

A close-up photograph of a person's back and arms. The person is wearing a dark, studded armband on their right arm. A large, intricate black tattoo is visible on the left arm. The person's hands are clasped together in front of them. The background is a blurred scene of a club or concert with colorful stage lights.

TRYING NOT TO
Love You

N.J. Nielsen

TRYING NOT TO LOVE YOU

Alistair Krunkstone is happy with his life—he plays bass guitar in a band, has a best friend, a family who loves him unconditionally, and yeah, he has a girlfriend, but he doesn't want to talk about her.

Keagan Thames has been in love with his best friend since the day they met. When Alistair breaks up with his girlfriend, Keagan takes him in. Being so close but not touching Alastair will be hard enough without the added burden of Alistair's ex threatening to ruin his life for something he hasn't done.

With the help from the other members of their band "DeRanged", family, and friends, everything comes to light. Will the strong bond they've always shared be enough to pull them through the awkwardness of their changing relationship? Or will it pull them apart forever?

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

TRYING NOT TO LOVE YOU

By **N.J. Nielsen**

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love's Landscapes* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a gift to you.

What Is Love's Landscapes?

The *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* invited members to choose a photo and pen a letter asking for a short M/M romance story inspired by the image; authors from the group were encouraged to select a letter and write an original tale. The result was an outpouring of creativity that shone a spotlight on the special bond between M/M romance writers and the people who love what these authors do.

A written description of the image that inspired this story is provided along with the original request letter. If you'd like to view the photo, please feel free to join the [Goodreads M/M Romance Group](#) and visit the discussion section: *Love's Landscapes*.

No matter if you are a long-time devotee to M/M Romance, just new to the genre or fall somewhere in between, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

This story may contain sexually explicit content and is **intended for adult readers**. It may contain content that is disagreeable or distressing to some readers. The *M/M Romance Group* strongly recommends that each reader review the General Information section before each story for story tags as well as for content warnings.

This story is a work of fiction. Names, characters, places and incidents are the products of the author's imagination or are used fictitiously. Any resemblance to actual events, locales, or persons, living or dead, is entirely coincidental.

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TRYING NOT TO LOVE YOU

By N.J. Nielsen

Photo Description

Two guys asleep on a train one lying on top of the other's lap. They're both dressed in torn jeans and T-shirts. One has bluish/green coloured hair. They look to be like they're in a grunge rock band or possibly are on their way home from a concert. The guy with the coloured hair is using the thigh of the guy lying on him as a pillow. They look comfortable with each other.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

Who are they? Are they band mates heading home after a gig? Buddies after a long night out? Fans post-concert? Is this the night that changes everything? Or just a night like any other they share? How have they become so comfortable, with themselves, and each other? Is it new and fresh, or solid and steady?

HFN/HEA preferably. Other than that head where the muse insists you go!
=)

Sincerely,

Calila

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: musicians/rock stars, first time, friends to lovers, gay for you, close bonds

Content Warnings: interfering family and friends

Word Count: 28,072

Dedication

Dedicated to Calila for such a great prompt. I hope you enjoy reading the story as much as I enjoyed writing it.

TRYING NOT TO LOVE YOU

By N.J. Nielsen

Chapter One

The sound of the crowd cheering was almost deafening as the final chord of “Red Flag Burning” died away. Ross was out in front of the crowd winding down from strutting his stuff all over the stage. Cooper had just hauled back and thrown his drum stick out over the crowd’s heads, but Alistair’s gaze was all for one person—Keagan. They had been best friends forever. In fact, the whole band had grown up knowing each other since high school. He was the eldest at twenty-three, then Keagan came in at twenty, while Ross and Cooper were both only nineteen. Alistair and Keagan had started DeRanged back when they were in school. After a year of just the two of them jamming non-stop, they grudgingly allowed his brother Cooper, and Cooper’s best friend, Ross, to join them. Luckily for them, Ross had a decent voice and took to the roles as lead guitarist and singer like a duck to water.

As the house lights slowly came back up, Alistair smiled when he saw Keagan checking to make sure his studded armband was still in place after one fan got a little too close during their last encore. They were lucky the damn keyboard was still standing after the scuffle which had ensued as security removed the young woman from the stage. Alistair knew the armband had been the last gift from one of their die-hard followers, and also one of Keagan’s colleagues from the aged care facility where he worked. Meg and her husband Benny attended all their gigs if they were close to home. Hell, she even volunteered to help set up the promotion side and quite often stood behind a counter or two selling the promotional items, such as T-shirts, hoodies, beanies, and surplus other little items. For all her help, she and Benny always got free entry into each show.

“How you feeling?” he asked as soon as he got into hearing distance of Keagan.

They thanked the stage hand who had handed them both towels to remove some of the sweat. God, he couldn’t wait to get back to the dressing room and take a shower. Sweating like a pig was the downside of being in a band, but for fame and fortune you sometimes had to put up with the shitty parts as well. Not that DeRanged was all that famous, though to be fair they had been starters for quite a few excellent headline bands. It was the truth to say DeRanged wasn’t in it for the fame, or the fortune. They did what they did because they were four guys who liked to play together. It took their minds off their real jobs. Alistair

was an author, Keagan worked in aged care, Ross worked as an assistant manager for one of the bigger music store franchises in Australia, while Cooper still worked part-time for their father at Krunkstone Construction. The best part was their respective bosses were lenient when it came to their band. They never had any hassles getting time off when needed.

“I’m fine. For a moment there, I thought she was going to knock me on my arse,” Keagan said as he finished running the towel all over his arms, face, and hair. Without thinking, Alistair reached out and used his hand in an attempt to control his friend’s wayward locks. Keagan grinned at him as Alistair let his hand drop away once semblance of order had been reinstated.

“I’m so glad this is the last show for a while. I’m bloody ready for a break,” Alistair said.

“What are your plans?”

Alistair shrugged his shoulders. “Same ol’—same ol’ I guess. Go home and make nice with Lauren for a while. Go see the folks. Hang out at your place... just the usual. What about you?”

“I’ve got work and I’m gonna tinker with some of the lyrics that have been floating around inside my head for the last couple of weeks. I wanna see if they have any merit to them.”

“Sounds cool.”

By the time they made it back to the dressing room, Ross and Cooper were already sprawled on the two couches the room had. Cooper sat up as they entered and tossed a bottle of water to each of them.

“So, are we spending the night in the motel and driving home first thing in the morning? Or do you wanna pack up now and drive through the night until we hit home?” Cooper asked. “I’m good with either one.”

He didn’t know about the rest of them but he was abso-fucking-lutely knackered and didn’t have the energy to even contemplate having to drive home. Home was nine hours away, and right now all he wanted to do was crawl into a nice clean bed and sleep for at least six solid hours.

“I’m too fucked to drive home tonight. I vote we crash here one more night and then head home in the early hours.” Alistair was relieved when Keagan agreed wholeheartedly that they spend another night away from home.

They collected all their gear and made arrangements to have their merchandise packed up and sent back to their home base, which was his and

Cooper's parents' house. Alistair had a case of the yawns as they made their way back to the motel they were all booked into. They were supposed to spend the last night hanging out with the headline act, Incredicon, but had begged off. There were only so many nights you could spend drunk off your arses and live to tell the tale of your adventures. As they pulled into their allotted car space, they said good night and parted ways to the separate rooms. Ross and Cooper were sharing, as were he and Keagan.

Alistair vaguely recalled promising Keagan he wouldn't snore too much, before the darkness hit him over the head as soon as he climbed into the room's queen-size bed. He couldn't have even told anyone if Keagan had replied to him or not.

The heat pressed up against Alistair's side felt good when he awoke the next morning—maybe a little too good. Turning slightly, he took the time to truly study his friend while he slept. The midnight-black hair set off the long, dark lashes, which framed what Alistair knew to be forest-green eyes. Through the years, he'd often teased his friend about his lashes, saying they were more suited for a girl. Keagan usually flipped him off, but it was true. The part he never added in his teasing was the fact that the lashes and the colour of his eyes suited the coffee-coloured skin to perfection. His own pale blue eyes were plain in comparison.

The different shades of tan on their skin looked surprisingly good together. He was slightly paler than his friend, but not by much. All over they were roughly the same size. Neither of them had muscleman body types, and maybe the both of them carried a few extra pounds around the middle. The truth was they were both extremely comfortable in their own skins. When Keagan had come out at the age of fourteen to family and friends, never once did it cross Alistair's mind to be disgusted or throw his friendship with Keagan away. In some ways the whole thing seemed to make them closer. Their friends and such knew that if they had a problem with Keagan's sexuality, they'd have to deal with Alistair himself. On the very day Keagan stepped out of his self-induced closet, Alistair silently vowed that he'd protect his best friend at all costs.

For his part, most of the people around his age couldn't, for the life of them, understand why Alistair's best friend was three years his junior. Alistair would always smile and tell them that once they got to know Keagan they would understand. Keagan had this whole mischievous side to him that seemed to draw Alistair in a little more with each passing day. Honestly, he never cared

about what other people thought of their friendship, and as his dad had once told him, not long after Keagan came out, *If it ain't broke, don't fix it*. This was a rule he'd lived by for the last six years. He'd been in more than a few fights when someone thought it would be funny to push Keagan around, but they soon found out that Keagan had more than a few friends, both male and female, who were ready to back him up.

Alistair stilled as Keagan sighed deeply and moved closer to Alistair, going so far as to wrap his arm around Alistair's side as he snuggled closer still. The weird part was being this close to his friend never seemed to worry Alistair in the slightest. Sliding his arm down his friend's back, Alistair held Keagan gently to his side. A shiver arced through him when the still-asleep Keagan placed a kiss against his flesh. It made Alistair wonder who his friend was dreaming about.

Lately, Alistair had gotten the feeling that there was someone special in Keagan's life. The other day he'd picked up Keagan's notebook, where he wrote out his lyrics, and noticed a change in how he usually worded things. Whoever it was, Alistair wasn't sure whether the relationship—if there was one—was good or not. All the lyrics on the first couple of pages came off as sad... heartbreaking even. Lying there in bed, one particular passage came flooding back to Alistair's mind.

Picking up the pieces of my heart.

Putting back together what you broke apart.

Don't wanna be lost in memories of days gone by,

'Cause everything you told me turned out to be a lie.

You walked away even though you promised to stay.

In the blink of an eye you said good-bye.

Those lyrics didn't sound at all like Keagan was in a happy place. Alistair was probably the only one in the band who realised how all Keagan's lyrics came from things the man had actually experienced. If this was still true, why had Alistair never realised his friend was hurting this bad. The best friend's code stated there should be no secrets, yet this was all new to Alistair. Once they were back at home and having a well-earned break, he would broach the subject and get Keagan to open up and tell him what had been going on in his life. Right now Alistair thought his friend would need some extra special attention... this was one thing he could do for Keagan, and he didn't care what

Lauren had to think about it all. Sometimes best friends came before girlfriends if the situation warranted it, and right now, he believed it did. There was probably going to be a shit-storm of a fight between him and Lauren, but hell, it would be worth getting yelled at if helping his friend made Keagan happier.

In the darkness, Keagan mumbled in his sleep and for one heart-clenching second, Alistair thought Keagan had called his name out, but that couldn't be possible, could it? There was no way his friend was having a dream about him, especially one that involved kissing. Keagan was way too smart to fall in love with him, but then why was the man trying to get closer still? The feeling was almost like Keagan was trying to burrow under his skin.

"Shh, it's all right." Alistair soothed as Keagan whimpered beside him.

Without thinking about the consequences, Alistair placed a soft kiss on the top of Keagan's head. The action instantly quietened the man in his arms. If Ross and Cooper could see him now they would never let him live down the fact he was sharing a bed with and holding a very out and proud gay man in his arms. Not that either of them had a problem with Keagan's sexuality—if they had, neither of them would be still in the band. On the other hand, if Lauren could see him now, there would be hell to pay. For as long as he'd been dating Lauren, she'd made it clear that she didn't like Keagan and his immoral lifestyle.

The sad part was Alistair didn't even know why he was still with her. He wasn't even sure if he'd ever truly been in love with her. She was just someone he had so he didn't have to spend the holidays alone, yet in reality he spent more time with his own family and Keagan's than he did with Lauren. Maybe it was time he sat down and really re-evaluated his life to see just where people fit into it. Well, if he was being totally honest, it was to see if Lauren still fit anywhere in his future.

"You're thinking too loud," Keagan mumbled beside him. "Is there something you want to talk about?"

Even though his friend was now awake, Alistair noticed he hadn't moved away. Keagan was still curled up against Alistair's side.

"Nah, I'm just thinking some thoughts. Nothing to write home about." Alistair chuckled when Keagan flashed him a half-lidded and sleep-filled grin.

"You know what?"

"What?" Alistair asked.

“I think I’m actually going to miss waking up next to you like this every day. After two months, I’m kinda used to sharing with you.”

Another chuckle fell from Alistair’s lips. “I bet you won’t miss my snoring.”

“Weirdly, I think I’ll even miss that.” Keagan’s words seemed to be edged in sadness. “But I think you’re going to be glad to get back to Lauren. I bet you missed her.”

“You would think so, wouldn’t you? She’s actually who I was just thinking about. I realised a few things about our relationship and I have some thinking to do about everything when I get home.”

“Huh?” Keagan pushed himself up on the bed.

Staring up into his friend’s eyes, Alistair spoke, “I’m not one hundred percent sure Lauren and I belong together. We’ve been touring for two months and I haven’t once rung her. The only times we’ve spoken to each other is when she’s called me, and usually that was to yell at me for something I was supposed to have remembered to have done before we left. Hell, earlier today, no, make that yesterday, she tore into me because I put the towels on the wrong shelf in the bathroom.”

Keagan stared at him and Alistair couldn’t quite read his face. “Do you think you’ll break up?”

Alistair sighed deeply. “To be honest, I don’t know. We’re supposed to love each other, and yet some days I get the feeling she can’t even stand the sight of me. I’m not sure what I want to happen.”

“No matter what does happen, remember that I’m always here for you.” Keagan stifled a yawn.

“Come down here.” Alistair tugged on Keagan’s arm and yanked him down onto the bed. Pulling Keagan back into his side he added, “We still have a couple more hours before we have to be up. Try and get a little more sleep.”

When Keagan wrapped an arm around his waist Alistair never complained. He just held on and welcomed the comfort in any form.

Chapter Two

Have you ever been so close to someone that a simple, innocent touch between two people can be seen as something more by family and friends?

Keagan looked at the words he'd written down. The question in itself had been running around his mind for a while now. He wondered if it was the beginning of a new song or maybe it meant something more. Glancing across the room he smiled at his best friend, Alistair "KrunK" Krunkstone who was currently sprawled out on the couch, dead to the world asleep, and snoring like there was no tomorrow. The weird thing was Keagan was used to the sounds of his friend in slumber. To be honest, he actually liked the sound; in a strange sort of way it was kind of like a security blanket. More than once while on tour, the band had shared rooms to save on costs. Alistair's snoring was legendary and had the rest of their band—DeRanged—running for cover in their early days when it came time to choose roomies. These days everyone just assumed Alistair and Keagan would be sharing. Apparently, according to Ross, their lead singer, it was in the best friends' code or some such bullshit that they should have to put up with the good and the bad of each other's idiosyncrasies. Five years on and he was just used to it. Sometimes when they weren't on tour he had trouble sleeping because it was so quiet in bed. Coop had even jokingly suggested that maybe they needed to record Alistair snoring to use as Keagan's own personal lullaby.

