade implied it’s my first time here since he’s been showing me around his favorite trails.

“Years ago.” I twist the cap off my beer and set it on the coffee table. “That’s what led me to believe it would be the perfect spot to get some work done.”

“Cade mentioned you’re working on a PhD?” Chuck asks.

“Yes, in environmental science,” I say proudly. I don’t miss Cade’s reassuring wink, and I have to admit it feels good to own that instead of dwelling on how it sets me

apart from the rest of my family.

“What’s your thesis on?” Jessie leans forward.

“Mom’s a teacher at school.” Cade’s silky voice draws my gaze to his. “Science.”

“Oh,” I exclaim, turning back to his mom. “I’m focusing on alternative energies. Specifically, water, and how we can harness its power without negatively impacting the ecosystems it supports.”

I notice Cade picking at a spot on his shorts as I talk, like he’s uncomfortable. We rarely talk about my work, and not in explicit detail. He’s attentive and asks questions when we do, which I appreciate, but I think that’s more to be polite than because he’s really interested. I get it, the subject isn’t for everyone so I haven’t tried to force it, but I can’t help but wonder if it bothers him to be learning some of this at the same time his parents are. If anyone else notices they don’t say anything.

“That would make Katah Vista a good resource as well as a good spot to work I imagine,” Chuck wonders aloud as Cade inexplicably seems to perk up a bit.

“It would.” I’m easily drawn back to the water conversation. “Observing how water acts as it melts helps us understand the impact it could have if we alter that behavior or try to harness it, although much of the work currently being done in this area is on the coast.”

After a few follow-up questions, the conversation drifts towards lighter subjects like favorite movies, foods and places to travel seeing as how his parents just returned from Belize. One thing that doesn’t come up is Cade’s sexuality, which I wasn’t convinced his parents were so willing to accept when he’d never skewed toward men before. It’s almost like sexuality doesn’t exist, which makes it even easier to feel comfortable in this new environment.

Over burgers, Cade and his dad debate the pros and cons of a former ski racer buying the resort. Apparently, everyone's a little apprehensive about the son of a wealthy man getting handed the reins, even if his background is in the sport. Since that topic doesn't apply to me, Jessie and I chat about her work at the school, what lessons she teaches her students, and even the history of the area.

"Did you know the mountain runoff follows the same path today that it has for centuries?" she asks me.

"I knew the path had never been deliberately altered, but I didn't know it's the same as it's always been." I shake my head.

"There's less of it now. The stream over there used to be several feet wider and higher—" she points to the edge of their yard "—and some years it's little more than a trickle, but it's the same riverbed that existed when the Native Americans first settled here. That's how the area got its name."

"From the riverbed?"

"No, from the mountain. Katah is short for Katahdin, the Native American term for 'Great Mountain.'"

"Mom, no history lessons tonight," Cade groans. "Maddox has enough school during the day."

"Then no business talk for you two," she admonishes the men with a grin in my direction.

We cap off dinner by roasting marshmallows over the fire pit, with Cade teasing me that the light brown shade I prefer isn't melty enough just before he takes a bite of his crisp marshmallow and dribbles the sticky mess all over his face. I help him wipe it

off before realizing his parents are watching us with contented smiles. I feel myself blushing under their gaze and am grateful for the stubble on my face that hopefully hides it.

Cade's parents refuse my offer to clean up, so he takes me to his old room while they put the leftovers away. It looks exactly like you would expect a teen boy's room to look, a double bed with a plaid comforter in the center of the room, sports and band posters all over the walls, samples of what I assume are his earliest attempts at welding on a bookshelf.

"When was the last time you stayed in this room?" I run my finger along the edge of the dresser.

"I usually stay on Christmas Eve so I'm here when I wake up, but I haven't lived here since I was twenty."

"You're really close with your parents." It's more of an observation than a question .

"Yeah. Hard not to be when I work for my dad. Plus, I bump into them around town a lot. You're not close with your parents?" He sits on the bed to watch me wander around his room.

"Yes and no." I pick up a little figurine that resembles a bike. "I don't bump into them around town so the only contact we have is when we schedule it. And even though they support what I want to do, the fact I didn't go into the family business puts some distance between us. Not bad, but it's there. Your parents are nice." I change the subject.

"They're pretty easy to hang out with." He leans back so he's resting on his forearms.

"They are. And they didn't give me the third degree which was nice. I was sort of

bracing for that.” I pick up a different piece, a candle holder maybe?

“Third degrees aren’t really their style. They just wanted to meet you.” His eyes track me as I set the candleholder down.

“If you ever met my parents, you’d definitely get the third degree,” I say without thinking. Dammit, why do I keep saying things that seem to hint at a future?

“Yeah?” He seems curious. “That does sound uncomfortable. Now I get why you were worried about coming here.”

“I wasn’t...yeah, okay. I was worried.” I smile sheepishly. “But I shouldn’t have been. This was fun.”

“They like you, you know.” He sits up and pulls me to him, setting his hands on my hips.

“How can you tell?” I lay my hands on his shoulders.

“Just a feeling.” He shrugs before gently touching his lips to mine. “You know,” he whispers against my mouth, “I’ve never shown anyone my room before. Never christened this bed.” He trails his fingertip along the waistband of my jeans .

Something about our conversation must’ve spooked him since he’s reverting to his flirty persona. But since being with his parents felt so easy, I’m a little spooked too, and I retreat to the physical with him.

“You want to do that now, with your parents here?” I slide my hands under his shirt and worry a nipple. I’m absolutely not going there right now, but I don’t mind teasing him a little.

?No. You're a screamer. So, I'm thinking I should get you home." He nibbles at my ear.

"I'm not a screamer." I pinch him.

"You will be tonight," he growls before kissing me deeply, and when we get home, he makes good on his promise.

Chapter eighteen

Cade

? Tell me again why we're here," Deacon interrupts the thoughts that have been playing on repeat. "The parade starts in less than two hours."

It's the Fourth of July, one of the busiest days of the year because of the parade we host, and it's getting so popular you have to get there early to get a good spot.

"Beck needs my truck to pull his float. I need to get all these tools out." I gesture to the boxes in the bed. Normally, I keep my tools in my garage, but since I've been staying with Maddox more often than not, it's easier to leave them in the truck. With his uncle's garage nearly done, I can store them in there while giving Beck more room.

?We couldn't have done this yesterday?" Deacon grunts.

?Didn't think about it until this morning." I scratch my head, realizing I need a haircut.

?Too busy thinking with your dick," Deacon mutters under his breath, just loud enough for me to hear him.

"What's that mean?" I turn to face him, gritting my teeth .

"You're still staying here every night, and today is the Fourth, the day you hyped all

last year as being the perfect time to find a bunch of hot women wearing skimpy outfits,” he complains.

This is another popular day for costumes, and while I draw the line at wearing a flag, I’m playing along and wearing a royal blue velvety shirt matching Madd’s stars and stripes one. One guess where they came from .

“It is, so you’ll have plenty of opportunity.” I lift one of the boxes off the truck.

“But I won’t have a wingman.” Deacon scowls as he lifts another.

“Get Ryder. Or Blake. You don’t need me.” I walk toward the garage, hoping that’s the end of it.

“I know. But I envisioned this summer going much differently.” He follows me. “We were supposed to hang out and go crazy the way you always bragged about, and instead you’re spending all your time with Maddox. I like him and all, but I thought you were going to fuck him out of your system and move on.”

“Those are your words, cousin, not mine.” I shoot him a warning look. “I said I couldn’t get him out of my head and was tired of fighting it.”

“So, haven’t you got him out of your head, yet?” Deacon scoffs.

“Not even close.” I set my box down and open the door, holding it ajar so he can pass.

“But you’ve been practically inseparable. How is that possible?” He steps inside and sets the toolbox on the floor.

“I don’t know,” I fib, because no way I’m telling Deacon how I really feel. I barely

understand it myself, not only because I've never been serious about anyone, but I always figured if and when it happened, it'd be because of a girl. This urge to be around Madd all the time is new on so many levels, but the one thing it isn't is scary. I may act oblivious, but I know why that is, I'm just not ready to admit it. "I'm just always anxious to see more of him."

"That's not like, boring, or anything? The same guy every night?" He looks at me skeptically, assuming I'm only talking about sex. I know it wasn't too long ago I thought the same way, but right now I struggle to believe I ever thought sex was the only thing I could get from another person, or that monogamy could be boring.

Putting aside the fact I'm not always trying to get in Madd's pants when I'm with him, our chemistry is off the charts. By now, I've got a pretty good handle on what he likes, which I'd never know if I'd walked away after that first night, and knowing I can give him what he craves... It makes me want to beat my chest like a caveman.

I've always believed myself to be a generous lover, observing what a woman likes so I can be sure she gets what she needs during our encounters. But I've never been as fascinated by a woman's reactions as I am by Madd's. I never paid much attention to those little cues until him, and now I'm proud to say I know the difference between the sounds he makes, and how to use that knowledge for his benefit.

Maddox inhales sharply when he feels something he enjoys, like when I push all the way inside him. If I do that slowly, it's followed by a soft grunt, faster a moan. If I hit a particularly sensitive spot, the moan gets higher in pitch, and if I keep at it, I can get him to scream. My favorite is when I bring him to the brink and back off, which has him grasping and pawing at me with a needy growl.

Before Madd, moans, groans, and screams all meant the same thing; yes. Now, they could mean faster, slower, harder, right there, more, or I'm coming. And I friggin love how I can speak that language.

"Honestly, I think it's better with one." I'm not going to betray Madd's dignity by saying any more, even to my cousin .

"Dude, you're kind of scaring me with that talk." I swear he actually shivers.

"Then don't listen." I haul my box inside and turn to leave. "If you want a bunch of different women, go to the parade and find a few. You won't have any trouble."

I send Deacon on his way with a promise to find him in town. I know I'm disappointing him by not being there for him this summer, and I feel bad about that. Not bad enough to waste any of the time I have with Maddox, though. I'll always have Deacon, but I may not always have him.

Maddox and I make the short drive to town and deliver my truck to Beck in the parking lot where they're staging the parade. We make plans to meet at The Underground later so I can get the keys back, but Maddox and I head there now since Dex usually sets aside a spot for us right out front.

The crew is already there when we arrive, and I pour Maddox a Bloody Mary from one of the pitchers Ally brought with her in a little camping wagon.

"Wow, you guys come prepared." He takes the plastic cup I hand him.

"We've been doing this a long time." Dex lifts his cup. "Tradition."

"Yep." Ally nods. "Breakfast and drinks along the parade route, lunch at Ryder's since his house is just a few blocks away, fireworks in the park, finish at The Underground." She toasts Maddox.

"What is it with this town and your all-day parties?" He wonders aloud. "I don't know where you find the stamina."

"Tradition," Dex says again.

"Pace yourself," I whisper to Maddox with a quick kiss to his cheek, which earns me a scowl from Deacon and heart eyes from Ally .

We have an hour before the parade starts so I grab a barstool from one of the outdoor tables lining the street and pull Maddox between my legs so I can bear some of his weight. An endless stream of friends and neighbors pass by on their way to find a spot, and normally, I'd get up and talk to each and every one to pass the time, but right now I'm content to just nod hello while I hold Maddox to me and run my finger along the smooth skin of his hip just underneath his shirt. Not to tease him, but to commit the feel of him to memory.

"Have you ever been in the parade yourself?" Maddox absently runs his hand over my thigh as we watch people pass.

"A few times. Mostly as a kid when different classes or clubs made a float. I drove Beck's float a few years ago, but then you don't get to just enjoy the day, so now I lend him the truck every year."

"Is he an only child, too?"

"Yep. I used to get stuck watching him when our parents would hang out, and he'd make me watch cartoons and play superheroes." I pretend to shudder.

"How awful for you." Madd snorts.

"When I was fourteen it was," I defend myself. "He's always been on the small side, so he looks younger than he is, and he's kind of a dreamer so he gets lost in his head a lot. Plus, his mom taught dance at the rec center and made him take all her classes. The other kids couldn't really identify with him, so I've tried to look out for him and

include him with my friends once he was old enough.”

“I can see how that would make him like the brother you never had.” His fingers dance along the underside of my knee.

