

A photograph of a muscular man from the waist down, wearing black briefs and black lace thigh bands. The background is a light blue gradient. The text 'Jessa Ryan' is positioned above the word 'Under', and 'PRETENSES' is in all caps below it.

Jessa Ryan

Under PRETENSES

Table of Contents

Love’s Landscapes.....3

Under Pretenses – Information5

Dedication6

Under Pretenses7

Chapter 18

Chapter 222

Chapter 339

Chapter 4.....49

Chapter 561

Chapter 675

Chapter 798

Author Bio110

Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

UNDER PRETENSES

By Jessa Ryan

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.

All rights reserved worldwide.

This eBook may be distributed freely in its entirety courtesy of the Goodreads M/M Romance Group. This eBook may not be sold, manipulated or reproduced in any format without the express written permission of the author.

Story Title, Copyright © 2014 Author Name

Cover Art by Enny Kraft

This ebook is published by the *M/M Romance Group* and is not directly endorsed by or affiliated with Goodreads Inc.

UNDER PRETENSES

By Jessa Ryan

Photo Description

The picture shows the torso and legs of a scantily clad man. Wearing only white, ruffled-lace undies and pink-striped stockings, his sexy, well-toned chest and stomach are bare and scrumptious. The tiny bows add to the contrast of strength and vulnerability.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My theater class recently watched the movie Stage Beauty, starring Billy Crudup. I've never been so turned on by seeing a man's performance of "feminine" qualities, movements, and mannerisms. Watching that movie, and already being a fan of the very masculine Mr Crudup, left me so painfully turned on—I was the first to get out of the room when the lights came up!

I just hope no one saw me racing out of the room with a hard on—but they probably wouldn't be able to guess why, anyway, right?

Wrong. Today I received a package in the mail with these beauties in it—no note, no idea of who sent them. Didn't let that stop me from putting them on though, and they feel AMAZING. How will I find out who guessed my secret?

Thanks for helping out,

Skookumjam

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, cross-dressing, humorous, secret admirer, underwear fetish

Word Count: 40,843

Dedication

Thank you to Skookumjam for the awesome prompt and picture that gifted me with hot men whispering their deepest desires in my head.

A very huge thank you to my family, who had to put up with my crazy writing for the last six weeks, and still love me.

And to my amazing betas—you guys rock! I'd offer to have children for you, but since my husband has said "No way!" would you settle for chocolate?

UNDER PRETENSES

By Jessa Ryan

Chapter 1

“Okay, get this,” Sam began as he walked out of the bathroom, orange-scented steam billowing out behind him. He was already dressed in a T-shirt and sweats, and was furiously rubbing a towel over his mop of sandy-blond hair. “I had this crazy dream last night, man. I was in Electronics and Instrumentation and Professor Boyle was lecturing, but he was wearing a bright, red clown wig.”

“That’s odd, but not exactly crazy. The guy *is* on the nutty side,” Mark mused from where he sat on his bed, back propped up on pillows against the wall. He discarded the textbook he’d been reading onto the pile to his left, and picked the top one off the pile to his right. It was all of his assigned reading for the new term. None of it was overly exciting, but it had kept him occupied—which was better than bored, or going stir-crazy cooped up in his dorm.

“No, that’s not the crazy part. You see, he started stripping. Right there. I’m not just talking about taking clothes off, I mean wiggling his hips and the whole shebang. And he kept lecturing while he did it, like it was normal. Nobody in class even noticed. Or maybe they just didn’t care.” Sam flopped onto his narrow dorm bed across from Mark’s.

“If Professor ‘Boiling Point’ was doing a striptease for me, I’d sure as hell notice. He may be an arrogant prick, but he’s got a fine body for his age. Was I there?”

“Of course not. You’re not in that class.”

“Yeah, because your dreams are so realistic, of course they would follow curriculum.” Mark kept a straight face and nodded. “The crabbiest professor on campus in a clown wig, and my straight roommate dreaming of men stripping for him are proof of how well your dream world reflects real life.”