When they first started out touring as a band, they had all made a pact that for the sake of the band's sanity—slash—friendships, they would never live together. The thought was that being together twenty-four/seven would only lead to in-house fighting amongst the members, which could lead to the destruction of DeRanged before they had a chance to make it big. The funny thing was even though they lived on opposite sides of the city, Alistair could more often than not be found at Keagan's house. This, in itself, was both a good thing and a bad thing. Good; because they were best friends, and there was nothing better than hanging out with your bestie to relax and chill out in the down time, and bad; because sometimes feelings developed that you couldn't tell anyone else about because you didn't want to lose their friendship in any way, shape, or form. It was better to love from afar than to lose what was already solid. Yet on the last night of the tour Keagan had gotten the feeling

that Alistair's and his friendship had changed. For some reason, the middle of the night had been the perfect time for listening to his friend's woes. They'd been back exactly three days and Alistair had yet to tell him what decision he'd come to about his life.

Shaking his head, Keagan went back to scribbling down random thoughts. The truth was it was none of his damn business. Alistair was in a relationship, and he just needed to get over his stupid feelings and get on with his own life. You couldn't always have what you wanted. And there was no way he was fessing up that he wanted Alistair. The next time he looked up, Alistair was lying there, his face turned in his direction. Those beautiful huge hazel eyes watching him. He hadn't even realised the snoring had stopped until right at that moment.

"You're awake." He smiled across the room. "How are you feeling? You seem kind of out of it today."

Alistair nodded, stretched, and yawned as he sat up. "I'm good. How long was I asleep for?"

"Only a couple of hours. I was planning on waking you up as soon as the pizza arrived. I got it fully loaded. Is that okay with you?" Keagan placed the notebook he'd been working in inside his guitar case and clipped it up before leaning the whole thing into the corner of the room so it was safely out of the way.

"You working on something new?"

Keagan shrugged. "Just putting down some thoughts. I'm not sure if they'll lead anywhere, but you never know." He walked across the room and dropped onto the couch beside Alistair. "Are you staying here the night or heading back to your place?"

A strange look flittered over his friend's face for a moment or two before it was gone. For the life of him, Keagan didn't know what it meant, but in case it was bad he wanted to be there for his friend in whatever capacity he could. Maybe Alistair had made his decision after all.

"I was supposed to be going out to dinner with Lauren. She said we needed to talk, but then she dumped me."

"Dumped you how exactly? Is she going out with her friends instead?" In the five years Alistair and Lauren had been living together as a couple, Keagan had never truly liked her. The truth was he'd never given himself the chance to

get to know her better, but honestly, that could have been simply because he harboured his own feelings for the man. Feelings he could never disclose to anyone—ever.

A deep, bone-rattling sigh fell from his friend. “More like we broke up. She thinks you and I spend way too much time together. She made me choose between you and her—and she lost.”

“Wow! I knew you said you had some thinking to do but I never expected you to really break up.” Keagan was literally blown away with the knowledge that Alistair put their friendship before his relationship with his girlfriend. One part of him wanted to jump for joy, but another part knew his friend must be truly hurting. He couldn't believe Lauren would make Alistair choose. He was just happy he was the one chosen.

Pain or something like it, was clearly etched on his friend's face. “I tried to explain to her that you and I have been best buds for as long as I can remember. She shouldn't have made me choose. We had our problems but...”

The sound of sadness in Alistair's voice was evident and had Keagan asking, even though part of him was screaming, and telling him to shut the fuck up. “No, Alistair, she shouldn't have. Do you think it's for real, or do you think you'll eventually patch things up?” *Please, God, let it be for real. I've never asked for anything in my life before, but I'm asking now.*

He was graced with another sad smile. “It's for keeps. She said since both our names are on the lease she would take over the apartment, and I'd have to find somewhere else to live. The fucked-up thing is, I didn't even really argue with her. Nor did it even cross my mind to try and get her to change her mind. You know I'd been thinking about things for a while now and this morning it all came to a head. If I hadn't walked away when I did, I think the neighbours would have called the cops. You should have heard some of the shit coming out of her mouth. It was either walk away or hit her. Hell, I even agreed to let Cooper and Ross go and pack up all my stuff and bring it to me. Just because she didn't want to see my face for another second. All I did was nod before I grabbed my guitar and walked out the door. What does that say about me?”

“Why am I only hearing about this now? I thought we were best friends. I thought we had no secrets. And it tells me you walked away like you did because you're a nice guy. And nice guys hate causing friction, even if they are in the middle of breaking up with their girlfriend, but you still should have told me earlier. Remember our last night on tour I told you I'd be here for you.”

Another sigh filled the room. "I know you did, but I didn't tell you because I didn't want to ruin the day for both of us. You make me believe everything can still be normal. I want normal. I don't want my life to be so tragically fucked up that it becomes the inspiration for some whacked-out country song."

"A country song? Melodramatic much? So where are you going to stay?" A burst of laughter spilled from Keagan even as his mind was already running through half a dozen ways to suggest Alistair should move in with him.

In the end, he didn't have to come up with anything, because Alistair did it for him. "You know the *best* thing about having a *best* friend is they have to take you in when you are in need. I figure I'll just crash on your couch until I work out what my next step is. That's okay with you, right? You're moving out to the farmhouse next weekend, and there'll be loads of room for the two of us. Hell, the whole bloody band could move in. I'm not sure whether it's worth me trying to find a place of my own just yet, especially when we are away so much of the time. Even if I did have my own place I'd probably still be at your place most of the time."

A heated flutter raced across Keagan's skin like liquid fire as he found the words to answer. "Of course you are welcome to stay with me. Where else would you go? No one would put up with your quirky arse, except me. You're my family, man. You're also more than welcome to shift out to the farm with me. It'll save on living expenses and won't be so lonely. Everyone always said we practically lived together anyway. If the couch gets too much for you this week, you can always crash in my bed with me. We've done it often enough on tour."

He hoped he came off sounding casual, even if his gut was twisting and turning like someone was holding a set of beaters in there, stirring everything up into a heated goo. He also knew Alistair spoke the truth. The house he was moving into had once belonged to his nana, and was bloody huge. When she decided to move into a retirement village she signed the house over to Keagan, saying she was leaving him the farm because she'd bought Leah the condo she lived in with her family.

"My mum offered for me to come home, but as you know, Coop and Tay still live at home and they both can be annoying little shits at times. I suppose I could always ask your parents if I can crash in your old room," Alistair said with a mischievous smile. "I'm sure they'd love to have me stay for a while."

Keagan burst out laughing. "Go ahead and see how far that gets you. You do remember Dad turned my room into a home office a week after I moved out

at the age of eighteen, but if you want to sleep on the floor under the desk surrounded by boxes of paperwork instead of staying here, be my guest. I won't stop you."

The sound of the doorbell ringing interrupted the conversation they were having. Alistair was up on his feet heading for the door to retrieve and pay for the pizza. His friend lived for food. He didn't care whether it was homemade or take out. Keagan stood and walked to the kitchen to grab some napkins and a couple of beers. His breath caught in his throat when he realised this would be their first meal while living together. Hopefully it was the first of many to follow. The problem was going to be if they were going to be able to live in such close quarters without Alistair discovering Keagan's secret attraction to him. The thought of losing his best friend because of his feelings was something Keagan never wanted to have to contemplate. He knew he was going to have to suck it up and act... what? Straight? What a crock of shit that would be. The whole band already knew he was gay. He'd never rubbed it in their noses, but he wasn't about to hide away by stepping back into some damn metaphorical closet just because it might make his friends more comfortable. Even harder still to grasp was, what if Alistair started dating again? How was he going to live through Alistair moving on and being happy?

This is going to get so damn awkward if my body starts reacting to having Alistair around me day in and day out. Keagan scrubbed at his face and pasted on what he hoped was a friendly smile as Alistair came back in with two pizza boxes and set them on the coffee table in front of the couch. He was already munching away on his first slice.

"I bet you made the pizza guy hold the boxes while you got a slice."

"You know me well. The smell hit me before I even opened the door, and it was like 'Gimme now!'" Leaning back into the couch, Alistair lifted his bare feet up and rested them on the table beside the closed boxes of food.

Opening a beer, Keagan handed it over to his friend. "Seems ages since we've had time to just relax. I'd seriously had it by the end of that last leg of the tour. Nothing better than coming home and sleeping in my own bed. I'm glad we have a long stretch off this time."

"I know what you mean. I was well and truly ready to call it quits. We seriously need some family time. Get our heads on straight before we even think about going back out for more. Maybe we can even have a few jam sessions, and try and get some new material so we can put out a new CD or something. Seems like forever since we released the last one."

Keagan sighed. “Almost been two years.” He couldn’t believe it had been that long since they had last been in the studios laying down the tracks on *Red Flags*. The good thing about that particular CD, it had produced a song which had brought them moderate fame and a diehard—if somewhat crazy—fan base. To this day “Red Flag Burning” was still being played daily by most of the radio stations. “We probably should call a band meeting and see what everyone thinks of cutting another album, or where their general thoughts are heading. I bet you could personally use it, just to take your mind off things with Lauren.”

“Sounds like a plan, but you know they’ll do whatever you want, seeing as you are the brains behind us. DeRanged would still be a garage band if you’d never hunted down gigs and kicked our collective arses into gear. Weirdly, as far as the whole Lauren thing goes, my mind is pretty good. I honestly think Lauren and I weren’t meant to last if I could walk away so easily. Doesn’t that just scream that there must have been something wrong with the relationship—well, more than her hating the one person who means the world to me?”

At that last statement, Keagan almost choked on his mouthful of pizza. Taking a deep swig of his beer, Keagan decided to ignore the remarks about Alistair’s relationship, and instead focussed on talking some more about the band.

“Someone had to do it.” Reaching for another slice of pizza, he added, “Besides, back then I was the only one not obsessed with chasing pussy all over the place.”

“Wanker,” Alistair mumbled around a mouthful of food.

“Dork.”

“Dick.”

Keagan batted his eyes at his friend. “Don’t I wish, but back then I was still too freaked out to tell anyone I liked guys better. I preferred to sit back and watch the rest of you guys making fools of yourselves.”

The mood changed as Alistair sat up a little straighter. “You could have told me, you know. I would’ve understood. I would have still loved you regardless.”

“I know that. In my heart, I knew that you wouldn’t abandon me, but my head was telling me you would toss our friendship away like yesterday’s trash. Our friendship was worth more to me than getting constantly laid. Does that make any sense at all? I guess it took me quite a few years to sort out everything inside my head, before I was comfortably able to come clean to everyone.”

“Yeah it does. Though, by what you just said, it makes the rest of us seem like selfish arseholes. If I’m going to be totally honest, back then I don’t know what the other’s reactions would have been. All I do know for certain is you would’ve still had me no matter what. Best buds status is a hard thing to lose when we have been friends for as long as we have.”

The sincerity in Alistair’s whole demeanour eased the tension that had been steadily building like a tsunami in Keagan’s chest and gut. Maybe things would be all right for the next little bit. Alistair never had to know Keagan sometimes saw him as more than just a friend, but that was a train of thought that had no business in this whole conversation.

Needing to divert the conversation from its current path, Keagan said, “We have been friends for a long time, haven’t we?”

Alistair’s responding laugh was so deep, it had heat racing through Keagan’s body to settle in his groin. As casually as he could, he shifted positions on the couch so his growing erection wasn’t on full display for the world to see.

When Alistair wiped the tears from his eyes, Keagan went on, “I didn’t think my statement was that funny.”

“Just remembering the first day we met. Coop, Tay, and I were walking round the neighbourhood looking for Scooter only to come across some skinny-as-fuck kid stuck up in a tree, and screaming his lungs out for help.”

“All I remember is Coop and Tay going for help and you sitting on the sidewalk laughing your arse off at me. Boy did you piss me off that day. I wanted to hit you so bad.”

Alistair snorted out another burst of laughter. “I was thirteen and you were all of what, like ten? It was my God-given right of being the oldest person there to take the piss out of you. At least I eventually climbed up and helped you down, didn’t I?”

“Helped me! More like you gave me a good ol’ shove, and knocked me clean out of the tree. Mum had to take me to the hospital because the fall broke my arm, or have you forgotten that little fact? I swear to God, I’ll never forget looking back up and seeing the shocked look on your face. I thought you were going to shit pink kittens. It’s kinda weird how after you almost killed me we’ve still managed to remain best friends. You would think I wouldn’t want to have anything to do with you after that,” Keagan answered.

“The best friend part is because I felt so guilty about hurting you. I spent the rest of the holidays hanging out with you so you didn’t get bored out of your brains. Coop thought I was nuts, but I’m glad I did it. It also helped that you weren’t a complete loser, and being with you was kinda interesting. I’d never met anyone before who could just spit out random facts about anything and everything.”

“Not much has changed really. We still spend most of our time together. The only difference I can see is I’ve stopped blurting out random shit at everyone. Huh! I can almost see why Lauren was so pissed off, but to be honest dude, as much as you loved her, I couldn’t stand her. She always grated me the wrong way.” Watching the array of emotions wash over his friend’s face he added, “Maybe I shouldn’t have said that last bit.”

Silence reigned for a couple of minutes before Alistair began talking again. “I think some part of me always knew you disliked her as much as she disliked you. I kinda knew right back at the beginning she was the wrong person for me. I just didn’t want to have to deal with the fallout, so I basically ignored the fact that I didn’t love her as much as I should. If I’d have sat down and really thought about everything, and what the consequences would end up being, I doubt Lauren and I would’ve been together for as long as we were. I was mostly with her so I didn’t have to be alone. I had you on tour, but at home it was different, and I just liked having another person around. Fuck! Maybe...” Alistair’s words trailed off into silence.

Keagan leant forward and grabbed Alistair’s hand and gave it a squeeze. “No matter what happens in the future you still have me. I’ll always be here for you. I really think you spent more time with me than you did her even while you were still together.”

“I know. Why do you think I’m here? You’ve always been my comfort zone. You are the one person I can always count on to be there for me when I need someone.”

Keagan was flabbergasted. He didn’t even know what to say to that, so instead, he continued to hold Alistair’s hand as they both sat there silently, wrapped up in their own thoughts while the pizza lay cooling on the table where it had been forgotten.

Chapter Three

The smell of coffee woke Alistair the next day. His back was aching from sleeping on the lumpy couch. The thing was fine for taking a nap or lazing on with Keagan as they watched movies, but the piece of crap definitely wasn't made for trying to sleep through the night on. He knew he would definitely be taking his friend up on the offer to share his bed for the remainder of the week. He was also going to strongly suggest they dump the couch and get something more comfortable on the arse for the farm house. Standing up, he slowly stretched his arms above his head trying to work the kinks out of his neck and back. The sound of slightly off-key singing was coming from the kitchen.