“Beck’s a good kid. I tease him about being like my annoying little brother, but I love him like he really is.” That’s the first time I admitted to anyone, including myself, how deep my affection for Beckett is. It’s kind of a big deal since I’ve never really been a ‘feelings’ guy, and Maddox must realize it because he rescues me before I can analyze it further.

“Next you’re going to tell me you actually liked playing superheroes, even at fourteen” he growls against my ear.

“Tell anyone and I’ll have to make out with you right here where the whole town watches,” I whisper back.

His Adam’s apple bobs thickly when he swallows, though he recovers faster than I anticipate. “They already think we’re living together, what could a little PDA hurt?”

I bark out a laugh. That’s not at all the response I’m expecting, and his little show of bravado has me both amused and proud. Before I realize it, I’m holding his face in my hands, trying to reign in my laughter. “God, I love y...our spunk,” I amend right before I kiss him.

Damn that was close. I almost told him I loved him. I’m not even sure what I actually said, I just know something came after love, and hopefully if it didn’t make sense my kiss distracted him.

“Get a room,” Ryder snorts.

I flick him off. That was definitely a PG kiss, but I pull back anyway, afraid of the expression I'm going to see on his face.

"Spunk?" He wrinkles his nose.

Huh ? Not the best choice of words, but I can work with it. At least he heard that instead of what I almost said. "Yeah, you know. Spirit. Courage. How you don't back down when I bait you, even if it makes you a little nervous. Spunk."

Madd regards me warily as he says, "When you put it that way, I guess it could be a compliment."

"It is a compliment." I plant a brief kiss on those soft lips. "Come on, parade's about to start."

I put my hands on his waist to help him to stand and set the stool aside so people can crowd together for a better view. Since we're at the edge of the sidewalk I position Madd in the street and stand behind him, using the extra few inches I gain from the concrete to wrap my arms around his shoulders. He folds a hand over my forearm, and I swear the gesture damn near makes my heart beat out of my chest.

I can't get enough of this man. Touching him, talking to him, laughing with him, I'm like a fucking junkie hoarding everything I can get, and it's not enough. It's never enough.

Maddox laughs from deep in his stomach as the floats roll by, not bothered in the least that the floats are really just trailers decorated with streamers and poster boards, most carrying little kids in costume.

There's a float for the Little Mountain Bikers Club with kids in helmets and pads, there's one for the Wildflower Club with kids dressed as flowers, and the dance float

Beck chaperones with his mom is full of girls in pink frilly costumes who are spinning and twirling, which Maddox whistles at using two fingers so the effect is loud and shrill. There's also a firetruck, a float with all the town veterans, and one from the local gift store that's tossing out candy to the kids. In other words, there's nothing really spectacular about this parade, but Madd's smile is so big it's like he's at Disneyland.

When the parade is over, Ally latches onto Maddox to ramble about how adorable it was, something she long ago stopped doing with the rest of us since we never shared her excitement. At first, I figure Madd's just being a good sport and letting her talk, but the more I watch him the more I think he's genuinely into it, and the affection he has for our goofy little town parade has me smiling like a fucking loon.

I catch Finn's eye and he gives me a helpless little shrug along with a knowing grin, and in that moment, I realize he's probably the only one of my friends who gets me right now. We're both aware the parade was nothing to write home about, but seeing Ally and Maddox smile so genuinely about it is better than an epic bike ride and the perfect powder day combined.

Finn knows I get that now, which means he also knows how I feel about Maddox. I close my eyes and exhale, acknowledging my feelings, then shake my head slightly to let him know this stays between us. He nods in return before reaching for Ally and pulling her to his side. I do the same to Maddox, because I can't stand not touching him.

"Ready to head over to Ryder's?" Finn plants a kiss on Ally's forehead.

"Yeah. You guys are coming, right?" she demands, turning to me and Maddox.

I let my arm slip from his shoulder and thread our fingers together. "Yep, as soon as I get my keys from Beck. He should be bringing them along any minute and then we'll

meet you there.”

Right then, a pair of arms are flung around my neck, and I’m tugged slightly downward for a suffocating hug.

“Cade, where have you been? I’ve been looking everywhere. I’ve even been to your house the past three days, but you were never there.”

I pull the arms from my neck with my left hand, since I’m still holding Madd’s hand with my right, and stand to my full height, looking down on the beautiful brunette who, until this year, was my go-to fling on the Fourth. I totally forgot about her.

“Ashley, hey.” I nod.

I notice my friends all rooted in place around me, their eyes darting between this little standoff, waiting to see how it will play out. I admit it’s not ideal to run into Ashley right now, but I’m not worried about it since I don’t have any secrets from Maddox.

“Happy Fourth. We were just heading out.” I give Madd’s hand a squeeze and start to tug him with me toward the bar .

“You can’t leave now that I’ve found you. Where have you been, anyway? You usually aren’t this hard to find.” She reaches out to stroke my chest, apparently oblivious to the fact Madd’s hand is still tucked in mine. I’m stunned silent, not because I don’t know how to answer but because I can’t believe Ashley would touch me when I’m clearly with someone else. I take a step out of reach and open my mouth to speak, but it’s not my voice that comes out.

“I’m sorry, I guess you didn’t realize. Cade moved in with me.” Maddox dislodges our fingers to wrap his arm around my shoulder, and I grab him around the waist in return.

“I suppose we have been sort of hibernating at home, haven’t we?” I grin at the man whose eyes are level with my own.

Damn he’s a vision, looking at me like there’s no one else around. This is a side of Maddox I’ve never seen, and it gives me hope he’s not claiming me just for the day or the summer, but forever. Instead of putting that into words, in case I’m wrong, I do the only thing I can think of. I kiss him.

“Who’s this?” Ashley gapes.

“This is my man,” I answer without taking my eyes off Maddox. His stormy gray eyes turn almost silver as he smiles, and I can’t help it, I kiss him again. I’m vaguely aware of Ashley watching in disbelief, but I can’t bring myself to care. Maybe that makes me a dick, but all that matters right now is Maddox, and making sure he knows he’s the only person I want.

By now our friends have drifted, realizing there isn’t anything to be concerned about. I break away long enough to tell Ashley to have a nice visit, then I pull Maddox with me into The Underground. The moment we’re through the door, I press him up against the wall and kiss the fuck out of him, getting lost in his lush mouth, the thrill of my man claiming me, fueling my need .

“That was so fucking hot,” I mumble against his lips. “I like this possessive side of you.”

“I’m not possessive,” he protests.

I cock an eyebrow.

“Okay, maybe I was a little. But she was rude. And forward.”

"Probably my fault." I rub the back of my neck. "Ashley comes here every year for the Fourth. It didn't even occur to me that she'd be here. I'm sorry."

"It's not your fault she was forward. What kind of woman comes onto a guy while he's holding hands with another man?" he rants, his cheeks getting pinker by the second.

"Shocked the hell out of me too. But it was kind of worth it to see you stake your claim on me." I press my body to his so he can feel how much I liked that.

"Of course, that makes you hot." Maddox rolls his eyes. "I guess I should be glad you didn't suggest sleeping with both of us since you apparently like people fighting over you."

Maddox isn't usually sarcastic, so I'm not sure if he's making light of Ashley's advances, or if me wanting other women is something he's worried about. I need to make sure he knows my dick isn't the only part of me that likes what he just did.

I cup his chin in my hand and force him to look in my eyes. "I don't like people fighting over me. I like one man fighting for me. There's a difference."

He snorts.

"I'm serious." I stroke his sexy stubbled chin with my thumb. "It's like I told Deacon, I'd rather have one person than many."

"You talked to Deacon about us. About...why would you do that?" He frowns, pushing at my chest.

I capture his hands in mine and hold them between us. "First, I wasn't just talking about sex. I was talking about everything we do together, whether it's just sitting at

home or watching a parade. I only want to do those things with you. Second, I didn't tell him anything private, and I wouldn't. All I told him is, I prefer to sleep with only one man instead of a bunch of different women. It's less distant, more intense."

"You really believe that?" He gives me a critical once over.

"I do," I tell him, knowing full well that's only true for him, because of how I feel about him. Since I can't say that all I can do is relate it to sex, the one language I can speak freely. "Deacon thinks variety is what makes sex fun, and I admit I used to think the same way. Now, I know different. I know every inch of this body, Madd." I drag my finger up his side, skirting his pec.

He sucks in a ragged breath.

I lean into him so I can whisper in his ear. "I know how to make you gasp. I know how to make you moan. I know how to make you scream. I know what to say to make you hard, and I know what kind of touch to use to take you over the edge. I can make this body do whatever I want, and that gives me more pleasure than I've ever had. With anyone."

"Oh." His whisper comes out like a growl, eyes glued to my lips.

"Yeah, oh. That made you hard, didn't it? Thinking about how good I can make you feel. All the sounds I can get you to make," I growl in his ear as I slide my finger under the waistband of his shorts, teasing the fine hairs at the top of his happy trail.

His hips roll towards me, and I drag my hand down to cup the bulge between his legs.

"Do you have any idea how hot it makes me to see the way your body responds to mine?" I groan.

"It does?" he inhales sharply.

"Hell, yes." I grind against his thigh as I rub his sac, and his head falls to my shoulder with a ragged moan.

"Should we be doing this here?" He pants as I stroke him.

"Want me to stop?" I hold my hand still.

"No," he growls.

"Good, I wasn't going to." I nuzzle his neck as I resume stroking him over his shorts.

"What if someone comes in?" His eyes dart to the entrance.

I reach over to the door and twist the lock. "They won't."

I'm expecting that little gesture to help Maddox relax, and I guess it does, if the way he claws at my shorts is any indication.

"Take my dick out," he grunts as he works mine free.

"You gonna fuck me up against the wall?" I wrap my hand around his length and give it a firm tug.

"Not today." He urges me to stand straight with a gentle push to my chest. "You're gonna want to see this."

The last time Madd said that I had the pleasure of watching him jerk us both off, so when he swats my hand away from his cock I don't protest. I just stand there and watch, awed, as he presses the tip of his crown to mine and covers it with his

foreskin.

I was not aware such a thing was possible, and now that I'm witnessing it... There aren't words for how erotic it is.

With just his thin little layer of skin covering me it looks like we're sharing a foot long dick, and though I can't see where I end and he begins, I can feel it, and that tiny bit of friction right on my slit is nothing short of heavenly. It's literally the most intense pleasure I've ever felt, right up until Madd starts stroking us, and I feel his silky smooth skin rubbing over my crown .

"Holy shit," I gasp, bracing my hands against the wall on either side of his head to keep myself upright. "You've been holding out on me."

"Not holding out, just waiting for the perfect moment to blow your mind."

"What makes this the perfect moment?" My eyes try to roll back in my head as Madd's hand shuttles over our cocks, but I force them to stay locked on the hedonistic display before me.

"You were bragging about how well you can work my body, so I had to show you you're not the only one who's been paying attention."

"I...aaah" I'm so blissed out I can't even form a response.

One of my most favorite things in the world is having someone else play with my dick. Stroking it, sucking it, riding it... I fucking love watching other people use it. I love when that person is Maddox above all else. But having him work my cock while it's blanketed by his foreskin is like reaching enlightenment.

I feel the pressure of his hand, just like always, but there's an added softness, a silky

glide that's new and different and utterly sublime. It takes all my restraint to keep my hips from pumping into his hand, and based on the way Madd's biting his lower lip as his fist travels over us, I'm not the only one on the verge of losing his shit.

Chests heaving, nostrils flaring, we're both desperate and frenzied, a chorus of grunts and moans echoing in the cavernous room around us as the rhythmic slapping of skin on skin drives us toward release.

"Jesus fucking... I can't hold back. I can't." My voice comes out like a whimper as my balls draw up tight and I explode, the wet heat of my cum out from under his foreskin. Madd milks me for every last drop, the squelch of my release as it's spread over our shafts a filthy symphony that sends him careening over the edge mere seconds after me .

"I'll forgive you for holding out on me if we do that again. Soon," I pant against his neck.

"Define soon."

"Tomorrow. Pretty sure you emptied me out til at least then." I kiss his neck, tasting the salty tang of sweat we just worked up.

"Deal," he grumbles just as the door rattles.

I stand to my full height and lock eyes with Madd, whose expression is the epitome of caught in the act. "Bathroom is all the way in the back," I tell him as a loud knock reverberates around us.

Madd rushes off while I tuck my spent cock away and open the door for Beck.