“Shut up.” Sam flung his towel at Mark. “Anyway, that’s still not the most bizarre of bizarre. Instead of his usual pale skin, it had this weird texture, and it was dark brown. I could tell it wasn’t really skin. And when he moved, I could see holes—”

“What song was he dancing to?” Mark cut him off.

Sam shot him an odd look. “What does that matter?” But then he hummed, either trying to remember the tune or just because he was thinking. “I don’t know. I can’t remember if there was even music, but he was definitely moving

to a beat. That's not important, though. Stop interrupting." Sam turned onto his side, propped up on an arm, and continued in an excited rush. "When he took his shirt off, I finally saw why his skin looked weird. He was made of brownie! One huge brownie! And every time he took off another piece of clothing, you could smell that fresh-baked chocolaty goodness."

Mark burst out laughing, but Sam kept going, smiling through his explanation.

"Seriously, man. It smelled sooo good. Suddenly I was starving, and I remember thinking that I hadn't eaten in days—and for some reason that made perfect sense in the dream. Then my stomach started growling super loud and people were glaring at me because of the noise. I kept thinking that his arm looked tasty..."

"You are seriously deranged!" Mark announced through his laughter.

Sam's mouth curved up, and he looked pretty pleased with himself. "I know. But I got you to smile, didn't I? First time in days, and it's about damn time."

Mark calmed slightly and brushed his dark hair out of his eyes. "Give me a break, it hasn't been that long. And who could blame me, with Mother Nature going seriously schizophrenic. Snowing one day, raining the next. Weeks of gray skies might not bother you, but I feel like I've been stuck indoors for *months*."

"It's been three days. Besides, you're used to worse than this. Didn't they just get a storm up north with some insane amount of snow?"

"Yep. Three feet." Mark had talked to his mom the night before to make sure everyone was home and safe. Northern Minnesota could be a real bitch if you got caught out in a blizzard like they were having. "You're right, though. The last two years I've loved it here in Iowa because of the earlier springs. Maybe I am going insane, because right now it's bugging the shit out of me that it's only February and it's raining. I almost miss home where winter means bitter cold, and spring doesn't start until a few weeks before summer." Sam raised a brow at that. "Okay, maybe not, but having my winter gear soaked through when it's only a couple degrees above freezing sucks big, hairy monkey balls."

Sam snorted. "Hey, it could be worse. Just think about the three feet of snow that you don't have to shovel. You're better off down here with me. And my awesome, kickass dreams. So what do you think the dream meant?"

"Oh, God. I don't even want to take a guess. You need to find yourself a psychology major for that. Unless... did you eat anything funky right before bed? Like, maybe, I don't know... a pound of beef jerky?"

"It was one piece, dipshit."

Mark was about to remind him of how he'd topped the jerky off with a bag of cheesy popcorn, but was distracted when his phone chimed. He stretched to his desk to grab it, looked at it in confusion for a second, and then opened the email.

"Everything okay?" Sam asked, his smile gone.

"It's from the campus post. Hot damn, I have a box waiting." Mark looked up at Sam, grinned, and punched the air. "Yessss! My mom's package. And here I thought for sure it would be days of agony waiting for my—" Mark made a quick correction when Sam cleared his throat. "—*our* treats." He snapped his fingers. "I've got it! That explains your dream. I told you my mom sent something, so the only thing you could think about was her awesome brownies. Oh, and the professor wearing a wig and stripping were probably what your mind came up with as the most disgusting thing you could think of to distract you. But even that couldn't work, because her brownies are just *that* great."

"Oh-ho! You could be on to something. Maybe you should switch from education to psychology," Sam suggested, but then tilted his head to look down his nose at Mark. "Although, I do take offense that you assume I'd think a man stripping is disgusting. Just because I probably wouldn't pop wood from it, doesn't mean I think it's gross."

Mark was used to that superior, I-know-better-than-you tone from Sam. He reached a foot over to kick him. "Shut up, you idiot. I know." Mark glanced at his phone and checked the view out the window. *No change, still craptastic*. "I wonder what she sent."