After taking the time to empty his bladder in the bathroom, he made his way to the kitchen and leant against the doorframe. He couldn't have stopped the smile from forming on his lips at the sight before him. Keagan was bent over, checking something in the oven as his arse swayed in time to whatever song he was singing. Biting his lip to keep from laughing out loud he watched as Keagan stood up. Only then did he realise his friend was wearing his earpiece and the song he was singing was a nursery rhyme. He must be singing to little Luke. His thoughts were confirmed when Keagan spoke again.

"No worries, sis. Talk to you at lunch on Sunday. Tell Mum Alistair will probably be coming with me."

His friend hadn't as yet turned around so he didn't know Alistair was standing there listening to the whole conversation—even if it was one-sided. Guilt tore through him as he continued to listen, because it sounded like he was hearing secrets he shouldn't have the privilege of knowing.

"No, it's not awkward having him stay with me." Keagan made a sound filled with a little frustration. "He doesn't know that... No you can't tell him... Because it's none of your bloody business, that's why... Look, he's going through enough without that being laid on him as well. If you love me at all, you will keep quiet about what you know... Yeah, I love you too, Leah. Say hi to Mike, and give that baby boy hugs and kisses from his uncle."

Before Keagan could turn and catch him in the act of eavesdropping Alistair quietly stepped back and out of sight as Keagan ended the call with his sister. Not knowing what else to do he faked a big yawn as he stepped back into the kitchen doorway and smirked at the man standing before him.

“This is special. Not very often I get to wake up to one of the famous breakfasts from Keagan Thames, keyboardist extraordinaire, who also has mad skills in the kitchen. So what are we having?”

His friend snorted out a laugh. “Don’t get too used to it. Tomorrow you can have kitchen duty if you want.”

“Takeout it is... I doubt either of us want to have our stomachs pumped after what passes for my cooking. So tell me where’s the best takeout joint around here?” Alistair asked as he dragged out a chair and took his place at the table.

The way Keagan looked at him, with mock horror clearly in his eyes, was hilarious. “I forgot just how bad you were. Fine, I’ll cook but you have clean-up duty. I shouldn’t have to do it all.”

“What? Don’t you want to be my slave for the rest of eternity? Most people would kill to hang around me and do my bidding just on the off chance I might bestow a smile upon them.” He knew what he was saying was idiotic, but it did the trick and had Keagan in what seemed to be a happier frame of mind.

“What kind of slave am I supposed to be, exactly?”

With a shrug of his shoulders, Alistair answered without thinking, “Every kind there is... Do my chores slave... Give me all over body massages slave... Hell, right now you could even be my sex slave. It seems like forever since I’ve had any decent—” he bit his words off when he realised what he’d just implied.

The silence that followed his last statement was almost deafening. Keagan was staring at him open mouthed, and the blush rising over his skin was probably the exact same colour as the one Alistair knew he himself was more than likely sporting. *God, could my brain have kicked in a little sooner before my mouth jumped into action. How the hell do I get myself out of this? Fuck me drunk, I need to think of something soon before Keagan thumps me.*

Keagan’s shock seemed to dissipate as a gut rumbling laugh reverberated out of him. “Oh! My! God! You should see the look on your face. Wait till everyone hears that you just asked me to be your sex slave.” Keagan wiped his eyes. “You really shouldn’t make offers you have no intention of going through with. *Love slave...* as if that were even possible. Your offer makes me think two things. A: You and Lauren weren’t doing it enough, or B: the sex wasn’t that great. Especially if you’re looking to switch playing fields.”

Again Alistair shrugged, this time taking a moment to think before he answered. “I guess it was a little of both. We did the basics, but I don’t think we

ever properly clicked in that department. I think she was more with me because I was in a band than because she was in love with me. Look, I don't even know if *that's* true because most days she wanted me to quit the band and get a real job." He scratched the side of his head in thought. "Maybe that's why it was so easy for our relationship to end. The love we were supposed to have just wasn't there."

"I'm sure that's not it. From what I witnessed, you definitely had passion between the pair of you. Maybe this isn't as bad as you think and she'll ask you to come home again. Five years is a long time together just to walk away without regrets."

"I thought you didn't like her?" Alistair asked repeating what Keagan had confided to him the night before.

Keagan rolled his eyes. "Just because I may not like your girlfriend, doesn't mean I'd not want you to be with her if it truly makes you happy."

As Keagan dished up the scrambled eggs, bacon, fried tomatoes, and toast he'd made for breakfast. Alistair fought an inner battle before he finally found the courage to say, "Sadly, after really thinking things through. I don't think I've been happy in the relationship with Lauren for a while now. I just didn't have the courage to leave. Her kicking me out made things a hell of a lot easier on my conscience. I think if the decision was left up to me we'd still be together and making each other miserable."

Once the words had left his mouth Alistair felt a hell of a lot freer for some reason. The heavy weight that had been playing on his mind for the last three years or so felt like it was all but non-existent. If the truth be known, he realised he could finally breathe again and not be worried that Lauren was going to lose her temper because he'd made plans to spend time with his best friend. Lauren truly had been jealous of Keagan from the very start. Her jealousy got even worse once Keagan came out and told everyone he was gay. She never understood how he could remain close friends with someone she perceived to be a perverted, immoral freak. This was one of the reasons he never ever told her how he'd more than once shared the same bedroom while on tour, and sometimes even the same bed as Keagan. They would have been over a lot sooner had he told her that fact. She never understood why Alistair never ever thought Keagan was perverted. To him, he was always just—Keagan.

They ate in silence for a while. Each caught up in their own thoughts. Alistair hoped Keagan wasn't planning on dodging him since the whole sex

slave outburst. As for himself, all of a sudden he couldn't get the picture of a naked Keagan out of his head. He'd seen his friend naked many times before, but had never really thought too much about it... Well, that wasn't quite true. There were a few nights when they'd been sharing a room when Keagan had done or said something, which had the good grace of making his body react to the closeness of his friend. One night he could even remember sitting up late into the night as he watched his friend sleeping in the other bed—*creepy much?* Creepier still, watching Keagan had become a serious habit after that night.

“So what's on the agenda for today?” Keagan asked, breaking into the silence.

“I guess we wait for Ross and Coop to bring my belongings here, though I should probably call Coop to make sure he collects the important stuff. For the most part I couldn't give a shit about it, but there are a few things I definitely want to keep, so they need to get them out of the apartment before Lauren tosses all my belongings out.”

The funny thing was, the things he wanted to keep were little things Keagan had given him over the years, plus all the photos where Keagan featured. All these things were kept safe in a shoebox out in the garage, as far from Lauren's prying eyes as they could get. Alistair knew without a doubt if she knew they existed she would have destroyed or gotten rid of them long ago.

That's how deep her hatred ran.

“Why don't you call your brother while I clean up the kitchen? The sooner we get this shit organised the better. Pity we weren't already in the new place. It would have made life so much easier. I think before they get here we should move some of my already packed boxes out and place them against the front lounge room wall so we aren't tripping over everything. See if you can get them to pack your gear so you won't have to unpack it until we move. Just leave your clothes and stuff out that you'll need right away.”

As he got to his feet, Alistair nodded. “Will do, and in case I forget, thanks for taking me in.”

“That's what best friends are for.”

It took three hours of moving shit around in the small apartment before everything was where Keagan wanted it to be. No sooner had they sat down when banging on the door let them know Coop and Ross had arrived with

Alistair's possessions. What Alistair hadn't expected when he got up to open the door was a very furious Lauren to be standing there glaring at him.

"Lauren!" Her name slipped from his lips in surprise.

"I can't believe they were telling me the truth when Cooper told me he was taking all your belongings to *his* house." The way she spat out the word *his*, it left no doubt in Alistair's mind she was referring to Keagan. He didn't say anything as she continued, "I thought he was pulling my leg, but here you are. I swear to God you disgust me sometimes."

"Here I am," Alistair echoed coldly. "Why do you even care where I'm staying now? You threw me out, remember? What did you expect me to do? Come crawling back to you on my hands and knees begging for forgiveness?"

"Yes! I *expected* you to come home and choose me. I didn't *expect* you to run straight to him. I *should* have expected it though. I've had my suspicions about you two for a while now. You being here just tells me that I'm correct."

What the hell was she talking about? And what the hell gave her the right to come to Keagan's home and cause a scene. She needed to turn around and go the fuck home and leave them in peace.

Trying his best to keep his temper in check, he took a deep calming breath before he finally could bring himself to speak to her without yelling. "I think you should leave. I don't know why you think you have the God-given right to come to Keagan's home and start making accusations and demands. You threw me out. That was a clear message to me about where I stood in your life. Why the hell would I come crawling back? You've disrespected me just as much as you've disrespected my best friend. You need to go home. You need to move on with your life, and you definitely need to stay the hell out of mine."

By the darkening, mottled-red of her face he knew he wasn't going to like what she was going to say next. He didn't have long to wait to know he was correct.

"You will regret this. Nobody walks away from me and doesn't pay," she snarled.

"What are you going to do? In case you didn't realise... you dumped my arse, not the other way around. You have no one to blame but yourself. Build a bridge and get over it."

As he went to turn away from her, she snatched her hand out and grabbed his arm keeping him firmly in place. "What do you think your precious fans

will think when they hear that he's a faggot? How long do you think they will stick around?"

"Go ahead and blab all you want. If you ever stopped by our websites even once you would already know that Keagan's being gay isn't a secret. No one seems to care. The only one who does is you with your narrow-minded bigotry. So do your worst, but just know this—I don't give a fuck about what you think of me, but if you say one word against Keagan again I'll sue your arse from here to hell and back. So you just go right ahead and do what you think best."

Alistair wanted to fist pump the air as she gave one God-almighty screech and stormed away. His whole body felt like it was churning. He wasn't sure why he finally had the balls to stand up to her, but he was glad that he did. Once she was gone, he could totally freak out over what just happened.

No sooner had she left than he suddenly found himself with his arms full of Keagan. The guy was laughing and hugging all over him. And to his surprise, Alistair found himself wrapping his arms tightly around his friend and holding on. He was glad that just like every other time in his life, when something major happened Keagan was there to celebrate or commiserate with him. The one true fact was Keagan was the one he could tell anything to and not feel like he was being judged.

Chapter Four

“You owe me a carton of beer. I said there’d be some man-on-man action happening once your brother broke up with that bitch.”

The smugness of their lead singer’s voice sounding nearby had Keagan pulling out of Alistair’s arms, and spinning to face Ross and Cooper carrying armloads of boxes.

Keagan couldn’t speak, and felt stupid for the fact he’d let his emotions get a hold of him. He was just so happy when he heard Alistair defending him to Lauren. He’d never truly believed how much she’d despised him until he heard all of her hatred spewing out of her mouth. The fact that she’d more or less asked Alistair to return home only to be denied told Keagan so much more than anyone knew. He didn’t even think Alistair himself had realised that he’d all but proclaimed Keagan meant more to him than the woman he’d spent the last five years with.

“You just missed Lauren.” Alistair snarled.

“So that’s where the wicked witch from the west went to. She demanded we not touch your stuff and took off,” Cooper said as he put the boxes next to Keagan’s steadily growing pile. “Fuck! They’re heavy.”

Ross grinned as he offloaded his boxes as well. “As soon as she left we raced around the apartment and grabbed everything we thought you’d want to keep. Left all the girly froufrou crap, but after what we just witnessed maybe we should have grabbed it as well.”

“Has anyone told you lately how much of an arse you are, Ross? I swear the shit that comes out of your mouth is just inviting a punch to the mouth.” Alistair threw back.

The tone of his voice kind of blurred the lines so that Keagan couldn’t tell whether Alistair was pissed off at their friend or not. “Alistair, he’s just being the dick he’s always been. Take no notice of him.”

“Why is it that when everyone calls him Krunk, you insist on calling him Alistair?” Ross teased.

“I’ve always called him Alistair. It was the name he used to introduce himself to me when we first met. So it’s the name I’m going to use.” Keagan wasn’t going to confess to anyone that his friend looked like an Alistair more

than he looked like a Krunk to him. He'd never even been tempted to call him Krunk. In his mind, Krunk was a stupid nickname to have, but Alistair never told anyone to stop so why should he? "Why should it matter what I call him?"

Ross shrugged. "It doesn't, but I've always wondered and only just gotten around to asking. Come on, you two can help us carry the rest of his gear into the house. Coop is right; this shit is heavy."

Keagan watched as Alistair bumped shoulders with Ross as they passed each other and wondered if it was Alistair's way of telling their friend to back off. Even without knowing it, Alistair was looking after him.

After they had brought in the last of Alistair's belongings, they were lounging around having a well-earned beer when Cooper nudged Alistair with his boot. "Mum still wants you to move home. I'm supposed to convince you to do it."

Something inside Keagan clenched tight as he waited to see how his friend would answer.

"Tell her I'm okay right where I am. Keagan is taking very good care of me," Alistair answered and Keagan felt himself relaxing.

"I told her you wouldn't want to come home, but if she asks you can tell her I tried. I think she's feeling a little put out."

"Why would your mum be feeling put out?" Keagan asked. Anna Krunkstone was one of the most easy-going people he'd ever met.

Cooper cringed. "That could be my fault. I kinda told her I was moving out. She realised if I did she would only have Tay at home to smother in motherly love."

"Moving out? Where the hell are you going?" Alistair demanded.

"I'm moving in with Ross. His flatmate is moving to Tassie and he needs someone to cover half the rent, so I thought I'd give it a go."

Keagan chuckled. "Remember when we swore we'd never live together and now here we are thinking about doing exactly that. Alistair even joked how the farm was big enough to house us all."

The gleam which suddenly appeared in both Ross and Cooper's eyes had him inwardly groaning at having opened his big mouth. He knew without a doubt the house he'd just begun to think of as his and Alistair's home was about to be invaded by the other two members of DeRanged.

“If I remember correctly the farm is big enough to even house a recording studio. We could have some place to jam without having to pay for studio time. I’d be willing to throw money in to create our own space,” Ross said in apparent excitement.

“Are we really doing this?” Cooper asked. Leaning across he tapped Ross on the knee. “When does your lease run out?”

“Two months.” The obvious frustration was clearly heard. “I wouldn’t be able to move until the middle of July.”

Alistair snorted. “Keagan hasn’t even asked you guys to move in and you’re already making plans.”

Keagan threw his friend a smile, but even he knew they’d all end up living together. It made sense. They could pool their money to pay the amenities, buy food, and anything else they need. His cash flow was running pretty low since he’d paid, not long ago, to have the wiring replaced in the farmhouse.

“Keags will let us move in; he loves us,” Cooper laughed.

“No, he’s letting me move in because he loves me.” Alistair shook his head in mock dismay at his brother. “He just tolerates you and Ross. Isn’t that right Keags?”

Rolling his eyes, Keagan thought a bit of payback was due. “Sure babe, especially since you have offered me the job of your sex slave.”