"Sorry man, didn't realize that it was locked." I open the door so he can step inside.

He gives me a skeptical once over before handing me my keys. “Thanks again for the truck. I left it in the public lot. Where is everyone?” He tries to peek around me, but I don’t think he saw Maddox racing to the bathroom.

“Ryder’s. We’re headed there now if you want to come with us.” I pocket the keys.

“Maybe I’ll stop by later. I still have some cleanup to finish.” He jerks his thumb over his shoulder and starts to turn toward the door.

My memory drifts back to what I told Maddox about him at the parade, and I wonder briefly if Beck knows I’m not teasing when I say he’s like my little brother. I should probably tell him, but I’ve never specifically said it before, and I’m not sure how to. So, I say the first thing that comes to mind. “Float looked good this year.”

He stops cold and turns. “Since when do you pay attention to the floats?” Beck knows all too well I’m usually socializing or drinking during the parade, and don’t often notice much else. I can tell he’s a little stunned .

“Uh, since Maddox enjoyed it.” I rub the back of my neck.

“That’s what I thought.” he grins knowingly.

“Whatever. Get out of here.” I give him a playful shove in the arm, hoping it’s too dark in here for him to see the way I’m blushing.

Maddox is deep in conversation with Ryder and Blake, trying to follow why they think snowboarding is better than surfing, while we wait for the fireworks to start. Normally I’d be all over that debate, but I’m doing my best to give him a little space. Not that he asked for any, but because I think I need it.

Today has been perfect, so much so I don't want it to end, and that's a dangerous way to think when I know our time is limited. But damn if I can turn off the voice trying to convince me this is real.

I got so wrapped up in the moment earlier, I almost told him I loved him, and I flat out admitted I like how he got possessive over me. Plus, after foregoing condoms, meeting my parents, and what we did in the bar earlier, I know he's giving me some of the firsts a guy like him normally saves for someone special. All of that makes it so tempting to believe I won't lose him to his career, but he hasn't given me any indication he wants me to be part of his life, and unless he does, I don't see how I can mess with his dreams.

So, I'm trying to put a little distance between us right now to regroup and get my mind right. I'm hoping this will make it easier to get through the fireworks, which I know he'll watch from my arms.

"Just tell him already," Finn says quietly as he hands me a beer.

"Not that easy." I shake my head as I accept it.

"Not that hard either." He looks at me pointedly .

"Maybe not for you, but Ally wasn't chasing a big-time career she'd have to put on hold to be with you." I nod subtly toward his girl.

"Sure, she was." He takes a sip of his beer. "She wanted to be a fashion designer, and instead she owns a boutique."

I didn't know that, but I press on, undeterred.

"She can design stuff anywhere though, right?" I raise my eyebrows.

"True, but it's a harder path to do it alone than to work under a big label and build up your references."

"I hear you, but I'm not sure Maddox can do all his science stuff from here. It's not like there's a lab around town." I stare at the ground so he can't see how much that bugs me.

"What do you mean, science stuff?" He cocks his head.

"Oh, uh, Climate change, alternative energy, monitoring plants." I lift a shoulder, realizing that since I've been so consumed with Maddox, I've never actually talked to the guys about what he's doing here. What he wants to do.

"I'm no scientist, but I would think you could do all that stuff anywhere." Finn sips his drink.

"He wants to do stuff with water. You see any water around here?"

"Snow becomes water," Finn deadpans.

"Pretty sure it's not the same thing." I roll my eyes.

"Okay, what if you went where he needed to go. You can do construction anywhere, right?" I know he thinks he's helping, but that's not actually a solution.

"Leave Katah Vista? Who will take over my dad's company?"

"You say that like you're thinking of taking it over. You never seemed interested in running things before."

He's got me there .

"Still not. Yet. I always knew it would happen one day though. I just didn't feel the need to rush into it," I admit what I've never really said aloud.

"So, what are you saying? You want to stay here and take over?" He seems surprised. I guess after years of shunning responsibility I can see why.

"That's the plan." I sip my beer. I may have been putting it off, but I resigned myself to this fate long ago.

"But would you be happy?" Finn frowns.

"Sure, why not? Having my own company would be a nice setup, and I'd still have the mountains." I stuff my free hand in my pocket.

"The only thing I've seen you really truly happy about is Maddox, and if he's not here I'm not sure your nice setup will cut it." He actually looks worried. Shit.

Finn isn't telling me anything I haven't thought about already but hearing it out loud has a way of making it real. So real, the thought of living here without Maddox makes it hard to breathe, and that feeling doesn't go away until he's sitting between my legs with my arms wrapped around him as we watch the fireworks.

Chapter nineteen

Maddox

“Where is he taking you?” Ally’s eyes sparkle as she hands me a shirt to try.

“He didn’t say, he just said to wear something nice.” Technically he asked me to wear the Trent Crimm jeans that “make my ass look edible” although I’m not using those words with Ally. Then he took off to help out at a different job site, leaving me without any other information, and since the only shirts I have with me are t-shirts I find myself at Ally’s mercy.

“So mysterious,” she murmurs, passing me another one.

I look at the charcoal button down she hands me and shake my head. “This feels too fancy.”

“What do you mean?” Ally frowns.

“I mean it’s the kind of shirt you wear with a suit. I don’t even think Cade owns a suit.” I haven’t looked in his closet or anything, but he doesn’t strike me as the suit type.

“Just roll up the sleeves to make it look more casual.”

“I guess.” I put the shirt on and face Ally, who smirks proudly.

“Definitely this one. The gray matches your eyes.”

“So, you don’t have any guesses?” I ask her as she rings up my purchase. “There has to be somewhere in town you need to dress nice to eat at.”

“Not really.” She scrunches her lips together. “I mean, there are nice places and people sometimes dress up to go there, especially up at the resort, but there isn’t a dress code or anything. People go there in their ski gear in the winter.”

“Well, I’m officially stumped, then.” I put my credit card back in my wallet.

“And I’m officially jealous,” Ally says. “I’d love it if Finn surprised me with a dress up night. I can’t believe I’m saying this, but I may have to tell him to get some date night pointers from Cade. No offense.”

“None taken.” I bite back a laugh. “I know it’s not really in his nature to do dates and things.”

“It’s really not. Just goes to show what the right man will do.”

“Right.” I snort.

“Oh, come on. Don’t tell me you’re unaware of how monumental this is for Cade.” She gives me a disappointed look.

“Taking me on a date?” I frown, wondering why she’s repeating what we just established.

“That, sure. And putting so much effort into it. You’ve turned that man upside down and inside out, Maddox. I know you know that.” She passes me the bag .

"I know he's out of his element, sure," I agree. "But you make it sound like he's a changed man."

"What would you call it then?"

"I don't know. Living in the moment." I grasp at the first thing that comes to mind, which makes sense to me since it's what I'm doing.

"Please," she scoffs, putting my signed receipt in the register. "Cade wouldn't go through the trouble of planning a special date for just anyone. That man cares about you. A lot."

"I know," I insist. Despite not putting a label on it, it's clear Cade and I both care about each other in a more than friends way. "But this is the man who's never really dated before, so that just makes anything he plans seem like a big deal."

"You're totally going to ignore the part about you guys caring for each other?" She frowns, hurt.

"I'm not ignoring it." I shake my head. "Of course, we care about each other. We wouldn't be spending so much time together if we didn't. But you're trying to make it more than that."

"Are you telling me it isn't?" she presses. "Are you telling me he's not in love with you? Or you with him?"

"I'm telling you he hasn't said that, and I won't put words in his mouth." I set my mouth in a firm line to avoid giving anything away.

"Fine. Then tell me how you feel." She crosses her arms and waits for my response.

I hold my breath, trying to decide how to answer. I like Ally, and I want to be honest. But I don't want to fuel town gossip that might put Cade in an awkward position, and I don't feel right telling her things I haven't told Cade.

"Maddox, I'm not trying to pry." Ally seems to read my mind. "I'm only trying to point out that you two have something real. Something that makes you both happy. "

"He does make me happy."

"And," she prompts. "Is that all, or do you want more?"

"For now, happy is enough," I say. "Anything more is up to him."

Ally sighs and offers me a weak smile. "Okay, I'll drop it. I didn't mean to overstep. I just don't want to see my two friends miss out on something real."

"I know," I tell her.

"Ally, I need an interview outfit, stat!" I turn to see a stunning brunette man barreling through the door, cheeks flushed and eyes sparkling with excitement.

"Lennon was only kidding about you interviewing for the waitress job. It's yours if you want it." Ally gives me an apologetic smile then turns back to the man. "You don't need an interview outfit."

"I do when the interview is for the resort." The man spreads his arms wide.

"You scored a meeting with the team doctor?" Ally rushes him and is enveloped in a hug.

"No." The brunette deflates a little. "The spa at the resort. But massage is a foot in the

door.”

“People don’t go to the spa for physical therapy.” Ally gives the hands she’s holding a little squeeze before dropping them.

“Tourists might. And at least they’ll have my name on the payroll.” The brunette guy seems determined to stay upbeat.

Ally seems ready to respond when she catches sight of me. “Oh, I’m sorry. Maddox, this is my brother, Sloane. Sloane, Maddox.” She gestures between the two of us. “Sloane just moved here to pursue a job in physical therapy. He’s hoping to work for the ski team.”

I shake hands with Ally’s brother, finding it impossible not to return his smile.

“A job at the resort sounds like a good start,” I encourage him.

“Right!” Sloane agrees. “It’ll put me closer to the team and give me a chance to perfect my massage techniques. Win, win.”

“The spa doesn’t pay as well as the doctor would.” Ally shoots me a worried look.

“Then I’ll take the serving job too. Lennon said he’d hire me, right?”

“Finn might need that job with Carter Quinn taking over the resort.” Ally crosses her arms in a huff. “I wish that man would make up his mind about what he’s going to do with the existing staff.”

“He can’t get rid of everyone and still run a resort.” Sloane rolls his eyes when he thinks Ally can’t see it. “Besides, Finn has been here forever and knows the mountain inside and out. This Carter guy would be a fool to get rid of him.”

"I hope you're right." Ally worries her lip with her teeth until she catches sight of my bags.

"Oh my gosh, what are you doing here listening to us babble. Go have an amazing time with your man." She gives me a hug.

I'm tempted to stay and offer support, but I catch Sloane's eye and he gives me a wink, signaling he's got his sister's back.

"I will." I say goodbye and wish Sloane luck with his interview then head home to get ready for my first date with Cade.

"Holy shit. Uh, I mean, wow," Cade says when I open the door. "You look incredible."

"Really?" I look down with a frown before looking at him. "You look pretty great too." He's wearing a pair of gray slacks and a blue button-down that brings out his eyes, and just like mine, the shirt is rolled up to the elbow. I suddenly feel underdressed given I'm in dark jeans rather than slacks.

He looks down at his outfit. "You mean you weren't sure if I even owned nice clothes?" He tosses me a coy grin.

"Exactly." I chuckle.

"I might break out in hives if I wear them too long, but you're worth it." He bites his lip bashfully before leaning in to brush his lips over mine.

"You didn't have to do this, you know." I gesture at our outfits.

"I know, but I want to. You deserve a nice date once in a while." He takes my hand.

"There you go with that whole deserving thing again."

"I'm not taking it back this time. Besides, this is just as much for me as it is for you."
He leads me to the truck.

"Really?" My brows draw together.

"Of course. I get to look at you being sexy all night. Totally worth the discomfort of wearing a shirt with a collar."

"Do I get to find out where we're going now?" I ask as he pulls onto the street.

"There's a reservoir about 45 minutes away. A really nice Italian restaurant is on the bank, and I thought we could sit outside and watch the sunset." He pulls my hand into his, something he's been doing with increasing frequency, though most of the time I'm not even sure he's aware of it since he's always doing something else at the same time, like driving or watching a show.

"That sounds perfect."

Cade points out different landmarks as we drive, teaching me the names of different peaks or pointing out where he likes to camp and or fish. Seeing this helps me understand why he refers to the area as every guy's dream backyard. It really is endless, with an infinite amount of things to do.

When we get to the restaurant, we're shown to a table in a quiet corner, overlooking a vast lake. The water itself is a deep blue, but the bright green peaks that seem to rise out of it are what make it striking.

"It's beautiful." I step up to the railing for a better look.