The sight of Ross and Cooper spitting their beer out was hilarious. They were coughing and spluttering so much that Keagan thought he was going to bust a gut from laughing so much. All the while, Alistair covered his face and groaned.

“You asked Keags to be your sex slave?” Cooper asked in between the deep breaths he was sucking in.

Alistair shrugged. “It’s not as bad as it sounds. Have you tasted the guy’s cooking?”

“So... you want him to not only be your sex slave, but to cook for you as well?” Ross queried.

“Okay, when you say it like that it sounds pretty bad, but I really wasn’t going to make him cook for me.” Alistair tried to defend.

“But just so we’re clear, you were going to have him sleep with you? Makes sense even,” Cooper said thoughtfully. “I mean who else are you going to get

who'll put up with your pain in the arse snoring. I vote if we do move in together that maybe you should soundproof your room so the rest of us don't hear the snoring or any other kinkiness that might be happening."

Keagan decided to throw Alistair a lifeline. "He really doesn't want me to sleep with him. Everyone knows Alistair is a die-hard heterosexual. I have absolutely nothing that would interest him in the bedroom."

The way Alistair blushed was kind of sexy. Keagan liked the fact that even with all this teasing he knew it wouldn't harm their friendship in the slightest. The hard thing was that even though Alistair had no intimate—beyond friendship—feelings for him, Keagan had been in love with his friend from the day they first met.

"So Keags, do you want a couple of more house mates? I'll need to let my rental agency know if I'm not renewing my lease," Ross asked.

"What do you think, Alistair? Should we let these two crash our home?" Keagan's chest felt constricted at the obvious relief written in his friend's eyes. He surmised his friend didn't really want to be alone with him after all this talk about the two of them having sex.

Before Alistair could answer him Ross spoke again. "If we are doing this, why doesn't Krunk move in with me for the two months and then Cooper can stay at home and in July we'll all crash the farm. I mean there's no sense in Cooper moving twice. Krunk can leave all his belongings here and just take the basics to my place."

"Is that what you want, Alistair?" Keagan asked calmly. If his friend wanted to stay here with him he would be more than happy, but if he'd be more comfortable with Ross, then he wouldn't interfere—he'd go along with whatever his friend chose to do.

"Are you really going to let them move out to the farm?" Alistair countered.

"Sure, I'll give it a go. Ross is correct. It will give us somewhere to practice without having to hire a place for it. We could probably turn the barn into a recording studio and practice area, especially seeing as it hasn't housed animals in years."

"Then I guess it makes sense for Coop to remain at home until you move in. I'll go and stay with Ross for the interim. Besides, your couch is really crappy to sleep on."

"If that's what you want." As much as he tried not to, even he could hear the disappointment in his voice. The sharp eyes of both Ross and Cooper seemed to see straight through him. He knew they would be thinking about what exactly was going on.

"Well, on that note I think I'll head home." Ross stood up and stretched. "You ready to head out?" he asked Alistair.

"Yup, what about you, Coop?" Alistair asked.

"Nah, I still have half a beer. I think I'll hang here for a bit. I want to talk some shit out with Keags about the farm."

Once Ross and Alistair left, Keagan turned his attention to his friend. "So what did you want to talk to me about?"

"I want to know what's going on between you and my brother."

"I thought you wanted to talk about the farm?" Keagan stalled answering the question asked.

"We'll talk about that later. What's up with you and Krunk?"

Fuck! Keagan closed his eyes and leant his head against the back of the lounge. "There's nothing going on. He came to my place to crash after he split with Lauren. Hell, he didn't even tell me they had separated until late yesterday afternoon."

"Do you have feelings for him? I mean I've always suspected that you do. Shit's happened over the years which made me think you had strong feelings for him."

"You're right, I do have strong feelings for him. Alistair is my best friend. He's seen me through some of the crappiest events in my life. I'm determined to be there for him as well. If you're asking me if we've ever had sex? Then the answer is no. You know him probably better than I do even. Your brother is straight. I've never even had an inkling that he might bat on the same side of the fence as I do. What would even make you think so?"

Cooper stood and walked over to where they had stacked Alistair's belongings and dug through them before coming back to the couch with a shoebox in his hands. He held onto it as he spoke.

"This is the one thing Krunk asked me to get when he called me this morning. He didn't care about the rest of it." He handed the box to Keagan.

“Why are you showing me?” Keagan’s hands trembled as he held the box on his lap.

“I think you need to see what my brother treasured over the rest of his belongings.”

Slowly Keagan opened the shoebox. His breath caught in his throat as he saw what was held within. Tears filled his eyes as he rifled through his friend’s belongings only to realise the box only held things Keagan had given to him over the years. There was also a bundle of photos in there that had been taken at the numerous gigs they had played. Each and every one featured him and Alistair. Some they were warming up, some they were on stage mid-concert, while others were just the two of them goofing around. As he flicked through them one caught his attention. It was him and Alistair asleep on a train. For some reason Alistair was sprawled on his lap while Keagan used Alistair’s thigh as a pillow. When the hell had the photo even been taken? He had green hair so he knew it had to be at least two years ago. What captivated him was the fact that even in sleep they both looked so relaxed and comfortable with each other. He carefully placed the photos back where he’d found them and closed the box.

“I’m not sure exactly what you want me to say. He’s never acted any differently toward me. I don’t know what you think it is that’s going on, but as far as I’m concerned your brother is straight, and until he tells me anything different I’m going to always think of him as being straight.”

“And if he decides that he isn’t?”

“What do you want from me?”

Cooper sounded sincere when he finally answered. “I want you to promise me that if he comes to you seeking to be more than friends that you won’t just use him and then send him on his way.”

“I’d never hurt him. I—” he bit off what he was about to say. Cooper had no business butting into his life the way he was.

“You’re in love with him. I’ve known that since the year you fell out of the tree and broke your arm. It’s never made one iota of difference to me who you like to sleep with, but Krunk is my big brother. I have to look out for him.”

“Rest assured, Coop, I don’t intend to hurt him. I think you’re wrong about him being gay. I’ve honestly never gotten that vibe off him.”

“Then you’ve obviously never seen the way he looks at you.”

Keagan wasn't sure what to make of what his friend was saying. He'd never seen Alistair look at him as anything other than as a friend. He wasn't happy that Cooper was putting these thoughts in his head, but at the same time he knew he'd be watching his friend more closely to see if Cooper was telling the truth.

Shit was just about to get complicated.

Chapter Five

“What’s the matter with you?”

Alistair looked up from the page of the magazine he’d been staring at for the last twenty minutes without retaining a single damn word. In the time he was supposed to be reading, he’d been sitting here brooding about the fact he was staying here with Ross instead of with Keagan like he wanted to. He was feeling shitty because he knew that Keagan had wanted him to stay, but he’d freaked out when everyone had started joking about the whole sex slave thing. Even though he’d never before had a problem with Keagan’s sexuality, he wasn’t ready to come out of his closet just yet.

“Are you going to tell me, or what?” His brother was looking at him curiously. Why the hell was his brother even here?

Instead of answering him, he asked, “What are you doing here? I thought you’d be at home packing up your own crap in preparation for the move out to the farm.”

“I don’t have a lot of gear. I’m gonna pick up some boxes on my way home this arvo.”

Cooper was looking at him so intently that Alistair began to get a nervous feeling in his gut. He knew his brother wasn’t done grilling him, just like he also knew he didn’t want to have to play twenty questions all about his life. When he did that, all kinds of shit found its way spilling out of his mouth.

“There’s nothing going on with me. Just trying to get my head around everything that’s been happening lately.” It wasn’t exactly a lie. His brother just didn’t need to know how messed up his head really was. Shit like this was something he had to work through on his own.

His brother snorted out a laugh. “I call bullshit on that. There’s no way in hell you can tell me that you’re mourning the loss of your relationship with Lauren. I just don’t believe it.”

“Christ, Coop, she was my girlfriend for the last five years. Of course I’m upset things ended the way they did.”

“You forget that as your brother I know you inside and out. I think the only person who might know you better than me is Keagan. I’m telling you now you’re lying to yourself if you think you’re upset over losing Lauren, because if

you were you would have gone crawling back home to her when she asked. Now I want you to tell me what's really going on with you. The truth, and not some bogus bullshit because you don't want to talk about whatever is going on."

"I swear there's nothing going on," Alistair defended.

Why couldn't Coop believe him, or at least just drop the subject altogether? He didn't need this right now. All he wanted to do was work through this on his own. He didn't want anyone—especially his family—trying to help him. Christ if that happened he would end up more screwed-up than he already was. His family tended to get a little too enthusiastic when it came to offering help. Particularly if that help had to do with anything remotely concerning his private life. Cooper might be younger than him by four years, but he also took after their mother, who was the queen of all meddlers.

The staring match they were currently having was starting to piss Alistair off. If his brother had something to say, he just needed to spit it the hell out. To break the silence he asked, "What do you want to know, Coop?"

"I want to know what's up between you and Keagan. And remember, I want the truth."

"Huh? There's nothing up. Why would you even ask?" Alistair relaxed slightly as he realised his brother was probably only guessing that there was a problem. "Why would there be a problem? He's my best friend for fuck's sake."

"I'm not questioning your friendship," Cooper stated.

"Then what the hell are you getting at?" It was like his brother was talking in riddles. Or fragmented like a jigsaw puzzle. If he could get the thing into alignment, the whole conversation would make sense.

"Fuck, you can be dense sometimes." Cooper appeared to be frustrated as hell. "I mean that box you were so adamant I rescue from the garage. I got curious so I looked inside. I wanted to know what was so damn important to you."

Holy fuck! He knows my secret. What the hell am I supposed to do now? Alistair started to spin out. He couldn't have stopped it from happening even though he wanted to. His mind was on turbo overload—a full-on panic attack was heading his way. Taking a dozen or so deep breaths to get himself somewhat back under control he finally asked, "And?"

"And... I want to know why you have a secret stash all about Keagan. Is there something you want to tell me?"

The look on Cooper's face was blank and Alistair couldn't even begin to guess what his brother might be thinking. His choices were to panic, to deny everything, or to fess up and admit he had feelings for his best friend... taking a moment he looked his brother dead in the eye, and lied—well, kind of lied.

"I kept those things away from Lauren, as much as she hated Keagan, she would have destroyed it all."

"You're lying."

"Why the hell would I lie?" he demanded. Alistair wasn't liking where this conversation was going at all. He wanted it to stop right now.

They sat there in silence for a while, and the tension between them seemed to be growing by the second. He could see the calculating way his brother was watching him, and he wanted to yell at him, and tell him to stop.

"Maybe you don't even realise that you're lying. Maybe in your head—"

"You don't know what you're talking about. I don't want you going to Keagan with any of this rubbish you're thinking. I don't want you to screw up the one true friendship I have. I don't want you making things awkward between us. If that happens I'll never forgive you."

"Is that why you're too scared to tell him the truth about how you feel about him? Are you scared he'll stop being your friend if he knows?"

Those two questions made him gasp like he'd been sucker-punched in the gut. He didn't want to have to talk about this anymore. He didn't want anything fucking up what was solid between him and Keagan. The reason he'd never said anything himself is because he never wanted to hear Keagan tell him that he didn't feel the same way. He'd worked out all those years ago when Keagan had turned fourteen just how much he was attracted to his friend, so he went out and got himself a girlfriend to be normal, and look just where that had gotten him—*dumped*, but he'd deserved what he got because, with Lauren, he'd been living a lie.

"Why would you think I'm in love with Keagan?"

"We've always known you're in love with Keagan."

When he heard Ross speak from behind him, he groaned. He'd forgotten his current roomie was still in the apartment with them. How long had he been standing there listening to what he and Cooper were talking about?

“You forget we have eyes, brother. We see how you look at Keagan, especially when you think no one is looking. If he’s in the same room with you, you seem to know exactly where he is at all times. Hell, even when you’re apart you could probably tell us exactly where Keagan was, couldn’t you? I bet you know where he is right now.”

The shitty thing was he did know. He knew that today Keagan had a lunch date with the guy from Corelli Studios. They had met the last time DeRanged had hired rooms to lay down some ideas. He hadn’t at first realised the two had hit it off until Keagan told him a couple of weeks ago they’d been kind of meeting up for coffee or lunch.

“Do you know where he is?” Ross asked.

He nodded, “Yeah, he’s on a date with some guy from our last round of studio sessions. They’re having lunch at Oscarnelli’s.”

Confusion or something akin to it filled Cooper’s eyes. “Why would he be out on a date?”

“Because he obviously likes the guy.”

“He might like the guy, but he’s in love with you,” Ross interjected. “Maybe he’s tired of waiting for you to get caught up with the damn program. If I were you, I wouldn’t hold off too long or you’ll lose him to someone else completely. Keags is a pretty good looking guy. I mean he’s not my type, but he’s probably a lot of other guys’ type.”

Alistair and Cooper both wore matching open-mouthed expressions as they stared at Ross. Cooper recovered first. “How the hell did I not know you were gay?”

“You never asked, and by the way, I class myself as bi. I like both sides of the fence, so to speak,” Ross threw back casually.

“Am I the only straight one among us?” Cooper demanded jokingly.

Ross rolled his eyes. “No one in this band is completely straight. I don’t think any of us have forgotten about the time you and Joey won the kissing competition at Helen’s birthday party.”

“For fuck’s sake, that was years ago. I was all of thirteen for crying out loud. And you were the one who bet us twenty dollars we wouldn’t have the balls to go through with it. If you think one event six years ago makes me gay, or even bi, you’re dreaming.” The laughter in Cooper’s eyes was a clear indication he thought Ross was off his rocker.

“All I’m saying is you have participated in what would be considered by most a homosexual act.”

They all laughed and it suddenly hit Alistair that Ross in his own unique way was drawing Cooper’s attention away from the subject of Keagan, and his feelings for the man. When Ross glanced his way, Alistair gave him a quick smile as a thank-you. In return he was given a slight nod to indicate the message had well and truly been received.

The sound of knocking at the door was unexpected. Especially at the ferocity in which the person was pounding on the door. Alistair shrugged at his brother as Ross went to see who was there. The angry tones of a woman’s voice had him cringing inwardly. For whatever reason, Lauren apparently wasn’t yet done with him.

He didn’t even bother getting off the recliner as she stormed into the room and glared at them all. Even as pissed as she seemed to be he didn’t think the anger was aimed at him this time.

“What the hell gives you two the right to go through *my* belongings and remove things from *my* home? I told you not to touch a thing and when I got back yesterday you had done the exact opposite.” She stood with her hands on her hips as she shouted at Cooper and Ross.

Enough was enough!

“You told me that you would allow them to pack and collect my stuff. They never took anything of yours. Hell, they even left most of mine behind. What right have you got to be pissed off?” Alistair lowered the footrest on the recliner as he got to his feet and stood toe-to-toe with his ex.

She never even stopped to think about it as she hauled back and slapped him across the face. “You... You arse. You need to pack up your things and come the fuck home where you belong. It’s time you gave up this stupid band nonsense and got a real job. You know my father wants you to come and work at the bakery with him. He’s offered you a full-time job, and you’re throwing it away all on these idiots and the idea of becoming huge rock stars. It’s never going to happen. You need to come home and grow the hell up. You’re twenty-three, not some teenage boy still in high school. I want a family, and we can’t do that until you get a real job.”