There's a faint click behind me, and a minute later I feel Cade's heat against my neck as he breathes, "Not as beautiful as you."

Cade turns and pulls out two chairs so we can sit, and when we're both settled and have a glass of wine, he tells me a little more about the area, including how before the reservoir was built a small town existed here, and in the past, severe droughts forced the water level low enough you can see some of the buildings.

"That must be strange, to see the remains of a town." I try to imagine what it would be like to see roofs poking out of the water.

"It is, especially because lots of the buildings are still pretty intact," he says. "Like they're frozen in time."

"Speaking of building, you mentioned other projects you have going a few weeks ago. What are those?" We don't spend much time talking about Cade's work, since up until now, I've had a front row seat to it, but I'm curious to know more about the business.

"Mostly just a few renos. One is a new build. It's just your typical house." He gives a little half shrug as he twirls the stem of his wine glass.

I roll my eyes. "Define typical. Big, small, custom, something else? I know it can't be just a house, not after I've seen what you're doing at my uncle's."

"It's nothing special." He offers a weak smile. "Five bedrooms, chef's kitchen, vaulted ceilings. The normal stuff people want in a dream house."

"Do you enjoy it?"

"Enjoy what?" He looks at me blankly.

"Building." I nudge his foot under the table. "I know it's the family business and you'll inherit it, but do you enjoy it?"

"Mostly. I'm not much of a desk guy, so I like the building part of the business. The operations stuff I'm not too keen on, but Dad sees it as his legacy to pass on, so it'll be my job eventually." He rubs his neck.

"I can't tell if you think carrying on the legacy is a good thing or a bad thing." I watch his face for a reaction that doesn't come.

"Probably a little of both." He sips his wine absently before focusing on me. "I'm fortunate to have something stable, something I can do year-round as opposed to the seasonal jobs most other people have. And I guess it'll be nice to work for myself instead of someone else, but I'm not in a hurry to be the guy in charge."

"Does he want you to be? In charge, I mean?" I take a sip of my wine.

"Not yet. He's not ready to retire, and he'll want to make sure I'm all set long before he calls it quits. I'm sure he'd prefer I start learning the ropes sooner rather than later, though." The corner of his lip pulls up just slightly before it settles back into a thin line.

"It means a lot to him to have you take over?"

"Yeah. He took over from my grandpa," he trails off, looking out at the water.

"The fat happy guy?" I hint.

"That's the one." He finally cracks a full smile. "I think it's a pride thing to be able to

pass it on, you know?”

After a second, I nod my head, because I do understand family pride and being able to leave your kids with something. I also understand how that can be both a blessing and a curse. In my case, the pressure for me to go into the family business isn't as encompassing since I have siblings and cousins who are happy to get involved, leaving me free to pursue what I want. For Cade, I sense it's a bit of both, he appreciates it, but it might not have been his first choice of careers. I respect him more than ever for his inability to walk away from it, and if anything, it makes him look even more selfless in my eyes... It just means his future is here, and only here.

It's never been a secret, but having it confirmed still makes my chest ache, because up until now, a part of me wondered if he'd ever consider leaving. Whether those unguarded moments when his gaze lingers a little too long means he does have feelings for me, and whether it's possible those feelings might outweigh his love for his hometown.

I'd never ask him to leave, of course, though if I thought he'd be willing to maybe I'd be a little more forthcoming with my own feelings. But in addition to not knowing exactly where we stand, I could never ask him to turn down the legacy his family wants to leave him. Which means, when I leave in a few weeks, he'll stay here.

Permanently.

That makes this whole evening bittersweet. It's such a thoughtful gesture, to get dressed up and take me out for a special evening, highlighting how much he really does care about me. And like I told Ally, it's clear we both do truly care about one another. Yet our lives seem to be on separate paths, which is what makes this evening just as sad as it is special. He'll never leave Katah Vista, and my career path doesn't encourage me to stay.

That's not to say I couldn't work here. Environmental scientists are used everywhere, particularly where people and nature form a delicate balance like in Katah Vista. But I've poked around to see what sort of opportunities exist, and right now there aren't any. Besides, it'd be presumptuous of me to get a job and stay here when he hasn't indicated he wants me to. He may care about me, but that doesn't mean he wants me to be a permanent fixture in his life.

I need to be content with the time we have instead of spending it wishing for more.

"If your other clients rave about your work as much as my uncle does, they're leaving you with a nice legacy." I try to sound positive.

"They are," he agrees.

"And I bet in some ways it's nice not to have to question your future. I envy you that, since I still don't know where I'll be working after I finish my thesis." I play with the stem of my wine glass.

"Wherever it is, I'm sure you'll make an impact. You're the most brilliant person I've ever met." He's giving me a compliment, and while his intense gaze tells me he's serious, he almost seems sad about it. I'm not sure what I've done to make him lose the giddy smile he had earlier, but I don't want the evening to end on a negative note.

"You know you don't have to compliment me to get me into bed, right?" I send him a wry smile. "I'm a sure thing."

My lame joke earns me the chuckle I was going for.

"I didn't bring you here to get you into bed." He bumps my leg with his under the table.

"Why did you bring me here?" I ask. "I mean, you mentioned about me deserving a nice date, but why here? Why not somewhere in town?"

"I thought you'd like the view." His eyes dart to the lake next to us as if to say duh . "Plus, if we went somewhere in town, I'd have to share you. Everyone would stop by to say hello, they'd want to know what the occasion was, and they'd make it impossible to eat in peace. I didn't want to share you tonight. Is that okay?" He looks slightly panicked, like he made the wrong decision .

"Of course." I reach out under the table and rest my hand on his thigh. "Don't get me wrong, I love the town and all your friends, but I like how it's just the two of us right now. Sometimes, I don't want to share you, either."

"Yeah?" There's a note of hope in his voice I can't quite decipher, but rather than puzzle it out I try to stay in the moment, leaning over to give him a swift but searing kiss.

"Yeah."

Cade signals for the check.

Chapter twenty

Cade

We're mostly silent on the drive home, with our interlaced fingers doing the talking, driving up the sexual tension.

Madd's thumb slides over the back of my hand, feather-light, yet just as potent as if he was stroking my chest, or my cock. Everywhere he touches me, every way he touches me, ignites such an intense response. I'm helpless against it. I'm helpless against him.

He's part of me now, and I know that won't change even after he's gone. The thought puts a bit of a damper on an otherwise perfect night, because we're inching closer to the day when he'll leave for good, and there's nothing I can do to stop it.

Tonight was sort of a last-ditch effort to see if there might be a future with us. I wanted to give him a traditional date, show him how special he is to me, and I hoped by doing so he'd decide to pick me instead of his career.

I can't outright ask him to do that. It's too selfish, even for me, but I figured if he came to that decision on his own, I could live with myself. So, I went all out, getting dressed up, taking him to a fancy restaurant, the whole nine yards. And I can tell he loved it. But not enough, since he mentioned not knowing what his future holds after he finishes his thesis.

I knew it was futile to hope he'd pick me after all the work he's put towards his

dream, though I still hoped for it, anyway. It fucking crushed me to have him confirm he's still leaving, but then he turned around and laid claim to me, sort of, and I'm still riding that high right now. It's probably temporary, I think he still plans to give me up when he leaves, although if dinner didn't convince him to stay maybe sex will.

That makes it sound like I'm reverting to old habits, but nothing could be further from the truth. Sex is totally different for me now than it was before, and while I have so much more than just sex with Maddox, there's no denying the two of us together are something special. At this point, I'm so desperate to have him choose me I'm not above using any means necessary, including sex, to nudge him toward that decision.

By the time we get home, his sweet little touches have made me hard as a rock, and I have the overwhelming urge to throw him on the bed and take him. But I force myself to go slow, to savor every moment of this, and show him what he means to me since I can't tell him.

I take his hand and lead him to the bedroom, standing him before me so I can drink him in. He's just as stunning as he always is, but tonight he looks roguishly sexy in his button down with the sleeves rolled up. I trace my finger along the exposed skin at the top of his chest, up his neck, along his chiseled jaw.

"Beautiful," I whisper as I cup his face in my hands and kiss him softly.

Maddox reaches out to undo the buttons on my shirt, one by one, pushing it off my shoulders to run his hands over my chest, down my stomach, teasing along the waistband of my pants. I mirror his movements, pushing his shirt off his shoulders so it falls to the floor, leaving him standing before me in nothing but his low-slung jeans.

I want to capture the image before me, commit it to memory, but the need to touch him is too great. I pull him close, crushing our chests together as I wrap my arms

around him and capture his mouth. Our tongues meet in a sensual dance, giving and taking and savoring this moment where our passion for each other is the only thing that exists.

"I need you," Maddox growls against my lips, and damn if that doesn't make my heart ache just a little. I know he means he needs me physically, but two months ago he wouldn't have been bold enough to say so, and it makes me both proud and sad that he's comfortable enough to do it now.

Stripping off my pants as he does the same, I walk him backward until his legs hit the bed, pushing him down until he's lying on his back. His breathing turns heavy, and goose bumps rise to the surface of his arms. His nipples pucker even though I haven't touched them, and when I wrap my hand around his length, he's hard as steel.

"Cade," he groans. "I want you inside me. I want to come together."

"We will." I place a quick kiss on his soft lips. "But you, first."

At my urging he rocks his length into my hand while I pump him, fucking my fist, until his warm cum spills over my fingers.

Maddox coming is a stunning sight. His hands grip the sheets, knuckles white. His back arches as his hips buck. His chest heaves as he cries out. Fucking beautiful.

I hold still until the tremors stop, then release his cock to lick his essence off my fingers, then reach for the lube.

"I need to feel you, Maddox," I tell him as I wet my dick. "This time we'll come together."

I push slowly inside him, and the ecstasy consumes us both.

** *

“What’re you looking at?” Deacon asks as he comes to sit next to me.

I turn the screen off before he gets close enough to see that I was staring at a picture of Maddox. It’s the only one I have of him, taken at our sunset dinner, when he was standing at the rail looking over the water.

His back is to the camera, head turned to the side, looking at something in the distance with a wistful expression. I don’t know what possessed me to take the picture, but I look at it every chance I get.

“Nothing, just a list of what’s left to finish.” The lie rolls off my tongue so easily I think I get away with it, until Deacon snorts.

“Right. A list of what’s left to do is what’s giving you that sad puppy face, not the fact your man is leaving.”

“We should be done in the next day or so.” I ignore him, because I don’t want to have this conversation. I know my life is about to change for the worse and don’t need Deacon to point it out.

“You don’t have to pretend,” he continues. “You look fucking miserable, and I know it’s because of him.”

“It’s not because of him.” I shove my phone in my pocket.

“Of course, it is. Instead of getting him out of your system, you managed to get him stuck in it.” He shakes his head, looking at me like I’m pathetic. I probably am.

“That’s not his fault.”

"Maybe, maybe not. Look," he exhales, "I know I wasn't your biggest supporter this summer, or his, but I'd rather have no wingman than a depressed one, and if you're this depressed now, I hate to think what you're gonna be like after he leaves."

"What's your point?" I rub a hand over my face.

"Don't let him leave," he says matter-of-factly .

I hate how everyone thinks it's that easy. My dad, Finn, now Deacon. They all think my feelings have the power to keep Maddox here, and I should completely ignore the fact he'd be giving up everything he's ever worked for if he stays.

His dreams.

His ambitions.

His desire to succeed on his own merits.

Sure, maybe I can convince him to stay now , but he'd grow to hate me for it when he regrets abandoning his goals in life to date me. I'd rather miss him like crazy than have him resent me one day.

"Whether he stays or goes isn't my call." I sink to the retaining wall as my energy wanes.

"Let's try this another way," Deacon starts. "Do you think he'd want to stay? He's obviously as interested in you as you are in him."

I close my eyes and shake my head slowly. "Wasn't too long ago he mentioned not knowing what he'll do after he's done with his thesis. If staying here was on his radar I'm sure he would've said something."

Deacon blows out a breath. “That sucks, cousin. I’m sorry.”

“It is what it is.” I shrug, trying to downplay how sick I feel at the thought of him leaving. “I knew this had an expiration date.”

“Yeah, but you didn’t expect to fall for him, did you?” He sounds almost sympathetic.

“No, that part was a surprise.” I sigh, feeling somewhat relieved by the admission.

“Shit. I’m never gonna fall for anyone like that. If this is what it does to you it’s not worth it,” Deacon shakes his head.

“This part sucks for sure. But there were good parts too. Great parts.” I smile up at him sadly .

“Like sleeping with only one man?” I can’t tell if he’s being genuinely curious, or sarcastic, like he’s trying to cheer me up by implying I can go back to sleeping around.

“Don’t knock it until you try it, cousin. Fucking phenomenal.”

“Pfft.” He waves his hand dismissively. “Not from where I’m sitting. No man is worth the way you look right now. And before you jump down my throat, I like Maddox, really. But if this is what relationships do to you, I want no part of it.” He shudders.

“I hear you. I used to think that too. But the right person has a way of making you think differently. The right person makes everything feel like it fits.” I lean forward and rest my arms on my knees, too tired and depressed to sit straight.

"Everything?" Deacon takes a seat next to me with a sly grin.

"I'm not talking about sex." I give his shoulder a quick shove. "I'm talking about all of it. Hanging out together, talking, sleeping next to someone. Before you have someone to do that stuff with you don't realize you're missing anything, but after, it's almost like..." I stare towards the mountains that always used to make things seem okay. "He gets me in a way no one ever has, even you if I'm being honest since you think I've lost my mind. And even the parts of me I'm not overly proud of he can find good in. I never expected someone to see me that way, and the fact he does makes me feel like he's sort of the perfect fit for me. Like I'm finally whole. I don't know any other way to explain it." I slump forward.

I see Deacon from the corner of my eye, staring at me with his mouth hanging open, like he can't believe that sappy shit just came out of my mouth. Truth is, neither can I, but that doesn't make it any less true .

"You'll get it one day," I say to him even though I'm staring at the ground. "And I'm going to enjoy saying 'I told you so' when it happens."

"No way," he protests. "After seeing you like this, there's no way I'm ever dating someone seriously. And I wish I'd never suggested you try it either."

"I don't. I wouldn't change a thing," I say quietly.

"Seriously?" Deacon scoffs. "Maddox isn't even gone yet and you're already moping. You wouldn't change that if you could?"

"Nope. I fucking hate that he's leaving, and I know when he does, I'm gonna feel like shit for a long time. But I don't regret any of it. I'd do it all over again. The good parts were that good." I sound like a fucking sap. I don't care.

Deacon shakes his head in disbelief. I know he doesn't understand me right now. Pities me even. But I've never really worried about what other people think, and I'm not going to start now. I'll never regret my time with Maddox, even knowing I'll be wrecked when he leaves, because letting him go is the right thing to do.

Even if it breaks me.

Chapter twenty-one

Maddox

I wake around dawn, too restless to sleep. My departure is just hours away, which has me feeling depressed over the coming changes, though I'm trying to focus on being grateful for the good times.

My summer couldn't have been more perfect. Filled with hikes, barbecues, bike rides and summer concerts, there was always another adventure, and I loved every minute of it, loved experiencing Katah Vista the way Cade sees it. But I confess my favorite part has been the lazy evenings we spent at home, where it was just the two of us, and we talked and pleased each other into the night.

Since our very first night together, we've rarely been apart, and as the minutes tick closer to my departure, I'm not sure how either of us will handle being alone. We have such a comfortable rhythm, our separate lives fitting together effortlessly, I wonder if returning to the lives we had before is even possible .

Cade fills the voids I didn't even realize I had, and now that I know what it's like to connect with someone so completely, I'm not sure I want to live without it. I'm not sure I want my life to be singularly focused on my career the way I did before I set foot in these mountains.

I feel like that's the future I'm heading for though, since we never talked about ignoring our end date.

We seemed to have an unspoken agreement not to discuss it, to just live in the moment, but now that the end is in sight, I'm finding it harder and harder to ignore the fact that being with Cade feels right, in a permanent sort of way.

There are times I think he feels the same, like when I catch him staring at me when he thinks I'm not looking, a sort of forlorn look on his face. Or when he cradles me to him in bed like he's trying to prolong every opportunity to hold me. He makes me feel loved, although, if he did really love me, wouldn't he have said it by now?

I know that makes me sort of a hypocrite, since I haven't told him how I feel either, but by his own admission he doesn't know how relationships work, and I don't want him thinking he's obligated to feel the same way I do just because we're together. Whatever his feelings for me are, I want him to express them without any influence from me. Otherwise, I'd wonder if I pushed him to say something he wasn't ready to say. And since he's never brought up how he feels or what he wants, that means we have just a few short hours left together.

I snuggle closer to Cade as the sunlight creeps into the room, and feel his arm pull tighter around my waist.

"Morning, beautiful." His voice is thick with sleep, but other parts of him feel like they're awake.

"Feels like you've been up for a while." As far as dirty talk goes, that was pretty lame, but the words make him chuckle, which he seems to appreciate .

"There is no better way to wake up than to feel your perfect ass rubbing against me." He nuzzles the back of my neck. "I'm kind of getting attached to it."

It's not a declaration of love, but this may be all he's capable of, so I'll take it. I'll make the most of it.

"You're getting attached to my ass?" I wiggle against him.

"There isn't a spot on your body I'm not attached to." He kisses my shoulder.

For a brief moment, my chest feels hollow, wishing his attachment applied to more than my body, but I push it back as Cade's hand ghosts over my hip. In my heart, I know there's a connection between us, something more than just sex. It just doesn't outweigh the physical component behind what's happening. Not for Cade. I always knew that might happen, so I have to accept it.

Despite his inability to see beyond the physical, I don't regret my time with him. Cade has brought me more pleasure than I ever imagined was possible, and I wouldn't trade that for a different ending. I value what's happened between us too much. I do regret how he can't see beyond this moment, but I don't fault him for that. So, I do what I always do when he touches me. I focus on how it feels to have his hands on me, giving myself over to this moment in time so I can't think about what comes next.

Cade's finger circles my nipple, coaxing it to attention, which doesn't take long since my body is so in tune with his. I know that's because we share more than just sex, but I let him believe it's because he's such a good lover. And let's be honest, he really is. He's so enthusiastic, so eager to experience sex in a way he never has before, it's impossible not to get swept up in his excitement. Plus, he's a surprisingly generous partner who prides himself on taking care of me, and while I think he finally sees himself as more than just a good fuck, there's no denying he has the skill to control my body.

As my nipple hardens Cade teases it tenderly, pinching and flicking and rubbing so the pleasure shoots straight to my cock. And when I hum my approval, that hand glides down my chest, over my stomach, and wraps around my dick.

Cade strokes me languidly, a gentle tease that starts at the base and ends with him spreading my arousal around my tip before he does it all again. The movement isn't designed to bring me closer to release because he doesn't want me there yet. We have that in common, both wanting to prolong this encounter since it will be our last.

"I never thought I'd find another man's dick so fascinating since I've got one of my own, but I don't think I'll be able to look at mine the same way again." His finger brushes my foreskin, which he's a little obsessed with, and that simple gesture that's so very Cade has me cracking a smile despite my somewhat gloomy mood.

"Are you saying you have inferior equipment?"

"Hey now." His grip tightens on my shaft. "I'm pretty sure my cock is responsible for giving you hours of pleasure this summer, so inferior is a strong word. I'm just saying I appreciate the additional feature on yours. I'll probably think of it when I'm touching mine."

"Because it's superior?"

"Because of those sinful noises you make when I touch it." He swipes his finger over the silky flesh, and as if on cue a sensual, throaty groan rumbles from my lips. "Just like that." Cade nips at my earlobe before sucking it into his mouth, sending a gentle shiver through my body. The subtle jolt spurs him to slot his cock between my thighs, where he lets it rest while he slides his fist over my dick.

It's the most delicious torture, a hint of the lazy mornings we won't have, and a tender goodbye rolled into one. Erotic and sweet, heartfelt yet heartbreaking, and while normally I wouldn't consider myself to be overly sensitive or emotional, especially during sex, right now I'm anything but.

If I could freeze time, I'd do it, so this moment never has to end. But in addition to

having a flight to catch, Cade's affectionate touch is taking me to the point of no return, and I don't want to finish in his hand.

I reach for the lube on the nightstand, which is just far enough away that it takes me out of his grasp. "Roll over. On your side," I tell him as I slather my cock and line up behind him.

It's cowardly, but I can't look at him while we do this. I have a feeling if we lock eyes one of us will learn something we're better off not knowing, and since we're about to part on good terms I don't want to screw that up.

The first push nearly undoes me, same as it always does. Yet, I grit my teeth and keep moving until I'm fully seated, and we're forcing ourselves to take even breaths.

"Good?" I rasp next to his ear.

He nods, and I begin my slow retreat. My even slower return. Back and forth, long and deep, I slide my cock inside his body, trying to commit the sensation to memory. The friction, the heat, the pressure, though what I'll remember most is how we've somehow managed to link our fingers together above his head.

A series of pleas tumble through my mind as we come together. Come with me. Ask me to stay. Tell me you love me. Rather than speak them aloud I snake my free hand over his hip and find his dick, hugging him to me as I pump his heavy cock to the beat of my steady thrusts.

It's not physically possible to get any closer, yet with each roll of my hips I try for the impossible, as if holding him tight enough, burying myself deep enough, could make us one.

"Come for me." I speak my final plea in Cade's ear, and blink back the gathering

tears as our bodies function as one for the last time.

I toss a few pairs of shorts in my suitcase as Cade emerges from the shower, wrapped in just a towel.

I hold my breath, too afraid that if I let it out I'll vomit all over him. Instead, I let my eyes roam over the man a final time, committing his image to memory.

The broad shoulders that carried me down the trail.

The strong arms that held me at night.

The lean, muscled torso that made my knees weak.

The rough fingers that touched me so gently.

And the eyes, those piercing blue eyes that I get lost in when he looks at me.

Physically, Cade surpasses every fantasy man I've ever conjured, and in that respect, I doubt I'll ever be as attracted to another as much as I am to the guy in front of me. But what I feel for him goes beyond the physical. He's the first person to take my choices at face value and support them unconditionally. And he's the first person to make me feel truly beautiful, inside and out. Sexy even. I don't have worlds of experience with men, but Cade is nothing like men I've dated in the past, which makes me fairly certain I'm getting the last look at the one who will prove to be the love of my life.

I take a fortifying breath and try to keep my emotions in check by taking a page from Cade's book. "I'm going to miss this view." I lick my lips as my gaze roams over him

.

"I knew it, you wanted me for my body all along," he responds in kind. He knows I'm joking to keep things light, but there must be some part of him that's going to miss this, or he wouldn't be flirting without abandon. I take some comfort in knowing that even if he doesn't love me, he cares enough to be sad I'm leaving, and he's trying to hide his emotions by flirting.

Suddenly, he strides toward me and engulfs me in a hug, guiding my head to rest against his neck. I take a moment to savor his smooth skin, the faint smell of masculine soap. Cade rests one hand on my back and strokes my hair with the other. We both know this is the last intimate embrace we'll share, and neither of us seems ready to let go. But if I can't live my life with Cade I need to move forward. That means I have a plane to catch.

I kiss his collarbone softly before pulling back and returning to my suitcase. I watch him dress and toss his clothes in a duffel bag from the corner of my eye as I finish my packing, trying to make myself believe we're packing for a trip instead of the return to our separate lives. When there's nothing left, we close up the house, parking my uncle's Subaru in its new garage home, and head to the truck so Cade can drive me to the airport.

It's not a quick drive, but it's mostly silent. We don't have future plans to talk about, like what we want to do for dinner, or how we want to spend the weekend, topics that might otherwise come up. We don't even hold hands like we normally do. He does ask about the process to finish my thesis, and I tell him about having to present and defend my conclusions to my professors, but the topic seems to make him uncomfortable, and we quickly revert to silence.

I've never felt this uncomfortable with Cade, not even during our earliest encounters when he flirted outrageously and put me on the defensive. At least the banter we had

then was playful, not awkward like this silence is. As much as I don't want to leave, I can't wait to be out of this truck. I don't want this strange feeling to be my last memory of our time together.

When we get to the airport, Cade takes me to the passenger drop off instead of parking to accompany me inside, and I'm oddly relieved our goodbye will be over soon instead of being drawn out at the ticket counter or the security gate. He pulls my bags from the trunk and passes them over to the attendant who checks me in.