What the fuck!

Pinching the bridge of his nose between his thumb and forefinger, Alistair contemplated the vision of their future together and he didn’t quite see it in the

same fashion. Hell, to be honest, this was the first he was hearing about most of it. He did know about the job offer from her father, but he didn't want to be a baker. His dream had always been to become an author. He'd recently submitted to and gotten a contract for his first story from a publisher. The story was in some way based on his own life and the trials of becoming a band. The feedback he'd gotten back on it had been promising. They were even discussing turning the book idea into a series and him writing more stories to follow on.

After what felt like forever and was probably in fact less than a minute he focussed on Lauren. "Please listen to me when I tell you... This dream life of yours is never going to happen. If it does happen it won't be with me standing at your side. I don't want to wind up married to you with a handful of kids and working for your dad. I'm not asking for you to even give me half the stuff in the house. I'm willing to let you keep it. I just want you to go home and leave me the hell alone."

She went to slap him again but this time he caught her wrist before it made contact. "We're done, Lauren. You need to re-evaluate your life without me in it because I'm not coming home. If you are honest with yourself you would realise that you don't love me at all. You and me—we fell out of love a long time ago."

Fury flashed in her eyes. "Of course I don't love you. I know that, but at my age I want a family and there isn't time to find someone else and start all over again. I gave you five years of my life, and I damn well want to get what's owed to me."

"Owed to you? Just because you're turning thirty does not give you the right to act like I owe you a friggin' child. When I have a child it will be with someone I actually love, not with some bitch who doesn't mean a damn thing to me."

She threw her free arm in the air and huffed, "So how are you planning for you and your fuck buddy to conceive a baby? Do you think your precious Keagan is up for the job?"

"Leave Keagan out of this."

"Why? He is the bastard you left me for, isn't he?" she demanded.

"My relationship with Keagan is none of your fucking business. Get it through your head—we're over—done—never going to be together again. You need to move on to some other sucker."

The air was thick enough to cut with a knife as she glared at him. “Fine! I’ll go, but be forewarned, I’m contacting the police and informing them that Ross and Cooper broke into my house and stole things from me. You should be expecting a visit from them sometime later today. And as for your fuck buddy, I’m going to make his life a living hell.” She yanked her arm out of his hand and once again stormed from the room.

It only hit him then that Cooper and Ross had quietly snuck out of the room and left him to deal with the woman scorned. If he’d had any inkling that this would be how things were going to play out with Lauren, he would never have gotten with her in the first place. He hoped like hell she was only talking shit about ruining Keagan, but somehow he knew she meant every fucking word she’d said.

“So are you going to give Keagan a heads-up on what’s heading his way? If she follows through on her threat he could lose his job.” Cooper stood leaning against the doorframe.

Ross was leaning over Cooper’s shoulder. “Considering he has a very public job, he might need time to warn and prepare his boss for what may happen.”

Keagan worked night shift at one of the local respite housing complexes for the elderly. He’d trained long and hard to get to where he was in life, even as far as breaking the family tradition of joining the police force by forming a band, and becoming an aged-care worker.

“Yeah, and maybe we should get in contact with Leah and see if she has some suggestions about what to do about Lauren. I don’t want the Thames’s to be blindsided by this. I can’t believe I’ve totally fucked up—or I’m about to fuck up—my friend’s life to this extent. Not only him, but this could have repercussions on their whole family. When he gets back from his date I think we should tell him what’s going on.”

“Fuck waiting.” Cooper extracted his keys from his pocket and headed for the front door. “We need to tell him now.”

“But he’s on a date.” Sighing deeply, Alistair followed Ross and Cooper from the room knowing they were right.

“Some things are more important,” Ross replied.

Chapter Six

Keagan laughed softly at some idiotic thing Matthew Phillips was saying. It wasn't that the joke was actually funny, Keagan just thought it would be more polite to laugh than to sit there like a bump on a log. Usually his meet-ups with Matthew were fun. Today just wasn't one of those days. Ever since Cooper had shown him what was inside that damn shoebox of Alistair's, Keagan couldn't get his best friend out of his mind.

"You're not even listening to me, are you? I can tell by the look in your eyes that you're thinking about some—*Krunk?*"

"What?" Keagan blanched.

How Matthew could possibly know who he was thinking about was beyond him. It was only as three people stopped at the side of the table that he realised his date meant Alistair was actually standing there. Not only Alistair but Ross and Cooper as well. *What the hell is going on? Why are my friends crashing my kind-of date? This can't be good.*

"We need to talk," Cooper blurted out before Keagan could even ask what they were doing there.

"Believe me, it's important, or we wouldn't be crashing your date like this," Ross added as he filched a chip from off of Keagan's plate. "The shit has hit the fan big time. I reckon we'll have to hire a dozen gurneys to get rid of the stink of what's going down."

Matthew immediately stood up. "This sounds important. I'll head out. We can catch up again at another time." He walked around the table and leant down to kiss the side of Keagan's cheek in a gesture of farewell. "If you need my help for anything just call me."

No sooner had Matthew left than Keagan's three uninvited guests sat down next to him. Part of him was a little pissed that they couldn't even give him one day to be by himself and do Keagan stuff. Didn't they know sometimes he just needed time alone to sort through the crap in his brain?

Ross again started eating off his plate and talking in between bites. "Hurry up and finish your lunch. We need to go talk to your sister before things get even more out of control."

“Can somebody please fill me in on what the fuck is going on? Why the hell did you feel you needed to chase away my lunch companion?” Even though he asked them all, he was looking only at Alistair for an answer.

“I think this is a conversation that needs to be had somewhere that isn’t so public. We don’t want everyone knowing our business,” Alistair said softly as he gestured with his head towards the door.

Keagan didn’t need to finish his lunch because his stomach was somersaulting with all the possibilities. If he tried to even fit in one more bite he would probably only hurl it straight back up again. “I’m done.”

As they stood up, Ross, who had already demolished the remainder of Keagan’s chips, grabbed the half-eaten burger from his plate, and followed behind them. When he stopped at the cashier’s to pay, Keagan was informed Matthew had already paid the bill—just showing how sweet and thoughtful the guy really was.

“You’re such a pig,” Cooper said to Ross. “You ate it all and didn’t even share.”

“I was hungry, and if Keags wasn’t going to finish it, I wasn’t going to waste a perfectly good steak burger and hot chips.”

Once they were in the cars and heading to his sister’s place, he turned slightly in his seat and asked Alistair, who was driving, just what the hell was going on. He didn’t like all this secretive bullshit. At first, he wasn’t sure Alistair was even going to answer him until a visible shudder ran through his friend’s entire body.

“Lauren came around to Ross’s and blew her stack at me again. I mean even worse than when she rocked up to yell at me at your place.”

“What did she want this time?” Keagan wished he could lash out at the woman for what she was doing, but he knew it wouldn’t do them any good.

Another shudder ran through Alistair, as he pulled the car over into the mall to park. “She basically informed me that if I don’t move home with her—if I don’t give up my whole life to work with her father at the bakery and have babies with her—she is going to make your life hell.”

Coldness seeped into Keagan at what he was hearing. “Why the hell does she want to destroy my life? What did I ever do to her?”

Alistair looked defeated. “In her eyes, you stole me away from her. She thinks I walked out on our relationship to be with you. She knows the way to hurt me is by hurting you.”

“I thought she threw you out.” This was all so confusing. Keagan didn’t know what to make of it all. *And what is that whole—she knows the way to hurt me is by hurting you—about?*

“I thought so too, but apparently she doesn’t seem to think so. She wants me to father her kids because Lauren reckons she’s wasted five years of her life on training me up to fit the mould of who she thinks I should be. She really didn’t like that I didn’t go along with her plans. She basically isn’t going to take no for an answer.”

This whole situation was ludicrous. The woman was obviously barking mad. “I still don’t get why she thinks this is my fault. I mean it’s not like I can make you gay just by being friends with you. What does she actually think I’ve done?”

“Honestly, if I knew the answer I’d tell you. I just don’t. Yes, I was with her for five years. We had sex. Okay, so it wasn’t the greatest sex in the world, but I thought we were happy. The only thing we didn’t agree on was you. She hated that you were my best friend. She didn’t think you were good enough to socialise with her group of friends. She hated how I wouldn’t back down on that one part of my life. Lauren never understood why I couldn’t give you up.”

“But that still doesn’t make you gay, and even if you were it wouldn’t be my fault.” The whole—*Lauren never understood why I couldn’t give you up*—was going to be a conversation for another day where Alistair would have to man up and give him answers.

As he sat there waiting for Alistair to answer, his fingers drummed out an irritated rhythm on his thigh. He knew that by now Ross and Cooper were probably already at Leah’s and filling her in on what was happening. He was still trying to fathom how Lauren thought he was to blame for her and Alistair breaking up. He had an inkling of why, but until Alistair actually said the words he wasn’t going to get his hopes up. And he definitely wasn’t going to set his heart up to crash and burn.

“I’m sorry, okay? I don’t know why she’s carrying on like this. If I knew how to stop her I would. I honestly think you should warn your boss about what’s going on. I don’t want you losing your job if Lauren decides to go postal on our arses.”

“Shit! Take me to work. You’re right, I better go warn Robert.”

Alistair started the car and carefully pulled back into the flow of traffic. They drove across town in silence before Alistair pulled into Drake House: Aged Care Facility. They sat in silence for a few minutes before Alistair spoke.

“Do you want me to come in with you?”

“I think you better, because this story is too insane to be believed. I think I’ll need you there to verify to some extent what I’m about to tell my boss. Hell, I’m not even sure if I believe it yet, and supposedly it’s happening to me. I seriously pray she was just saying shit to get under your skin and not something she was actually planning on doing.”

They both got out of the car and locked it before making their way into the building and headed straight for the manager’s office, only stopping long enough in front of the receptionist’s desk to ask if his boss was in. “Hi, Meg. Is Robert in? I need to chat to him for a minute.”

“Hold on, hon. I’ll just check if he’s available.”

Anger ate at him as they waited for the slightly—no more than a few years—older woman to ring through to his boss’s office. He wasn’t angry that he was here having to do this. He was pissed off that he had no choice but to try and explain something that may happen all because his best friend’s ex-girlfriend didn’t like being dumped. How fucked up was that?

“You can go right in. He has about two hours before his next meeting is scheduled to arrive,” Meg said as she hung up the extension. “I’ll bring coffee into you all in a few minutes.”

“Thanks, darlin’.”

She grinned at them both. “You know I’m not doing this out of the kindness of my heart. I expect free tickets to your next gig. Benny and I had a ball at the last one.”

“I would have given them to you anyway. Don’t I always give them to you for helping out?” Keagan threw her a grin as they left and walked the rest of the way to Robert’s office. He knew he needed to get this over, done with, out of the way, and hopefully he would still have a job at the end of the conversation which was about to take place. The truth was he wasn’t looking forward to this chat at all.

Knocking on the door, he entered the room and waited for Alistair to follow him inside. Keagan gestured to one of the two chairs in front of his boss’s desk before taking the other for himself.

“What can I do for you, boys?” his boss asked.

Robert Danning was a very stoic man in his late forties. He was a great boss to work for, and a person who would listen to everything carefully before

making his decision. Robert always claimed he wanted fact over fiction. So today this was what Keagan hoped to give him—fact.

“I’m not exactly sure how to start.”

“Why not start at the beginning. It always works best for me.”

Before he could start, Meg entered with coffee for everyone. He got an idea in his head and stopped her from leaving the office. “Meg, I think you should stay, as you may be the one who will have first contact with what I’m about to tell you.”

“This sounds serious,” Robert said, as Meg sat on the room’s last remaining vacant chair.

“I don’t know how bad it is yet, or even how bad it’s going to get, but, truth be told I think you need to hear it for yourself and judge.” Taking a deep breath he went on, “My friend, Alistair has been dating a woman for the last five years. Recently they broke up.”

“Good, nasty piece of work that one. You’re better off without her, honey,” Meg interrupted.

Keagan rolled his eyes at his work colleague, and truthfully, Keagan supposed he could also class her as both a friend, and a fan. Meg and her husband had been fans of DeRanged since they first started out. Keagan gave himself a mental slap to get back to the job at hand. “Well, for some strange reason Lauren’s gotten it in her head that Alistair left her for me, and let’s just say she’s not too happy about it at all.”

“Did you?” Meg leant across and grinned at Alistair, “and if so, can I tell Benny?”

“Meg, settle down. Let Keagan finish what he has to say,” Robert admonished softly.

Keagan nodded absently, not agreeing with Meg, but rather Robert. He needed to get his tale told. “Apparently Lauren and Alistair had a huge fight today where she threatened not only him. She also told him if he didn’t get back together with her she would ruin my life, seeing as she thinks their break-up is all my fault. I guess she thinks it fair that if I destroyed her life she has the right to destroy mine. Alistair thought it best I come and talk to you in case she makes good on her threat. I don’t want to lose my job because some woman, whose biological clock is running out, is hell-bent on revenge for something I didn’t even do. I can’t help but wonder if she thinks I’m the cause of everything

because she hated that I was gay. She once told me I was the scourge of society and would rot in hell for the rest of eternity.”

There, he'd gotten it all out and he knew without looking that the other three occupants in the room were all staring at him. Two in horrified disbelief and the other with guilt and remorse at his part in all of this.

It seemed like an eternity had passed before Robert cleared his throat and finally spoke. “Before we make any decisions, there are a few things I would still like cleared up.” He turned his attention to Alistair. “Did you in fact leave her for Keagan?”

“No. I honestly thought she'd kicked me out. I mean the fight started because Keagan and I spent so much time together when not at a gig. I tried to explain to her we were just good friends. I know she's never really liked Keagan from the very start. I had no idea she would try to ruin his life because we broke up. I have no clue how to stop her or how to fix whatever damage she may cause.”

“Where did you go to on the day you left her?” Robert asked, as he made notes on the legal pad in front of him.

Keagan already knew this answer, so when Alistair hesitated he answered, “He came to my place, but that's nothing new. He was always at my place. You've got to remember, Alistair and I have been friends for just over a decade. We met the day my family moved here.”

“Would there be any reason your ex-girlfriend would believe the two of you were in a relationship—whether it be sexual or not?”

“I don't know.” Alistair shrugged. “Keags already told you we are best friends. We've often shared the same hotel room when gigging. Our families are really close and spend quite a few of the holidays together.”

“That's true,” Meg piped in. “I've been to a few parties at the Thames' residence and the Krunkstones are always there. When I first met the guys, I thought their families must be related. It wasn't until I got to know them that I realised the truth. I guess the privilege of being a die-hard DeRanged fan has its benefits.”

“Have you and Keagan ever been in a relationship?” Robert asked, and Keagan wasn't sure if the man was serious or just curious. Whatever his reason was, Keagan wanted to hear what Alistair had to say.