And then it's here. Our final goodbye.

Cade stands before me, hands buried in his pockets. My stance mirrors his. And even though this moment is as awkward as the car ride, I don't want it to end, because when it does, our time together really will be over.

I'm not sure how long we stand there, acting more like strangers than lovers, before I finally find my voice. "I couldn't have asked for a better summer." I think my voice cracks on that last word, but I press on. "Thank you."

He nods his head, lips pressed in a firm line.

"Maybe I'll see you around?" I say lamely.

Cade seems to start, like my words have only just reached him. "Here." He presses something cold and hard into my hand. "This belongs to you."

I look down and see the flower we made together in his shop.

"I realized this morning I never did get you flowers." He shrugs, a sad smile on his face. "I don't know if that's a thing guys do, but since you're a plant guy I probably should've. At least this won't wilt."

“An eternal bloom.” I mean to think that, but when Cade utters a muffled “ yeah” I realize I spoke aloud. “Thank you.” I turn the metal over in my hands, frowning when I notice a wet mark on it. Is that... ?

Cade steps to me and cradles my face in his hands, wiping away a tear I didn’t realize I’d shed. Then he touches his lips to mine, giving me a kiss so tender and delicate I very nearly say the words I promised not to say unless he did. But he speaks first.

“Take care of yourself, Solo,” he whispers.

My heart plummets to my stomach. I know he’s trying to make this easier, but the nickname causes the cracks in my heart to fracture completely. “You too,” I grunt, spinning away before my eyes can find his one last time.

Chapter twenty-two

Cade

N ights are the hardest. That's when the loneliness is the most crushing, because now all the things I used to do with Maddox I have to do alone. Even though that was the case before he came into my life, and it never bothered me, I hate it now.

Deacon and the guys think hanging out with them will make it all better, divert my attention or something. That only makes me miss him more, because as much as I like those guys, their antics don't interest me the way they used to. I couldn't care less about chasing girls. I couldn't care less about getting drunk. I couldn't care less about what's happening around town. Besides, going anywhere would only expose me to the talk I know is going around, and for the first time in my life I can't stomach it.

Maddox may not have realized I was in love with him, but there's no doubt the whole town knew. They saw the changes in me and were happy for me, but now, that's turned into sympathy and pity, which makes my stomach churn. They don't mean anything by it, but seeing the sorrow mirrored back at me over and over again is too much. So, I don't go out anymore. Not to The Underground, not to the concerts and end-of-summer festivals, not even to do my errands. I drive to the next town over for those, where I'm less likely to run into anyone I know.

Or anyone I know well enough to ask about Maddox anyway, because if someone did, I don't have an answer to give.

We haven't communicated at all since he left. Total radio silence. I guess I should be glad he's making a clean break, not drawing things out and making it even more difficult to get over him. I might resent it a little though, because he's apparently fine without me, and I'm wrecked without him. Barely surviving and keeping it together by staying busy so I don't have time to think—to remember.

I hope closing the books on his uncle's project today will help with that, because I can't stand to be at this place without him. Normally, I'd leave this part to my dad, but without Maddox here, and to keep myself occupied, I've started to take on a bigger role in the business. Given how this was my job site, Dad wants me to do the final review, so for the first time since he left I'm back at the place that felt like ours mere weeks ago.

"I know, you've never been good at sitting still," Dad says, "but you're driving me nuts."

"Sorry." I stop pacing and take a seat on one of the chairs to wait for Rick.

"You never told him how you feel, did you?" He sounds disappointed.

"I couldn't do that to him." I rest my arms on my knees and shake my head.

"Do what exactly? Make him happy? Because he looked pretty damn happy when I saw him." He rocks back and forth in his chair.

"For the summer, yeah. But long term? He's too smart and driven to be happy with a guy like me," I say softly.

"Was that really your decision to make?" He stares at me pointedly.

"Yes," I insist. "I'd just hold him back."

"Why, because you don't have a PhD?"

"Among other things," I snap.

"Don't tell me you're intimidated by the fact he's smart."

"Of course not." I scoff. "I kept quiet because we don't exactly boast a lot of jobs for scientists here, but since you pointed it out, I have absolutely no idea what he's talking about when he discusses his work. It sounds like a foreign language to me and the best I've got to add to the conversation is the occasional head nod. I'm not foolish enough to deny at some point he'll want to be with someone who understands what he does, so while I'm not intimidated by his intelligence, I acknowledge my lack of it might get boring to him one day." I stand up to pace again, unable to sit still.

"Do you think I understand what your mother does?" Dad frowns, his eyes tracking me as I move.

That's not at all what I was expecting him to say. "Don't you?" I ask.

"Hell no. I'm a builder, same as you. I find what she does interesting, but I can't talk to her intelligently about it. I can't give her advice or input about her job any more than she can give those things to me, although I like to think that the questions I ask help her do her job better." He winks. "Either way, what we do for a living doesn't have any bearing on how we feel about each other."

I admit I hadn't considered my parents' ability to make things work despite being in two wildly different fields, but the type of work Maddox does or the fact that he's brilliant was never my major hang up. Sure, I worry he'd get bored with a guy like me, but I was more concerned with his ability to do what he loves here in Katah Vista. Mom doesn't need a lab to do her job, she's fine with a couple scales and microscopes. I doubt Maddox could say the same .

A car pulls into the drive, ending our conversation. Which is for the best considering I've thought through all this already, and I don't need to go through it again, even with my dad. I doubt he could change my mind, anyway. Rick exits and gives the driver a tip before turning to get his first look at what we've done, and from the look on his face he likes what he sees. We were able to blend the new garage with the original structure in a way that makes the house seem like it still has its original footprint, but whereas before the garage faced the driveway, now it's sort of tucked behind the house, connected by the new, oversized mudroom.

"I'm speechless, guys, it looks amazing." He steps up to shake first Dad's hand, then mine.

"Which part do you want to see first?" Dad beams.

"The garage. Definitely the garage." Rick's eyes light up as he looks at it.

Rick and Dad follow me to the first of three bay doors, where I enter a code into the keypad. The door slides upward to reveal the Subaru that's been parked there since Madd's departure. It's the first time I've seen that car since he left, and it hits me harder than I expected to see it sitting there untouched. It makes the air leave my lungs for a minute, and I have to take a shallow breath to shake off the memories before I lead them inside, hoping they didn't notice my hesitation.

Rick likes his toys, so we've set him up with storage for everything from skis to bikes and tools. The car has always been here, but once we finished the garage, we retrieved all his items from the storage locker he rented and put everything away. You wouldn't know it given the lack of visible evidence, but this garage is holding a shit ton of gear.

"I can't believe how clean it looks. You guys made storage for everything," he marvels as he opens and shuts cabinets .

Dad beams at the compliment. I should too, since it's actually my work, but I just can't bring myself to get excited. Dad looks at me with raised eyebrows, and I reluctantly make the rounds to show Rick each and every nook and cranny he has to store stuff, first in the garage, then the mud room. When he's explored every inch, we head to the patio so he can take that in.

Outside, I can breathe a little better, but I still can't muster a lot of enthusiasm, even when Rick discovers the sculpture I hung on the garage. I can't look at the copper mountain-scape mimicking the view from Madd's favorite hike without feeling like my chest is about to cave in. I look everywhere else while he asks about it, doing my best to answer his questions without sounding like an asshole.

"I never would've thought to hang anything here, but the sculpture makes this feel like another room, not a patio. And I love how it's suspended on the wall, so it looks three dimensional even though it's flat. And you say it will change over time?" He turns to me.

"The patina will change, yeah," I mutter.

He and my dad exchange a look, and I know I'm not doing a good job of sounding pleasant.

"It'll become a little more weathered, but not smudged like silver gets," I add, trying to sound informative instead of bored. It's not Rick's fault I can't wait to get out of here.

"Did you get this piece locally? I'd love to put something like this over the fireplace inside too." He turns back to admire the sculpture.

"I made that with a few copper scraps I found." I rub the back of my neck, wishing he hadn't asked. I don't want to get into how I came up with the design.

"You made this? With scraps?" He traces the edge of the mountain-scape with his finger.

I nod, wondering if his surprise means he's disappointed or impressed.

"Wow, I never would've guessed. You know, this reminds me of this little flower Maddox has. It's made out of a gear and some sort of metal pipe, I think. From a distance it looks like a symmetrical flower, but up close you can see the size of the leaves are slightly different, sort of imperfect, which he says makes it more real because nothing is perfect. But now I'm wondering if that was the intent, or if it's just what the artist had available." He stares at me knowingly as he finishes talking, and even though this is his uncle, I can't help but wonder if maybe his ability to see inside me and understand me better than anyone else comes from him, because it sure feels like he knows me too well right now. It was oddly reassuring when Maddox did it, but it's kind of intimidating coming from Rick. Shit.

I've always liked Rick, and I'm not going to insult him by playing dumb. But I don't know how much Maddox has said about his summer, and I don't feel right talking to him about us, so I'm not going to volunteer anything more than I have to.

"It's what I had available," I confirm evenly.

"Why does it say, Eternal?" he presses, his tone decidedly less friendly than it was when we were looking at the garage.

"Come again?" I frown, confused. It didn't say anything the last time I saw it.

"It's in a frame on his desk that says, Eternal." Rick crosses his arms and stares pointedly at me.

Maddox framed it?

With the caption 'Eternal?'

That's... Oh my God. That's what he said at the airport when I said the flower wouldn't wilt. Holy fuck that's... Sweet?

Nah. I mean, it's sweet he put it where he can see it every day, but that's not the right word.

Sentimental? It's that too, but sentimental isn't right either.

Meaningful. It's fucking meaningful, just like he said he would be when he taunted me about being a notch on my bedpost.

Fuck I miss him.

Oh shit, Rick's still staring at me.

Am I smiling? Or staring at nothing? Even good memories of Maddox can leave me feeling empty, so I have no idea what expression he sees right now. I try to make my face blank.

"Well, technically metal doesn't wilt." That sounds like an excuse, a dismissal, even to my ears, despite the fact every word is true. But I won't say more because it's not my place to tell him what Maddox might have been thinking when he framed the flower. Or what I wish he was thinking.

"You know, Cade," Rick glowers, "I'm tempted to deck you right now for making him so miserable, but since you look just as awful as he does, I'm guessing he isn't the only one with a broken heart. What the hell happened?"

Dad's eyes dart back and forth between me and Rick, like he's not sure whether to be

alarmed by this confrontation, but I'm too distracted by what Rick said to think about his anger. A broken heart? That doesn't make any sense.

"You think he has a broken heart?" It comes out as barely a whisper.

"He's not the same person he used to be, and I can't think of another explanation for that. So, are you going to tell me what happened?" he demands, fisting his hands on his hips.

"Nothing happened." I clear my throat. "Not like you're thinking, anyway."

"What am I thinking?"

"That I somehow took advantage of him, but it's nothing like that. I respect Maddox more than anyone I've ever met, and all I want is to see him achieve the dream he came here to work on." I try to sound happy. Optimistic on Madd's behalf. I don't think it works.

"Your answer still doesn't explain why you're both lonely and depressed."

"He's lonely?" I wince.

"And depressed," Rick adds.

I'm not sure how to react to this. I assumed the reason I didn't hear from Maddox was because he was able to put me out of his mind, not because he was miserable. Did I really cause him to feel that way? Did I end up being the distraction I always swore I wouldn't become? If so, I may have put his career in jeopardy. Shit .

"Did he pass his thesis?" I hold my breath, waiting for the answer.

"Yes," Rick says curtly.

"What's he going to do now?" I ask softly.

"I don't know. I don't think he knows. We've all been wondering why that is, when he was so driven before. Now I understand." He eyes me critically.

"I'm sorry." I hang my head. It's not enough, but I don't know what else to say. I'm not sure there's anything you can say when you screw up someone's future. I never should've let myself get close to him.

"Sorry for what? Sorry you let him go? Or sorry he fell in love with you?"

"You think he's in love with me?" I blink as my jaw drops.

"It would explain how he's acting."

For a moment, the weight in my chest vanishes. Maddox in love with me are the words I've wanted to hear for so long, and even though it's not him saying them, it makes me so fucking relieved to hear it. But all too soon the weight comes crashing down again. Even if it's true, it doesn't change anything.

"I'm sorry, Rick, I don't think you're right," I choke. "He never told me that."