Again Alistair shook his head. “No, we haven't. I've always dated women. The only relationship Keagan and I have ever shared is that of being each

other's best friend. Hell, I'll be lucky if I even have that after all this shit settles down."

"We'll always be best friends, Alistair," Keagan answered honestly. He reached over and squeezed his friend's thigh in comfort before letting go.

As the minutes rolled on by they talked about what they were going to do if Lauren indeed decided to try and cause trouble. Both he and Alistair promised his boss that they would keep him informed on whatever his family had to say. By the time they made their good-byes and left, almost two hours had passed.

The drive to his sister's house was relatively quiet; they didn't even have the usual background music of the CD player. Keagan was pretty sure Alistair was cut deeply by some of the things which had been revealed today. He wanted to ask about the shoebox, but didn't have the guts. Keagan supposed one day, when he was ready, Alistair would share the reasons behind it with him. For now he would just have to wait, wonder, and hope he wasn't wrong.

They pulled into his sister's drive behind Ross's car, and Keagan realised all of the Krunkstone family was here as well, word must have been passed throughout the whole family network. Could this day get any weirder?

"I'm sorry, Keags. I didn't mean for any of this to happen," Alistair said before he got out of the car.

Keagan hurried to join his friend and grabbed his arm to stop him from going inside. They obviously had things to talk about and get out of the way. He just needed something from Alistair right now, but even he wasn't sure what exactly it was that he needed.

"This isn't your fault." Keagan pulled Alistair into a hug. "It's not your fault you dated a psycho bitch from hell." He released Alistair and gently cupped his face. "You're my best friend and I will always love you no matter what."

Without thinking he closed the distance between them and brought their lips together in a soft kiss. There was no tongue involved, but oh how he wished there was. When he felt Alistair freeze in his hands he slowly pulled away.

Whatever happened next—the ball was well and truly in Alistair's court.

Chapter Seven

Holy-fucking-hell! Keagan had kissed him. Keagan had actually kissed him. Okay, so maybe it was just a peck on the corner of his mouth, but it was more than he'd ever had before. His mind was still working its way through everything when he realised his friend was heading into the house and had left him standing in the middle of the drive beside his brother's car. Keagan had kissed him and he just stood there like a stunned mullet.

Keagan looked back at him over his shoulder as he reached the door and the slightly freaked-out look on Keagan's face finally got his feet moving. He wasn't going to read too much into what happened. Hell, there wasn't even any tongue. The question was what did the kiss mean?

By the time he entered Leah and Mike's house, the distinct sound of angry voices could be heard coming from the kitchen. Even if he hadn't heard them, he would've known that's where he'd find everyone because every family meeting was held in the kitchen. The sight of so many blue uniforms facing him as he entered the room was formidable. Mike, Harold, and Catherine Thames were all still in uniform. The only one who wasn't was Leah, and that was only because she was currently on maternity leave after giving birth to little Luke. His own family held a variety of jobs. His mother, Anna, was a homebody, and his father, Ian, owned and operated Krunkstone Construction, where both he and Cooper had worked at different times during their lives. His youngest brother Taylor still worked there during school holidays and had all intentions of taking over if their father ever decided to retire. The truth was the fateful day he'd accidentally helped Keagan to break his arm had cemented a very strong friendship between their two families.

"Are you okay?" Leah threw her arms around him before he even registered she was there in front of him. His gaze sought out where Keagan was and saw him sitting between his father and Mike.

"I'm fine, sis." He and Keagan had always called her sis because when they were younger she'd thought she could boss him around since she was older than them both. It didn't matter to her that the age gap between the two of them was only by a few months. She was older and that was all there was to it.

"I can't believe what a complete bitch she's being. I mean I can believe it because she was always so snarky to everyone when you weren't around. A few

times I thought Meg was going to deck her. I'm glad you're no longer with her. She was definitely all wrong for you."

The way she spoke so fast was kind of comforting in a weird way. When they were younger all the boys had nicknamed her motormouth because she never seemed to breathe between sentences. Through the years things hadn't changed that much.

"Once all this bullshit is over, we can find you someone nicer to be with. Someone who sees what a wonderful and sensitive person you are. You can do way better than that overpriced good-for-nothing piece of white trash."

He couldn't help but smirk at Leah's description of Lauren. She wasn't far off. The only thing he would have to differ on was Lauren wasn't white trash. Her family were pretty decent. It was just Lauren who thought she was above the rest of them. Her father had once told him that sometimes it was better to give in rather than put up with the hissy fit that was sure to follow. Her mother pampered to Lauren's every whim even if it meant the rest of the family went without. Maybe this all happened for a reason—maybe he was supposed to show her that she couldn't get her way every time she felt hard done by.

When Leah pulled away from him, he realised she'd finally wound down, and by the end, he really hadn't heard a word she'd said. Walking around the table, he gave first his mother and then Keagan's mother a hug before he leant back against the bench. Harold was explaining what they could legally do. He wanted both Keagan and Alistair to take restraining orders out against Lauren. He also wanted them to record any conversations they had with her in the future, making sure they informed her she was being recorded, or otherwise it would be inadmissible as evidence. The other piece of advice was to get a book and record date and time and a rough description of what had taken place.

Keagan slowly filled everyone in on what had happened at his work. He also told all of them the plan Robert had come up with. Robert had assured Keagan his being gay in no way affected his ability to perform his job. His job was safe. If Lauren did try to make waves, they were just going to inform her the matter was already in the hands of the police. The police being Keagan's own family.

The stupid thing was, Lauren already knew that the Thames family were all in law enforcement, and considering how close the family was, she'd have to know they would all back Keagan if she did follow through on her threat. Alistair couldn't understand how she didn't understand she'd be in deep shit if she tried to cause trouble for Keagan.

“Should we let her parents know what she’s up to?” Alistair asked. He wasn’t sure if involving her family was the right way to go about things, but on the off chance they could calm her down, it would be a good thing. Kind of like shoving a fire extinguisher down the dragon’s throat before she could burn them all into crispy critters.

Harold nodded and tapped the list he’d made in front of him. “Already on the list. Mike and his partner are going to stop by the bakery on their shift tomorrow and fill him in on the situation at hand.”

“I don’t like the fact Keagan is at his house all alone,” Catherine stated firmly.

“It’s only for a week, Mum,” Keagan answered.

“What about after that?” Catherine countered.

Cooper answered before Keagan could. “After that, Ross, Krunk, and me are going to be moving out to the farm with Keagan. We decided it would be better to pool our money instead of doing it alone. We’re even thinking of building a studio out there to use instead of paying for space when we need it”—he paused for a moment—“actually I’ll be moving with him next week. Ross’s lease doesn’t run out for two months and Krunk’s staying there with him to help pay the last of rent.”

“Or,” Catherine began, “you could all move out together. If Ross is paying rent for another couple of months anyway it won’t matter whether he’s still there or not. I think it would be much better if you all moved together.”

Secretly, Alistair wholeheartedly agreed with her. If the shit was going to hit the fan, he wanted to be there to deflect enough of it away from Keagan before it did any real damage. He would give anything to be able to take the threat away from his friend. He didn’t really care what Lauren did to him because he probably deserved it for staying so long with her, even after he realised he wasn’t in love with her, but Keagan didn’t deserve this at all.

“That’s doable,” Ross said from where he sat on the kitchen bench. “I can’t believe we didn’t think of that option ourselves. Totally makes way more sense.”

“So it’s settled,” Ian stated. “The boys will all move out to the farm at the same time. I’m still a little worried about what she might do.”

Mike, who was usually the quiet one out of the group, spoke up. “To be honest, I don’t think she’ll do anything. I’m not saying she didn’t threaten

Keagan or anything, but I truly believe that once she calms down and realises just what she plans on doing and to whom she will reconsider everything. What idiot takes on a family filled with cops?"

"I hope you're right, but we can't take the chance. I think we serve the restraining orders and talk to her father and then see what happens. Just because she's pissed at Krunk for leaving, she shouldn't have the right to mess with Keagan. Even if Krunk did leave her for Keags," Leah said.

"Alistair didn't leave her for me. She threw him out, or are you forgetting that part in the whole drama?" Keagan sounded irritated, and Alistair had to wonder why.

"In her mind she thinks I left her for you," Alistair said quietly.

"But you didn't."

"I know that and you know that, but she believes that I have. She doesn't care that she was the one who asked me to leave." Alistair tried to explain it all again. "As far as Lauren is concerned, I left her because I wanted to be in a relationship with you."

No one spoke for a very long time. The sound of Luke making baby noises from where he lay in Alistair's mother's arms was the only sound in the room. He could feel the flush rising up and staining his skin as every set of eyes, except for the baby's, was focussed solely on him.

"Did you?" Taylor asked.

"Why does everyone's mind immediately think that? Keagan is my friend... My best friend... I have never been with him romantically," Alistair defended.

Taylor shrugged, "How would we know? Who knows what you get up to when you're away on tour? For all we know you could be living some freaky double life."

"What? So you immediately think I'm sleeping with Keagan?"

"It could happen," Taylor argued right back.

With a shake of his head Alistair said slowly, "I may have shared a bed with Keagan, but I have never slept with him in the sense that has all your minds in the gutter."

He wasn't really angry and by the smiles everyone was trying *not* to show he knew they were only yanking his chain. There wasn't any malice in the words thrown his way. Well, maybe Taylor wasn't joking as much as the rest of

them because he seemed dead serious in his questions. This was confirmed by the very next words out of his brother's mouth.

"It's not like it's a big deal if you suddenly tell us you like dick now. Keagan does and we still all love him anyway." Taylor grinned at Keagan. "Not that I'm coming on to you when I say I love you. I just mean..."

"I get it," Keagan assured Taylor. "I love you too in a whole platonic sort of way."

Taylor just didn't know when to shut up. "Whew, but it's okay if you love Alistair in the whole sexual way. We're still gonna love you."

"Thanks, I think," Keagan answered.

When Keagan looked his way for help, all Alistair could do was shrug in the whole *you're on your own* kind of way. He didn't want to start any conversations that were going to have him spilling his guts unless he was totally sure about just what he was confessing. At the moment everything was just a muddled mess inside his head.

The afternoon dragged on into early evening before the family all went their separate ways. With everything going on, Alistair didn't even think about getting in the car with Keagan. Even before the doors were closed he knew he would be staying at Keagan's place. They drove in silence the short distance home. As Alistair turned off the ignition Keagan finally spoke.

"You staying?"

"I'm staying."

Chapter Eight

To say Keagan was stunned by the turn in conversation at his sister's house last night would be spot on. The fact that Alistair hadn't jumped in and told Taylor he was way off base, or objecting to the rest of the family's general teasing of the two of them had Keagan's brain working overtime as he tried to figure his friend out. Stranger still was the fact that once they'd gotten home they had curled up on the couch together watching movies until Keagan had announced he was heading to bed and without a word Alistair had followed him into the room and climbed into bed beside him.

If the rest of the family could see them now it would have the gossip mill running full tilt. By the steady breathing, Keagan knew Alistair was still asleep. This gave him the perfect opportunity to gaze at his friend all he wanted without feeling guilty. The man was honestly beautiful... there was no other word for it. Keagan had been in love with Alistair a long time, so he was going to cherish this moment forever. His fingertip lightly traced the tattoo adorning Alistair's bicep. Keagan had lost count of how many times he had dreamed about licking every line and inch on the marked flesh. Crap! Even thinking about it now had his dick trying to grab the attention of everyone in the near vicinity, but somehow Keagan doubted Alistair would appreciate waking up to Keagan jacking off in bed beside him.

He was also still reeling over the fact he'd been brave enough to plant a kiss on Alistair yesterday afternoon. He wished it had been a real kiss instead of the slightly misplaced, lop-sided one it had been, but beggars couldn't be choosers. He was just happy Alistair didn't push him away. Keagan still wasn't even sure why he'd done it in the first place, but he was glad that he did.

When Alistair moaned in his sleep Keagan smiled. The man had reached out and wrapped his arm around Keagan's waist and hauled him closer. He knew Alistair was on the verge of waking up and couldn't help but chuckle at what the reaction would be when he opened his eyes.

He didn't have long to wait.

"Good morning," Alistair murmured.

"Morning." Keagan returned and was totally fucking amazed when Alistair didn't readily let him go, but seemed intent to hold on for just a little bit longer. "How are you feeling today?"

A smile filled with the remnants of sleep rested on Alistair's face. "I'm good. I'll be better when all this bullshit is behind us."

"Me too," Keagan confided.

They lay that way for a while before Keagan broke the silence. "I'm thinking that I'm gonna move to the farm today instead of waiting. I know the workmen will still be finishing off, but I don't want to wait any longer."

"Sounds like a plan." Alistair rolled onto his back and yawned. "I'll grab my stuff from Ross's place and go with you."

Keagan mourned the loss of Alistair holding him, but didn't say anything. Instead they made plans to hire a van to take everything to the farm. Both Ross and Coop would be busy working, and Keagan still had three days off from his job so it seemed like a good time to get most of the moving done.

After getting out of bed, they made a quick breakfast before Alistair took off back to Ross's place to gather his stuff. Keagan was mostly already living out of boxes since he'd been packed since before they went on tour. Instead he pulled out his guitar, and settled on the couch to work on the lyrics that were still floating around the edges of his mind. He'd set up the recorder to try and capture the raw tune he was putting to the words. Once they smoothed everything out, he thought maybe they'd have another hit on their hands. No one had to know the song was all about his feelings for Alistair. He was absorbed in what he was doing and was startled when the doorbell rang.

Getting up, he was a little surprised when he found Lauren standing on the other side of the door. "What are you doing here?"

Lauren stared at him for a long moment before she pushed past him and made her way into the lounge room. "You working on a new song?" she asked, as she sat on the single recliner in the room.

"Yeah," Keagan went back and sat back on the couch and waited for her to continue. If she was going to be civil, he was determined to be as well. There was no need to rock the boat if they were both willing to float on the calm water between them.

"Are you and Alistair sleeping together?"

There it was, blunt as hell, but Keagan still detected the nuance of hurt underlying the words. He decided to answer as honestly as he could.

"If you're asking have we had sex, the answer is no. You were with Alistair long enough to know he would never cheat on you."

She stared at him as if trying to figure everything out. "Then why?"

"Why what?" He was making sure there were no mixed signals between them.

"Why did he leave me for you?"

Keagan swallowed hard. "You asked him to leave, remember. If you hadn't have asked him to leave he would have still been with you."

"Then why didn't he come home?"

Again Keagan decided to be as truthful as possible. "I don't know, but I guess when you threatened to destroy my life it was too much to forgive."

"I wouldn't have really done that. Don't get me wrong. I don't like you. I never have, but that's not a secret. I don't agree with your lifestyle, nor do I like the fact that Alistair seems not to care. For the last couple of years I've had the feeling that maybe Alistair had similar feelings for you. He's been changing. I needed to blame someone, and you were right there. Every time I made plans he'd already made plans with you, or you were going on tour. It wasn't fair." She seemed genuinely confused and Keagan pitied her because she couldn't understand how she was partly to blame in what unfolded.

"Did you ever think I'm not to blame for what went wrong in your relationship? I might be his best friend, but I never asked or even hinted that he should leave you, yet you blamed me anyway. You threatened to destroy my life and ruin my job if he didn't do as you wanted... think about that for a moment and see it as an outsider would."

"Are you trying to tell me I'm a selfish bitch?" She glared at him, but Keagan didn't feel any malice behind the action.

"I'm just saying that maybe that's how others would see it. I mean why would you even want to stay and have children with someone you don't fully believe is being faithful to you?"

She seemed to think about that for a long time before she answered. "I was jealous that he wanted you more than me."

"You do realise Alistair is straight, right? I have known the man since he was thirteen years old and I've never known him to even look at my side of the fence. He's only ever had eyes for the female population."

"I've seen you together. I've see the way you look at each other. I know that you're in love with him," she argued softly.

Again the truth was necessary. “Yes, I am. I have been since almost the first moment we met, but just because I have feelings for him it doesn’t mean they have ever been returned. Sure there’s love between us, but it’s the deep and unbending closeness that comes with true friendship. It’s never been anything more.”

“But you want it to be more?”

“I’m not going to lie to you. I’ve always wanted to mean more to Alistair than I do. I’m just not stupid enough to do anything that may fuck up our already existing bond.”

They stared at each other in silence for a long time. Keagan could see an array of emotions fighting for dominance on her face. In the end, he thought maybe it was resignation. She stood up and nervously glanced around the room before she spoke.

“I’m never going to like you. I’m probably always going to blame you for what’s happened, but you can call your family off. They don’t need to hound my family further. I won’t cause trouble. I’ll keep my distance. I just want to say I admire that you were so honest with me. Maybe you should do the same with Alistair, even if it means like me, you lose him in the end.”

With that said, she walked away without saying another word.

Keagan stared after her in shock. If he ever wondered how this particular scene would play out in his head, it was never like this. He would never have dreamed in a million years that he and Lauren would sit down and have a civilised conversation about everything. He could only hope like hell she was being honest when she said this was the end of it.

When the sound of the tape-deck on the table clicked off, Keagan realised he’d recorded the whole bizarre conversation, he rewound it a little to make sure he really had. Switching out the tapes he put the one with Lauren on it inside his guitar case for safe keeping. He may never need it, but he needed time to digest what had just happened before he decided what to do with the recording.

After that fateful day, Keagan had rung his dad and let him listen to the tape of what had taken place. At the same time he’d made his father swear to keep what he’d heard a secret. He may have been honest with Lauren, but he wasn’t ready yet to let everyone else know what was going on.

As it was they'd been living at the farm for nearly two months and Keagan was glad he'd kept quiet, because with every passing day it felt like Alistair was pulling just that little bit further away from him. Since that last night at his old apartment he and Alistair had never shared a bed. Realistically, he knew they wouldn't, but it still hurt that there seemed to be a wall forming between them.

The funny thing was Alistair and Cooper seemed to be spending a shit-load of time together, but lately, they were arguing more than not. Something was definitely going on between the two of them, and neither was willing to talk. Ross spent his time either working his day job, or mucking around in the small studio they'd installed in the barn. He was laying tracks down of the songs Keagan had come up with on their break. He and Ross had been discussing the possibility of doing a small tour where they were the headlining act, instead of being the starter band. They'd also decided before that happened they would put out their next CD. The recording company had been hounding them recently to hurry the hell up.

Tonight they were all supposed to be laying down the first real tracks on the demo, but Alistair had announced he had a date and asked if they could put it off for a night. The day Keagan was dreading had finally arrived—Alistair was ready to jump back into the dating pool, and didn't that just feel like a kick in the balls. He knew it was coming and there wasn't a damn thing he could say about it without coming off sounding petty. Ross and Cooper, on the other hand, both bitched him out big time.

Keagan didn't even stay to listen to the last of their conversation. He quickly made his way back to the house and hurried into his room, in effect shutting out the rest of the world as he fought to get his emotions under control. His heart was shattering into a million pieces and he felt there was no way he could put it back together again.

Part of him wanted to retaliate and go out himself. Sex would take his mind off his problems, but deep down he knew they would still be there tomorrow. In the last few months he'd finally had to let Matthew down easy when the man had wanted to take their friendship to the next level. Maybe now he realised there was no hope at all for him and Alistair he could finally move on.

Keagan curled up on his bed and let his tears freely fall as he forced all emotions out of his body. He needed to grow the fuck up and realise just

because he wanted something didn't mean he was entitled to it. Let Alistair go out on his date tonight, and tomorrow Keagan would find the strength to move on.

Probably.

Chapter Nine

Just one more fucking word. Just one more ignorant, narrow-minded, snide remark about gays and Alistair was going to punch someone. He had a rule about never hitting a girl under any circumstances, but seriously, right now, he was reconsidering it. This bitch and her friends were getting on his last damn nerve.

Go out and get a date. It'll be fun. The words his brother said to him earlier in the week were still ringing in his ears. This was the reason why he now found himself sitting here with this bunch of the most obnoxious, self-centred, and close-minded bigots he'd ever met. In truth, he should have walked away hours ago when he first realised they couldn't see anything but their own points of view. Hell, they knew who he was, who his best friend was, and still they seemed oblivious to how wrong their conversation was. All he wanted to do right now was ditch them and go and find Keagan. Keagan would make this all right. At least then he knew he would have a chance of enjoying himself for the remainder of the night, instead of sitting here listening to the boring as hell biography of the miserable life of Joanne Wells, and how hard done by she was, all because her boss was gay.

Things had been perfect the way they'd been going. Why did Cooper need to fill his head with all that shit about putting a cock block on Keagan's personal life. Or how he just needed to get back into the dating scene and give Keagan some space. They had all been living together for over two months now and to him there hadn't been a problem. Then Coop pointed out that in that time Keagan hadn't been out on one single solitary date. Alistair had pointed out that neither had he when he realised his brother had a point. The weird thing was that when he'd told Keagan about his plans for tonight he could've sworn something akin to hurt had filled his best friend's eyes. And strangely that wasn't sitting well with Alistair.

The sound of laughter from the group brought him back to the night from hell he was currently supposed to be enjoying. In the three hours they'd been here, he realised Joanne hadn't said but a handful of words to him. As soon as her posse arrived to crash the date, he was all but forgotten. Nor did she care whether Alistair was keeping up with the conversation or not. He got the feeling he was just there so she could be seen with a guy from a band. Her fifteen minutes of fame, so to speak. The more he thought about it the more he

realised he had options. He didn't need to sit here and listen. He could walk away. Why the hell had he let Leah and Mike set him up in the first place?

Alistair stood and was just about to leave when Joanne grabbed him by the wrist. "Where are you going?"

"Look, I've had enough. I'm just going to go home." He really just needed to get out of there.

She looked at him expectantly. "You want me to come with?" When he hesitated she stood up.

He wanted to yell 'hell no', instead, he shook his head and said, "Nah, I'm just going to head home and crash early. You should stay here with your friends." There was no way he was going to take her bigoted arse anywhere near Keagan. With the way his night was going the bitch would say something to upset Keagan, and there was no way Alistair was letting that happen—not in this lifetime at least.

Before he even realised what was happening Joanne had thrown her arms around him and slapped an in-depth, and probably what she thought was a hot as hell kiss on him. Alistair wanted no part of it. He wanted to push her away, but she was clinging to him like a bloody octopus. Every time he moved one of her hands it landed somewhere else. The sad part was he knew it was all for show—this kiss was all sparkle with no real fizz. The worst part was her mouth tasted like the sugary-as-fuck cocktail she'd been drinking, sweet enough that he wanted to hurl.

When she finally pulled away she smiled at him and said, in what he assumed was an attempt at a sultry voice, "Call me."

"Not bloody likely." He knew he wasn't being pleasant, but he wanted to make sure these people understood his take on their whole prior conversation. "I won't be calling you ever again. You treated me like shit on the sole of your shoe all night long. Ignoring me was the best thing you did. I've had to sit by and listen to you and your friends talking bullshit about gay people. In case you've forgotten, my best friend is gay. And I can tell you now I'd rather spend eternity in his company than spend one more fucking second with you and your friends. You need to grow the fuck up—the world does not revolve around Joanne-fucking-Wells."

"When you said yes to come out on this date with me I thought those rumours about you two being involved were all bogus. My sources told me

you're straight, and not some homo-degenerate." The look on her face was all fury, and Alistair knew without a doubt that it was aimed at him. All he could do was laugh. And not just a small chuckle but a big, gut-rumbling laugh.

Did he deserve her anger? Probably. Did he care? Not one damn little bit.

By the time he finished laughing he wiped the tears of mirth from his eyes and smiled sweetly at her. Leaning in close he whispered for her hearing only, "Have you ever thought your sources should check their facts before handing over information they know nothing about?" Without another word he turned and walked away. He knew by the silence behind him he'd just stunned her with his revelation.

As he headed for the door of the night club, a vision of him buried balls-deep inside his best friend's arse came to fill his mind, and for the life of him he could not find the desire to stop it. His cock gave a jolt in agreement. Alistair realised tonight his whole world was going to change, because tonight—God willing—he was going to find out exactly how it felt to fuck his friend until they were both screaming in pleasure. Well that, or he was going to go to bed and jack off to visions of him fucking Keagan all night long. Sometimes it was worth having a good imagination.

Outside he went to hail a taxi, and groaned instead when he found Leah and Mike parked out front of the nightclub—obviously waiting for him. He knew then the drive home wouldn't be as short or as quiet as he would've liked it to have been. No sooner had his arse hit the back seat when the questions started, even if it felt more like an interrogation. The little amount of booze he'd consumed over the past three hours did little to dull what Leah and Mike wanted to know.

"So, have you made up your mind yet?" Mike asked as he gazed back at Alistair via the rear-view mirror.

"Made up my mind about what?"

Leah turned, leant between the two front seats and thumped him on the leg—hard.

"What the hell was that for?"

She glared at him menacingly. "You know what that was for... now answer the bloody question before I hit you again."

"Isn't this classed as police brutality?"

"I'm on maternity leave so I'm not a cop at the moment," she retorted.

Trying to divert the conversation Alistair asked, "Where is the rug-rat anyway? And why the hell were you sitting there waiting for me?"

"Luke is with Nan and Pop Thames for the night. And we're here to make sure you chose the right damn way," Mike snarled jokingly as they headed out of town.

"What the hell are you talking about?" Alistair had an inkling of where they were heading with this whole conversation even if he wasn't ready to admit it out loud. He couldn't even admit it to himself let alone anyone else.

"Idiot," Leah slapped his knee, "Keagan—we're here to make sure you pick Keagan."

"If you wanted me to choose Keagan, why the hell did you set me up on a date with Joanne?"

Leah rolled her eyes. "Duh, I knew if I set you up with someone who was not a bigoted psycho bitch you might not realise you're in love with my brother."

The little voice in the back of Alistair's head had also been telling him, since the disastrous date began, to man up and go the fuck home. It was enough to make him think about coming clean with everyone. Or to at least stop lying to himself. He'd been arguing with himself all night—hell, he'd been arguing with himself since he first met Keagan all those years ago. By the time they pulled up at the farm. Alistair found himself praying that Coop had been wrong and Keagan didn't have a guest over—mainly one by the name of Matthew-bloody-Phillips. As selfish as he knew he sounded, Alistair wasn't sure he'd be able to handle seeing Keagan with anyone else. Especially, someone who wasn't him.

The problem was, he now had to find out if Keagan could ever think of him as anything more than a friend. No matter that everyone else thought Keagan had been in love with him for years—until he heard the words from the man himself, he wasn't going to believe it. As the car pulled to a stop, Alistair took a moment to get himself under control. He wasn't going to race in there gung-ho if this was all gonna end up being for nothing.

"He's been in love with you for years." Mike put the car into park and turned to look at Alistair. "He may have hidden it well—from you that is, but for the rest of us it's been as clear as a cloudless sky. You only had to be in the

same room as the two of you to know that you both have feelings for each other. And by feelings, I mean of more than just friendship. No one cares if you love him. Hell, we've all been taking bets on how long it would take you both to get your heads out of your arses."

Leah cut in, "We're really okay with you two being together, you know? Nothing is going to change."

"Our friends mightn't agree with you. This could do damage to us and our sales." Alistair voiced one of his main concerns about everything.

Mike blurted out a laugh. "Sorry, but have you been on the band's site lately? Everyone has been guessing as to whether you and Keagan are an item or not since someone posted a picture of you asleep in Keagan's lap on the train. I think it was after we all went to Soundwave. I think Meg must have taken it. I'd never seen it before. Seriously, mate, the both of you need to sit down and talk it out."

"You look so cute all flaked out and Keags is kinda using one of your thighs as a pillow." Leah grinned at him.

All the while Alistair was wondering how or rather who had posted the picture. As far as he knew he had the only copy. Meg had taken the photo on Benny's phone, but not long after he'd forwarded the picture to Alistair, the man had dropped his phone and broken it beyond repair. Alistair had printed off one copy to add to his collection and had then moved the picture itself to his external hard drive for safe keeping. Who would have gone into his belongings and uploaded the picture? Damn he didn't even have to guess—Coop had already confessed that he'd looked in the shoebox.

"What if he doesn't want me?" Alistair asked the one question that he was having the most troubles believing—how could Keagan want someone like him. In all the years they'd known each other, besides that one kiss in the driveway of Leah and Mike's, he couldn't remember Keagan ever seeming interested in him as anything other than as a friend.

"Of course Keags wants you. He's always wanted you, but you were just too blind to see."

Alistair wanted to believe Leah. He wanted to believe there was a chance he and Keagan could have a happily-ever-after. The only way he was going to find out for certain is if he grew a set, went inside, and came right out asked the guy just what he wanted. Mike was right. This needed to come out in the open for

them all to be able to move on with their lives. One way or the other he was going to come clean with Keagan and see where they both stood.

Inhaling deeply, Alistair said one last thing before he got out of the car. "Okay, I'm going in. Wish me luck."

As he closed the door he heard Leah reply, "You don't need luck."

The house was quiet when he entered. Cooper and Ross weren't anywhere to be seen when he walked into the lounge room, and he figured they were both in on the whole setup from the start. He wasn't surprised to find Keagan sitting on the couch watching TV all by himself. There was sadness in his friend's eyes when Keagan looked his way. This was both the most exciting and terrifying moment of his life. Right now he was going to find out if his world was going to become something more or if he would lose everything that was most important to him.

"How was your date? I didn't expect you home for hours, if at all." There was definitely a note of upset in Keagan's voice as well. This wasn't good. He hated knowing this was because of him.

Taking a seat on the couch beside Keagan, he turned to face him. He needed time to figure out just what to say, but not to the extent where it would become too awkward and he would shut down before he opened up. The nerves running through his body were tingling like all buggery, he felt like bugs were crawling all over his skin. Not because he was freaking out—more because the next words out of his mouth were going to change his life forever.

"Keags, we need to talk."

"If you're going to tell me you've been out screwing, well don't. I may be your best friend, but there are some things about you that I just don't need to know."