"Cade, I'd be remiss if I didn't point out you're in love with him, and you didn't tell him how you felt either," Dad says, almost guiltily. Rick looks at me with raised eyebrows.

"I didn't tell him because he deserves the best, and the best isn't me or this town. Not for someone like him," I say firmly.

"Someone like him?" Rick prompts.

"Yeah. Someone who's brilliant and wants to do good things with that knowledge. He should be surrounded by people who can give him those opportunities. He won't find them in Katah Vista or with me. He deserves better." I'm practically shouting at this point, but I'm damn tired of having to justify why he's better without me.

"Forget about what he deserves," Rick scoffs. "Think about what he wants. Do you even know what that is?"

"Do you?" I retort.

"I used to," Rick insists. "But like I said, he's different now. He's different since he met you. I think the only way to know what he wants is to ask him."

I stare at him, dumbfounded. "What, just call him up out of the blue and ask what he wants to do with his life? Ask if he wants me to be part of it? Is that what you're saying?"

"Yes," he shouts, startling both of us. He shakes his head, takes a deep breath, and continues. "I appreciate that you're trying to think of what's best for him, but it's not your decision to make. It's his."

"Can't you see, by not asking him, I'm keeping him from making a bad decision." I reason. "How could I live with myself if he gave up his dream career for me?"

"From where I'm standing, it looks like you'd sacrifice anything for him. I fail to see how that makes you a bad decision." Rick crosses his arms, almost daring me to object, which makes no sense considering he seemed pissed at me just a few minutes ago.

What the hell? Why is everyone hell bent on me trying to make things work with Maddox? Can't they see that's a selfish thing to do? I don't want to be the selfish bastard anymore. I don't want to be the guy who thinks of himself at the expense of others. I'm finally putting someone else's needs before my own, and even though it's gutting me to live without him, I'd rather do that than be the reason he loses his dream.

I hate that Madd's hurting, and I'd do anything to take that away. Anything but what Rick's asking. I won't ask him to give up everything and I won't have him grow to hate me later for forcing him to choose between his future and loving me.

"We're talking in circles here Rick," I exhale, shaking my head in defeat. "I'm messing up Maddox's future."

"You're not going to tell him that you love him?" He arches a thick brow.

"It's because I love him," I say softly. "If he knew... If he knew he might say it back. And if he says it back he might walk away from everything he's worked for to be with me. As much as I want that, I can't do that to him. And I can't leave here, either. Why would I ask him to give up everything when I wouldn't be willing to do the same?"

Rick throws his hands in the air and turns to my dad. "Is he always this stubborn?"

"Not usually, no." Dad sounds almost sad. Hopeless, even. Fuck .

I storm off before I can hear Rick's response. I can't stand here and talk about Maddox anymore or listen to Rick and my dad talk about me. I don't care that Rick's the client and I'm supposed to be nice to him. I don't care that I'm walking out on my dad. I just can't be here anymore. All I care about is erasing this day from memory in the nearest bottle. Maybe then, I'll forget what Rick said about Maddox loving me.

Chapter twenty-three

Maddox

My heart beats wildly as I sit on the front step, waiting.

I can't remember the last time I was this nervous. Even presenting my thesis didn't leave me this jumpy. I wipe my sweaty palms on my pants, cursing the fact that my anxiety can't be limited to a racing heart and a queasy stomach. Sweaty palms are so embarrassing.

Not for the first time, I wonder if I'm doing the right thing. My heart says yes, but my mind isn't as sure. I replay the events that led me here, hoping they'll give me some reassurance...

"Uncle Rick?" I mutter as I open the door.

"It doesn't sound like you're happy to see me." He steps inside to give me a hug.

"Just surprised. I thought you were in Katah Vista to see the work on the house." I close the door and lead him to the living room to sit down. "Do you want something to drink?"

"No, I can't stay very long." He sits at one end of the couch while I take the other. "I probably shouldn't be here at all," he continues, "but I'd feel guilty if I never said anything."

"Said anything about what?" I'm suddenly very nervous. Rick and I are close, but this is a little out of character for him.

He braces his arms on his legs, wrings his hands together nervously. "I saw Cade," he blurts.

At the mention of his name, I freeze. I've thought about him daily, all-day every-day more accurately, but I haven't heard anyone say his name since I got home. It has a bigger impact than I expected.

"Why didn't you say anything?" Rick meets my eyes, his own a mixture of confusion and sadness.

"What do you mean?" I say cautiously. I haven't told anyone about Cade, so I'm not sure what Rick's getting at.

"Maddox, you've been different since you got back. I couldn't figure out why, none of us could. Then I saw Cade. You're in love with him, aren't you?"

I'm afraid if I try to speak my voice will crack, so I nod instead.

Rick sighs. "That's what I thought. You didn't tell him?"

"I didn't want him to feel obligated to say it back," I exhale. "He'd never been in a relationship before, and I didn't want my feelings to influence his. Letting him say it first was the only way I'd know if the words were genuine."

"Okay." Rick nods, turning my words over in his mind. "I can follow your logic. But if he had been the first to admit his feelings would that make yours any less genuine?"

"I...you're making it sound like you know what his feelings are," I venture.

"Picked up on that, did you?" He smirks. "Yes, I know how he feels. I also know he's as stubborn as you are, which is probably how you two ended up in this mess."

"What do you mean, stubborn?" I frown. "That doesn't sound like Cade."

"Apparently, it's a new trait he's picked up, but he's already a pro." Rick shakes his head, frustrated. I still don't follow what he's getting at. "He's bound and determined to believe being with him means you'd be giving up your career," he exhales deeply.

"That doesn't make any sense," I protest. "I wouldn't have to give it up completely. It just might look different in Katah Vista than it would in a place with more resources."

"Well, he doesn't see it the same way." Rick shrugs. "And I'm pretty sure he won't unless he hears it from you."

"Hears what from me? That being with him doesn't mean giving up my career? Or that I love him?" I ask cautiously.

"Either. Both."

"I'm just supposed to show up out of the blue and tell him I love him?" My eyes bug out.

"If that's how you feel, then yes." Rick nods.

I let myself imagine for a minute I could, that if I showed up at his house and told him how I feel we'd get our happily ever after. Only I know it's not that simple. Cade won't leave Katah Vista, and while I'm sure I could find something to do there, it would undoubtedly look different than what I originally envisioned for myself. I can

live with that, but could Cade? Or would he constantly blame himself for forcing me to go in a different direction, even if I was happy to do it? I'd have to convince him he's more important to me than my career, and he's never been good about believing he's important.

"What if he can't accept that?" I ask.

"Then he's not the man I think he is," Rick says matter-of-factly. "Just think about it, Maddox. I hate to see you unhappy."

"Okay." I hear myself agree even though I don't know if I can.

Rick stands to leave, but before he heads to the door, he reaches into his jacket pocket. "I saw this on my trip. I thought it might interest you."

I look at the printout he hands me. It's an advertisement for a job. An environmental science position. My jaw drops to the floor as I look to him for confirmation.

"You heard about the new owner at the ski resort?" he prompts.

I think back to my dinner with Cade's parents, and the concerts in the park. I do recall talk about a new owner. I'm ashamed to admit I haven't thought about how that might affect the people in town, especially the ones I'd grown close to.

"Yes," I reply.

"He's talking about doing some new development at the resort. That'll require a lot of study before anything can begin, I imagine." He winks at me as he heads for the door...

And now here I am, waiting for Cade to get home, so I can confess in a last-ditch

effort to see if we have a future together. If he wants one.

The crunch of tires on gravel pulls my gaze to the driveway, where Cade's truck is rolling to a stop. The engine goes quiet, but the driver's door stays shut. There's no movement inside the cab, and because of the sun's reflection on the glass I can't see Cade's face to know what sort of expression he's wearing. I take a shaky breath, force a blank expression to my face, and wipe my palms again as I stand up.

The door creaks as it opens, echoing in the relative silence around us. Cade steps out but makes no attempt to move away from the truck. Instead, he stands there with a confused look in his eyes, like he can't make sense of what he's seeing .

His face is just as stunning as I remember, but the mischievous spark I grew so fond of is gone, replaced with an almost vacant air. He's here, but somehow not. Detached almost. Lost.

"Maddox?" He blinks. It's barely louder than a whisper.

"Hey." I give a lame little nod since he makes no move to come closer.

"What are you doing here?" He sounds more disoriented than happy or sad, leaving me to question again whether this was a bad idea.

"I...wanted to see you," I falter.

He's still standing by the truck, using it like a shield, or maybe a support. I'm usually better at interpreting his movements, but right now he feels like a stranger.

God, this is awkward.

"I'm sorry," I blurt. "I shouldn't have just shown up like this. I'll go." I look around

for an escape, but Uncle Rick dropped me off, so I either have to call him for a ride or walk. I'm leaning toward the latter and step off the porch when Cade seems to wake from his stupor.

"Don't leave." He finally shuts the door and comes toward me. "I didn't expect to see you, that's all. Come here."

He opens his arms so I can step into them, and the moment we connect all the tension and anxiety evaporate. A huge sense of calm washes over me, and from the way Cade sighs I'm sure he feels it too.

We cling to each other and just breathe, and for a moment time seems to stop. My mind goes quiet. His touch shuts out all the doubts, the fears, the what-ifs. I know this doesn't mean we're magically okay, we still have things to talk about, but as long as we can hold on to this, to how right it feels to be together, I have to believe we'll figure it out.

"Come inside," he whispers, taking my hand and pulling me with him toward the front door.

As we step into the living room, Cade drops my hand and starts rushing around, picking things up, and I'm reminded of the lost look he had earlier. We didn't spend much time at his house over the summer, but I was here enough to know he keeps it fairly clean, and just like his expression, this clutter is something about him I don't recognize. I'm not sure whether to feel guilty that my silence led to this, or hopeful I can fix it by telling him the truth.

"Sorry about the mess," he says. "I haven't...I've been working a lot," he amends as he clears a spot for me to sit on the couch.

He takes a seat on the opposite end, and once again I start to lose my nerve, the

distance between us making me wonder if he's ready to hear what I have to say. I won't change my mind, but I can't just blurt it out. Not when he's clearly confused about how he should act. I'll have to ease into this.

"Work?" I ask. "Another build?"

"I've been doing some more with the business. Managing stuff." He meets my eyes briefly as he speaks, then averts them again. Usually, when he doesn't know what to say he flirts outrageously, but this Cade is subdued. Almost timid. I hope I'm not too late.

"Your dad must be glad to have the help," I offer.

He nods absently. "I heard you passed your thesis. Congratulations."

For the first time since he pulled up, my smile isn't forced. "I did. Thank you."

"Does that mean you have a job lined up? You stopped by to tell me where you're off to?" He doesn't look at me when he asks.

"No job," I say softly. It's now or never. "But I did apply for one... Here."

"Here?" He meets my eyes again, but this time he doesn't look away. He studies them, searching. Hopeful almost. "In Katah Vista?"

"Not Katah Vista, specifically. The whole county. There's talk about more development around the mountain, and the kind of infrastructure needed to support that. The environmental impact for such a large-scale project would have to be carefully studied, so there's a lot of work to do. Years of work..." I trail off, not sure how to finish.

"That's not the alternative energy you wanted to focus on," he says sadly.

"Not exclusively," I agree. "But energy resources are part of any development, so I'd still be able to work in my specialty, maybe even with water as a resource."

"Why?" He shakes his head in disbelief.

He doesn't have to elaborate. I know exactly why he's asking that question.

"I could live anywhere in the county. Even right here." My voice is barely a whisper.

"Don't do this for me, Maddox." He closes his eyes, an almost pained expression on his face. "Don't give up on your dreams for me."

"I'm not," I say evenly.

"You are." He looks at me sadly. "Katah Vista was never part of your future."

"You weren't supposed to be either." I shrug. "Plans change."

"They shouldn't. Not for me," he insists. "You deserve better."

I was hoping, after an entire summer together, Cade would be able to accept how important he is to me, but I see he still needs convincing.

"I'm not changing my plans for you. I'm doing it for me." I take a deep breath and continue. "This is what I want. To be here. Besides, didn't we agree you were going to stop worrying about what I deserve?" I chew my lip, waiting for his answer.

"We did." A hint of a smile plays on his lips though his eyes are still sad.