"Keags!" Alistair reached over and grabbed his friend's hand and held onto it like a lifeline. "I never had sex with her. Fuck! I should never have gone out with her in the first place."

"Then why did you?"

Alistair took in a shuddering breath and began to spill his guts. "Because I'm a fucking idiot. I listened to Coop and did something that my heart was telling me not to do, but my head was saying Coop was right."

"Right about what?" When Alistair shrugged and didn't answer, Keagan asked again, "Alistair, what was Coop right about?"

Gazing into his friend's eyes Alistair knew it was the time for the truth—all of the truth. “He said now that we were all sharing a house I was crimping your love life. He said that in the two months we've been here you haven't been out on one date.”

“Neither have you,” Keagan interrupted.

“That's what I told him, but he said just because I had a fucked-up relationship and a break-up with Lauren that I have been hanging around with you so much that you stopped going out to stay with me all the time. I thought about what he said, and I realised he was right.” Alistair squeezed Keagan's hand. “Have I really messed up your love life? I haven't seen you hanging out with Matthew lately. Did you ditch him to babysit me through my own life falling apart? Have I really been that selfish?”

“Alistair, I stayed home with you because I wanted to, not because I felt sorry for you. Sure, Lauren wasn't the best relationship for you, but I'm sure someone else will come along that makes you want to start over.” Keagan smiled, but to Alistair it seemed a tad wobbly.

Alistair bit the bullet. “What if I told you I already found someone?”

If at all possible, Keagan seemed to pale further than he already was. “Then I guess I would have to say congratulations and I wish you the best in life. Is it the girl you went out with tonight?”

“Nope. The person I'm thinking about I've known for a very long time.”

“How long?”

The silence between them lasted all of a minute but felt like a lifetime before Alistair finally confessed. “Ever since the day I found some scrawny kid stuck up a tree.”

Worry or something liked it filled Keagan's eyes. “I don't think Mike will be willing to let you have Leah.”

A laugh tumbled out of Alistair. He just couldn't help it. How could Keagan be so blind? “No, dumbarse. I'm not talking about Leah.”

“Then who?” Dawning realisation must have hit Keagan. “You mean me?”

“I've spent all these years trying not to love you... Now I'm just plain tired of the fight. Are you okay with that?”

Chapter Ten

Oh! My! God! What the fuck just happened?

The truth hit Keagan like a sledge hammer. He wasn't sure whether to fist pump the air in happiness or to ask just how much Alistair had had to drink. Here he'd been slowly dying in his own misery at the thought of Alistair out on a date. And now, it seemed... what the hell *did* it seem like?

"What are you saying?" He needed to know.

"I'm saying," Alistair sighed deeply, "that I choose you. I need to know if you choose me too. Do you want me in your life as more than just a friend?"

Keagan didn't think, he just launched himself across the couch and into Alistair's arms. He didn't care that for the last three hours he'd been slowly dying inside. Not when Alistair was here now telling him differently. "Are you sure?"

"There's nothing I've ever been surer about. I've been slapped in the face by the cold, hard truth tonight. When your sister set me up with that woman, I thought I'd be able to get you out of my system. I sat there for three hours listening to all her bullshit and inside I was wishing I was here with you. In my head, I was telling myself if I just made it back to you everything would finally be all right." He chuckled nervously. "When I finally had had enough I walked outside to find Leah and Mike waiting for me. She'd set me up so that I would finally pull my head out of my arse and realise—admit—whatever, exactly where I belonged, and who my heart has always belonged to."

Keagan was giddy. Yep, he definitely felt like a giddy school girl as he rained kisses all over Alistair's face. Things quickly turned heated when Alistair began to return the kisses in full. Somewhere along the way his friend had managed to stand up and take them both to Keagan's bedroom. Keagan hadn't even realised they'd moved until he landed on the bed with Alistair coming down on top of him.

"Are you positive this is what you want?" Keagan managed to get out as Alistair began divesting Keagan of all his clothes. The man had paused, for but a moment, before he started on his own clothes. When they were both naked as the day they were born, Alistair smiled as he once again covered Keagan's body with his own.

The feel of his soon-to-be lover's rock hard cock pressing against his own had Keagan knowing the answer. Alistair didn't reply as he rocked them together at the same time as he devoured Keagan's mouth. Fuck it felt so good. He knew that there was no way Alistair would be ready to let Keagan fuck him through the mattress, but maybe he would be willing to be the fucker instead of the fuckee.

He needed more.

"Need you in me." He managed to get out when they broke for air.

He almost laughed as Alistair scrambled to get the lube and condoms from the bedside table. Even though this was their first time together, Alistair had always known where he'd kept his stash. The bedside table drawer only held lube, condoms, and a small assortment of his personal toys. The way Alistair had stilled let Keagan know he'd just discovered the blue dildo and three purple butt plugs... there should have been four, but at the moment the fourth was being used.

Alistair turned and stared at him, his mouth slowly dropping open as Keagan lifted his legs to his chest and showed where the fourth plug was currently resting. He knew he wouldn't need much preparation, which was a good thing, because by the look on Alistair's face he knew there wasn't going to be enough time to stretch him out. Keagan moaned at the sight of Alistair kneeling on the bed his fully erect and slightly crimson cock standing up to wave hello.

Keagan reached out and lightly squeezed the head and loved the way a full body shiver arced over Alistair. The contact was all it took to get Alistair moving again as he tore open a condom packet and covered his dick. The way he then slathered his cock in lube did wonderful things for Keagan and apparently for Alistair as well. With his free hand, Alistair played with the plug nestled between Keagan's arse cheeks.

"You look so fucking gorgeous all laid out and on display for me. For a long time I've wondered what it would feel like to touch you this way."

"Now you won't have to wonder." Keagan hissed in pleasure as Alistair jiggled the plug. "I need you, please."

A blush flowed over Alistair. "Can I... I mean, is it okay if I..."

"What?" Keagan's skin pulsed in pleasure. Just this small amount of contact was already too much. He wanted Alistair to be buried balls-deep inside of him before he came. "You can do anything."

With a seemingly shy smile Alistair slowly pulled the plug from Keagan's body. The feeling of loss had Keagan talking. "I need."

Alistair nodded before he circled Keagan's hole with his lubed fingers. The sensation had the base of Keagan's spine tingling in want. When Alistair's finger finally breached his body Keagan gave into the desire to move as he planted his feet firmly on the bed and began to impale himself on his lover's finger.

"More... Fuck, just more!"

Again Alistair nodded as he added a second and then a third finger into the mix as he explored Keagan further. The look of concentration on his face was almost Keagan's undoing.

"Alistair! Now! I need you to fuck me now. I need your dick inside me as you slam me through the fucking mattress with each thrust." He wasn't ashamed to demand what he wanted. And right now, tonight, he wanted Alistair in his arse before the guy decided this wasn't what he really wanted.

"Thank you."

Keagan was going to ask why he was saying thank you before they'd actually done anything, but his breath rushed out of him in a great whoosh as Alistair lined up and thrust home in one forceful movement. Keagan reached up, grabbed his lover's biceps, and dug his fingers in. He needed something to ground him to the moment. The passion in Alistair's eyes was too much.

"Please." Keagan shifted slightly beneath his lover and Alistair kissed him deeply. Keagan loved it. He loved the taste he'd only ever imagined before and realised how wrong he'd been. Alistair tasted so much better than anything Keagan had come up with.

There were little sounds coming from Alistair as he started off slowly, and it wasn't long before Keagan was moaning in earnest as Alistair fucked him with all he had. The act itself was rough and a little uncoordinated. Keagan knew with practice they would get better as their bodies became accustomed to one another. Right now this was need with a healthy dose of lust thrown in. They both needed this. First times were normally a tad on the awkward side until a rhythm was established that suited them both.

This, here, was exactly what Keagan had always dreamed of, yet in some ways it was even better because it was actually happening. No more dreaming, this was reality. The sounds of sex filled the room and they were like the finest

music to Keagan's ears. What he truly loved was how Alistair had seemed to have lost the ability to speak. Somewhere between that first cataclysmic thrust and the pounding he was now receiving, Alistair had gone mute. The only thing he seemed capable of producing was a guttural grunt.

The best part of this all was the way his lover's eyes never left his own. With their gazes locked this way, Keagan knew without a doubt his friend knew exactly who he was in bed with. There would be no denying later on that he wasn't a willing partner. The way the man's mouth parted slightly was a fucking turn-on, but what came next was even better.

"Love you," Alistair mouthed seconds before he took Keagan's mouth in a brutal kiss.

Keagan rocked his hips to meet Alistair's every thrust. He keened in pleasure when his lover's lips left his own and found their way to Keagan's throat. Keagan knew Alistair was sucking up a mark. Knew his friend wanted to leave behind some evidence of what was taking place, and as soon as he had the chance Keagan would be doing the same thing. He wanted everyone to know that Alistair Krunkstone was well and truly off the market.

"So close," Alistair mumbled against his ear.

The smell of sex and the sheen of sweat on his lover's skin had Keagan hornier than he'd ever been before. That coupled with the way the man's iron rod of a cock plunged in and out of his body leaving behind trails of fiery heat was enough to have him losing it like a virgin on prom night. He loved this, but more importantly he loved that it was Alistair he was sharing this moment with.

"Fuck me harder. I want to feel you every time I move tomorrow. I want to remember what it was like to have your dick shoved up my arse as you screwed me to completion."

When the hell had he become such a chatty Cathy? He'd never talked dirty like this with any of his past sexual partners. They'd been there to get him off, nothing more, and now he couldn't seem to stop voicing every little thought that ran through his head.

"You turn me on so much. Your arse is so fucking tight wrapped around my dick," Alistair ground out as he upped the pace, doing just what Keagan asked for.

Just when Keagan thought it couldn't get any better, Alistair stopped long enough to shift positions. Keagan ended up with his legs over Alistair's

shoulders as the brutal but fantastic fuck he was receiving started all over again. He concentrated on watching Alistair as he, in turn, seemed to be looking down and watching his cock slamming in and out of Keagan's arse. The new and slightly more erotic position had heat racing all over Keagan's flesh to curl lovingly around his balls.

Reaching down, Keagan wrapped his hand around his own cock and stroked. He couldn't keep up with the pace Alistair had set but it didn't worry him. Keagan knew it was only a matter of time before his orgasm ripped from his body. When Alistair's rhythm faltered just a fraction Keagan knew his lover was close. Just the thought of Alistair coming in his arse had Keagan screaming out to God and whoever else was listening as ropes of cum shot from the slit of his cock and landed on his chest, neck, and face. In all his life Keagan had never remembered coming so hard.

When he thought he could take no more, Alistair shoved his legs down as he dropped back over Keagan. He curled his hands around Keagan's shoulder at the same time Keagan found what little energy he had left to wrap his legs around Alistair's sweaty waist and held on for dear life as he rode out the rest of the pleasure ride.

Even though his balls were empty, they still tried to release some more as Alistair gave one final deep thrust that Keagan would swear to his dying day he felt touching his throat, and screamed Keagan's name. Hearing his name screamed in passion by Alistair had Keagan coming all over again. Heat flowed between them as Alistair's body draped over his own.

Wrapping his arms around Alistair, Keagan held on tight marvelling how the man's heart seemed to be beating in time with his own. A hiss that was a mixture of both pleasure and pain escaped him as Alistair carefully pulled from his body, making sure the condom was still secure. He watched silently as Alistair moved to the side of the bed and cleaned himself up.

This was the one time Keagan was glad that he had the master bedroom because it was the only room in the house that had its own bathroom. He watched as Alistair stood up and walked into the bathroom and returned with a face washer to clean Keagan's body of the cooling cum. Keagan wanted to speak when Alistair once again took his seat on the side of the bed, but words failed him when he realised Alistair's body was shaking. Reaching out he placed the palm of his hand on his friend's back and waited.

"I never knew it could be this good."

Keagan felt relief wash through him like a tidal wave when Alistair turned and smiled at him.

“I know this is probably not the right time to say this, but I don’t know how else to explain.”

“Say it,” Keagan encouraged.

“Promise you won’t get upset.”

Well that didn’t sound good. “I promise.”

Alistair took a deep breath and said, “I once asked Lauren to let me fuck her anally. It took some persuading, but she finally agreed. At the time I thought it was the best thing ever. Taking her from behind like that turned me on more than doing it face to face ever did.”

Okay this was definitely not something he wanted to hear, especially when he still felt the after burn of the hard fuck he’d just received, but he didn’t say anything as Alistair got out whatever it was he needed to say.

“She hated it and would never let me do it again. She told me I was sick and twisted if something like that got me off, but tonight, with you, it just showed me that what I had with her was nothing. Being inside you felt like home.”

With the last part of his statement, Keagan felt his cock starting to wake up and take notice, and so, apparently, had Alistair, as his eyes narrowed in on Keagan’s returning erection. A smile graced his lover’s beautiful mouth as he reached over and ran his thumb over the weeping slit of Keagan’s cock. What shocked him even more was when his new lover leant over and swiped the head with his tongue before sucking as much of Keagan’s length as he could get into his warm mouth.

Keagan gripped the sheets tightly as he was given one of the best—and worst—blow jobs of his life, but right then with Alistair’s lips wrapped around his prick he didn’t care. He moaned—a lot—as he thrust gently into the other man’s mouth. Never before had he wanted the act of intimacy to go on forever, but here with Alistair he never wanted it to end.

What surprised him more was how his cock was willing for round three so soon. Before long, Keagan was pulling Alistair up and demanding he shove his cock back into his arse and make some more memories. He laughed out loud as Alistair immediately suited up and thrust home. When Alistair was balls deep and filling Keagan’s chute, the feeling was so good that Keagan found himself falling just that bit further in love.

“I love you so much,” Keagan whispered.

“I love you too,” Alistair murmured as he began to move.

The last time had all been about sex and fucking. This time was different. This time Keagan knew Alistair was taking the time to make slow passionate love to him. Each small movement sent wave after wave of ecstasy flowing through him. The way Alistair moaned softly and repeatedly against his ear let Keagan know Alistair was feeling the exact same way.

Their bodies already seemed to have mapped each other perfectly. Keagan couldn't help but ghost his hands over his lover's flesh, relishing in the ripples of pleasure he felt beneath his fingertips. The way Alistair arched into his touch was one of the most sensual and erotic things Keagan had ever felt. The soft request for Keagan to wrap his legs tightly around his lover's waist was willingly accepted. He knew tonight was never going to be enough. His body burned with the need for the man above him and for the way he fucked him so religiously, as if Keagan's body was the temple that Alistair so willingly worshiped at. Lust and heat rolled through him as the orgasm he was desperately trying to stave off won the battle for release.

All his life he'd wanted to belong to someone, and now he did.

He wanted more—he wanted forever.

The End

Author Bio

NJ needs to write like she needs to breathe. It's an addiction that she never intends to find a cure for. When you don't find NJ writing about the wonderful men in her stories you find her reading work by others who she greatly admires. NJ lives in the SE of Qld, Australia with her family, who all encourage her writing career, even if she does occasionally call them by her characters' names. NJ thinks that anyone taking the time to read her stuff is totally awesome.

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