"Good." His near smile gives me the confidence to continue. "Because the only thing I deserve is to be happy, and the thing that makes me happiest is you."

"Me?" He winces.

"Is that so hard to believe?"

"Yes. I'm the local playboy. I don't know how to be a boyfriend or support your career. I'll only hold you back." He looks at me sadly.

"I disagree," I say as calmly as possible. "You were a great boyfriend all summer. You gave me endless support to write my thesis. And you taught me to enjoy the moment. You didn't hold me back, Cade, you taught me what's important in life." I look straight into his eyes, willing him to understand my meaning.

"Don't say it, Maddox. Don't say I'm what's important." He shakes his head.

"You are important," I insist. "When are you going to see yourself the way I see you?"

"You see the best in everyone, Madd. But what you think you see isn't there," he pleads.

"Let me tell you what I see." I scoot towards him and take his hand, hoping the contact will bring back the calm we felt outside, and give me the courage to say what I came here to say. He looks down at our joined fingers.

"I see a man who's humble, honest, and supportive. I see a man who loves to have fun yet puts his responsibilities first. I see a man who acts carefree but feels deeply. And I see a man who's so selfless he'd give up his own happiness to see someone else find theirs. I know men who possess one or two of those qualities, but not all of

them, and none of them make my cock hard when they look at me the way you do.” That earns me a weak laugh, just as I’d hoped for, but he still won’t meet my eyes .

Stroking over his thumb, I try to give him time to process, but when he stays silent, I try again. “There isn’t a better man on Earth than the one sitting in front of me, and I don’t care if I deserve him or not. I want him. I want you, Cade. I love you.”

He inhales sharply and holds his breath, his eyes darting from our joined fingers to meet mine, and I swear they almost look a little glassy.

“And years from now? When you’re still focused on the development of this town instead of making groundbreaking discoveries in a state-of-the-art lab, will you still want me, then? Will you be happy you chose me?” His voice cracks.

“There isn’t any other choice.” I feel my own eyes turning glassy.

Cade reaches up to cup my jaw. “I really can’t convince you to walk away?”

“No,” I whisper.

“Thank fuck,” he exhales, “because I’m damn tired of trying to convince myself I’m okay without you.” He leans his forehead against mine and threads his fingers in my hair. “I love you, Maddox Gerome. I love you so fucking much I haven’t taken a full breath since you left. I’ve never felt as empty as I did without you here, like a piece of me was missing. I don’t ever want to feel that again.”

“You won’t.” I wrap my hands around his neck so I don’t collapse as the nervous tension that was holding me up seeps out of me.

“Good,” Cade whispers, right before he touches his lips reverently to mine, and my heart beats for what feels like the first time in a month. This, in Cade’s arms, is where

I've always belonged.

"God, I've missed you Maddox," he mumbles against my lips. "I missed holding you. Touching you." His kisses morph from tender and loving to firm, insistent. Making up for lost time.

"I missed you, too." Heat explodes throughout my body as his tongue drives inside my mouth to find mine. We cling together, tongues clashing, urgent, searching, as our hands fumble to get rid of our clothes.

Our lovemaking is urgent yet tender, carnal but passionate, both of us starved for each other but conscious of the magnitude of this moment. For the first time, Cade's allowing himself to believe he has value, that he deserves me just as much as I deserve him. It's everything I was afraid to hope for, and now it's real. We're real .

After our need has been temporarily sated, Cade cradles me against his chest, stroking my back as our breathing returns to normal.

"How did I get so lucky—to get this second chance?" he mumbles against my forehead.

"Uncle Rick," I say automatically.

"Did you seriously just mention your Uncle?" Cade groans. "Your dick is touching mine, you can't say another man's name, especially your uncle's."

"Well, you asked," I snort.

"That was rhetorical, Solo," he chuckles. "Although, I do appreciate your ability to make me laugh in bed." He wraps his arms around me and hugs me tight.

"I'm glad to be back in your bed." I sigh into his neck. "I was so sure I'd lost you forever."

"You never lost me, Maddox. Even when you weren't here, I still belonged to you." He tucks his finger under my jaw and pulls my lips to his for a soft kiss. "From the moment I blocked your car in, I've belonged to you, and I always will."

Reaching up to kiss his cheek and whisper in his ear, I say, "I guess I'm no longer Solo anymore, huh? You'll have to find a new nickname."

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Maddox got the job with the county. No surprise really, because he's brilliant, and just as he predicted it does include some work on energy resources. That eases some of the guilt that sometimes crops up about everything he sacrificed to be with me, but since he lights up like the sun when he talks about work, I know he doesn't think he's sacrificed anything.

Plus, alternative energy is becoming a popular business, and sometimes his family's investment firm gets approached to back these new technologies. They always ask for his input, which keeps him on the cutting edge of what's going on. It's even brought him closer to his own family despite the physical distance between them.

Watching Madd go after his dreams here in Katah Vista has inspired me to focus on what I love, too. And that—unfortunately—isn't construction. Not managing it anyway.

After trying to get involved in the operations of the company, I confirmed what I'd always suspected, I'm not really a desk guy. A long talk with my dad later, we came up with a future plan that doesn't involve me doing the paperwork. When he's ready to retire we'll either outsource things like payroll and accounting or bring in an office manager.

This way, I can concentrate on building—the part I enjoy—and not be forced to do the parts I despise. It also gives me the freedom to continue welding. Thank fuck.

Especially since Rick wasn't just fishing for confirmation of my feelings for Maddox when he was talking to me about my work. He commissioned a piece for above the fireplace, and he recommended me to several friends and clients looking for unique pieces. Now, I have a little side hustle making metal art. I've been able to experiment

in the studio, and it brings in enough extra cash that I was able to buy Maddox the perfect ring.

Deacon worries this is happening too fast, first moving Maddox in with me and then getting engaged a few months later, but the month I spent without him was the worst in my life, and I wasn't going to go through that again. I know now that keeping my feelings to myself can have dire consequences, and I'm not going to make the same mistake twice.

Now, in just a few short minutes, he'll be my husband.

And I cannot fucking wait.

There are still days when I wonder what I did to deserve him. I've stopped admitting that to him, because he thinks I'm putting myself down, but I'm not. Not anymore.

I remember what he said about all the good things he sees in me, and when I stopped beating myself up for wanting to have fun, I realized he was right. As a neighbor, as a friend, as his future husband, I do have good qualities. I'm honest and responsible. I'm supportive. And I definitely care deeply about the people around me. He helped me understand that.

So, when I wonder what I did to deserve him, it's not about putting myself down or questioning what he sees in me, it's about the fact I got lucky enough to find the person who helped me see those things in myself, too. Maddox is the person who makes me whole. I know how special he is, and I'm grateful for him every day.

I follow the minister to the arbor at the rim of the scenic overlook with the Katah Vista mountains as a backdrop. I offered to get married wherever Maddox wanted, thinking he'd pick his oceanside hometown, but he said he wanted the ceremony in the spot where we're going to build our life together, so he could see it every day.

My man's a fucking romantic under that sexy masculine body.

The guys follow me to the front of the crowd, first Deacon as my best man, followed by Beckett and Finn. When the music starts, Madd's hometown friend Jason walks down the aisle first, then his sister followed by Ally, and my palms grow sweaty knowing it won't be long before I see my man.

Once Maddox starts down the aisle with his dad, I forget how to breathe.

He's fucking stunning. He's wearing a gray suit the exact color of his eyes, with a white shirt open at the collar, showing off a hint of beautiful skin. Tan skin that looks like it's been kissed by the sun.

It's my wedding day, sue me for being poetic and shit.

His shoulder length waves are fluttering in the breeze, making it impossible to hide that gorgeous chiseled jaw of his, and the full lips fighting to tick up into a dazzling smile. It's part coy, part excitement, and a promise of mischief to come later.

God, I love this man.

Maddox and his father reach the arbor, and his dad shakes my hand and gives me a hug before placing Madd's hand in mine. I'm vaguely aware of both our mothers smiling through their tears as I link our fingers together, and because I'm so overwhelmed, I do the only thing that's ever come naturally when it comes to Maddox. I kiss the fuck out of him, feeling him smile against my lips .

"Ahem," the minister clears his throat. "You're skipping ahead, son."

"Sorry." I shrug as the guests try to stifle their laughter. "I'm really anxious to start calling him my husband."

Maddox turns red, but his grin tells me he feels the same.

"I understand." The minister smiles warmly. "Dearly beloved," he bellows to the guests, and my future begins.

Sloan

I spot him slipping into the back row just before the procession starts, and instead of focusing on the wedding party, I focus on him. I moved in with my sister, Ally, about the same time he moved to town, though until last week I hadn't seen him in person. This makes two Carter sightings in two weeks. What are the odds?

He's mesmerizing in his charcoal suit and black tie. I'd say that's because he's the only guy here in a full suit, besides the grooms, but it's more the way he fills out the suit that catches my eye. It's clearly not something he bought off the rack, clinging to his frame in a way that accentuates his trim physique.

I'm not really the kind of guy who goes for suits. Fashion is my sister's thing. And in my experience, most guys look uncomfortable in them, like they're pretending to be an adult. Lumberjack is more my style, or it was before today, but then I saw how Carter fits in his.

He was wearing a suit the day I was summoned to his office to give him what turned out to be an awkward massage. Or rather, he was wearing suit pants, so I didn't get the full effect. With the jacket and tie, he looks both graceful and powerful, and that hint of late-day stubble covering his strong jaw adds a bit of rustic appeal.

I sneak another peek at him just as Maddox passes my row. His expression is blank, his posture stiff, though his eyes look a little less serious today than they did in his office. In fact, they almost look warm, making me wonder what's going through his

mind.

There's no denying Carter's mystery is part of his appeal. Maddox seems to like him, but of all the people I know in town, he's the only one to have any regular contact with him. No one knows why Carter picked this ski resort to purchase or what his plans are for it, except maybe Maddox, but he's under contract and can't share details of his work.

Similarly, no one knows anything personal about him. Like what are his hobbies? What foods does he like? I can't imagine what a man like that would do for fun, or what he'd dare place in his mouth.

Part of me wonders, like most of the others in this town, if he's single. No one has seen him with a girlfriend... or a boyfriend. And as far as the press knows, he's not married. He so rarely leaves his office at the resort that sightings have become a bit of a game. A Katah Vista style 'Where's Waldo' among the locals

The ceremony begins with a laugh—Cade jumps the gun and kisses his groom before the officiant tells him to—which seems fitting based on what I know of the guy. Before long, I'm wiping away tears as I watch them take their vows. If ever there was an underdog to root for, it's Cade, the guy who once seemed allergic to relationships and felt like it made him unworthy to be in one. Fortunately, Maddox didn't judge him based on his past, and now they're the perfect couple.

Once the ceremony ends, people file out of their chairs and head toward the reception tent. I lose track of Carter in the crowd when I try to wipe away the evidence of my happy tears, but my curiosity has me casually meandering through the guests, turning my head from side to side in a lame attempt to catch another glimpse. After the massage debacle, this might be my last chance to see him in person, and I don't want to miss it. Unfortunately, the man is elusive.

I'm about to give up my search when something pulls my eyes toward the gift table. I

look up to find Carter staring in my direction, lips pressed in a firm line, offering no clue to what he's thinking or feeling. Yet, the intensity in his gaze suggests there's some deep thoughts behind the expressionless mask, and I have a sudden desire to discover every one of them.

Get it together, Sloane. This is still your boss.

Heart pounding, I hold my ground, willing myself not to blink. I don't know what's happening, what this little staring contest means, but I'm determined not to be as flustered as I was the other day. And what can I say? I'm desperate to commit this man to memory just in case I never see him again.

Even though I still don't know what prompted that interesting episode in his office—and likely never will—I don't have any illusions that his reaction was for me, despite him saying it's never happened before. And I have to assume it won't happen again, mainly because I doubt I'll be invited back.

As the seconds tick by, we hold each other's gaze, and my mind registers the need to move. I have to do something other than stand frozen in place. My head tilts up a fraction, the start of a subtle up-nod, just as he drops an envelope on the table and spins toward the exit.

Guess I should've kept playing statue.

Deflated, I head to the bar for a drink, telling myself this is probably for the best. After all, fantasizing about your boss can only lead to trouble, and in a town this small, trouble is the last thing I need.