"Go find out. You have plenty of time before class."

"It would make more sense to go after class when we meet for lunch. We're still meeting for lunch, right?"

"You bet. But what I meant was, get the hell out of here. A fidgety antsy Mark does not a happy roommate make." Sam sat up and reached to grab his laptop off his desk.

"Gee, thanks. Didn't know I was irritating you." Mark laughed it off, but internally he cringed. He had no idea he was getting that bad.

“Irritating would be too strong a word. But your cabin fever is contagious. It should be better now that J-term is over.”

Mark had to concede that Sam was probably right. Their dorm building had been especially quiet all month with two-thirds of the students gone over the January term. It was an awesome idea he'd never heard of until he'd signed up for classes freshman year. First semester ended at Christmas break, and the second semester didn't start until the first week in February. For the month of January, it was the student's choice whether to stay home, take a class abroad, or a class on campus. Mark spent last January in Germany as a teacher's assistant in an elementary class. This year he'd chosen to stay on campus and take part in the play. He was glad he did, but towards the end of the month, the empty campus had started to wear on him.

January term was nice in a way, having the same schedule every day. And a royal pain in the ass, having the same schedule every frickin' day. But now, it was the first week of the new semester. Mark was looking forward to the variety and anxious to have all his friends around. Unfortunately, he wasn't the only one hunkering down indoors from the weather. Their friend, Carlos, had gotten back last week, and they'd met up here and there, but apparently a month away from his girlfriend was far too long. They hadn't seen or heard from him in days. Not that Mark could blame him.

Students had been arriving back on campus throughout the weekend, and even just hearing all the commotion in the halls had been good. He and Sam had hung out with a few friends from their dorm on Saturday, but listening to stories of studying abroad or vacations in warmer climates hadn't helped Mark's mood. He needed fresh air. He needed the sun.

“Damn. It won't start again,” Sam muttered down at his computer before pinning Mark with a narrowed look. “Go. You're brooding again, I can tell. The walk across campus will do you some good.”

“Fine. Yeah,” Mark said without much enthusiasm and got up to rummage in his closet. He was already in jeans and a T-shirt, so he grabbed his red-and-gray flannel and some warm socks. After he'd donned his boots, coat, and hat, he asked Sam, “Can I borrow your umbrella?”

“Can't. Sorry.” Sam flicked Mark off when he shot a venomous glare at his mean roommate. “I'm not being a dick. I loaned it to Carlos on Friday, and I haven't gotten it back yet.” He must have seen the way Mark looked wistfully at his bed, contemplating crawling back in, because he jumped in with, “Here,

five bucks. After you get whatever your mom sent, go grab a cappuccino at Brew. Talk with people. Have fun.”

Mark cocked his head to the side and considered his roommate. “You’re awfully eager to get rid of me. Do you have a hot date or something?”

“Maybe. Maybe not. Or maybe I want you gone so I can watch porn and jerk off. Either way, go.”

Mark chuckled. “Yeah, good luck with that since your laptop’s history. If you need to use mine again, don’t leave any spunk on it.” Mark grabbed his bag and flung it over a shoulder. “Have fun, you horndog,” he sang out as he closed the door behind him.

Getting spit on by equal measures of rain and snow was definitely not Mark Giorgetti’s idea of a good time. He ducked under a branch, readjusted the bag on his shoulder and pulled his coat collar tighter, grumbling.

Mark hadn’t admitted it to Sam, but the three days of gray, drab, and damp weren’t the only reason he’d been moody. For the first time in his college life he was homesick, and the phone call from his mom last night hadn’t helped. He loved his mom, of course. She was sweet, supportive, and wonderful, and that was part of the problem. She’d spent almost an hour telling him about what all five of his younger siblings were up to. While listening to her ramble about all the little-big things he wasn’t there to see, it hit him square in the chest how much he missed them. Sure, he’d been home over Christmas break, but the eight short days were a blur.

There was a bonus to his mom’s preoccupation with his siblings, though—she hadn’t once asked if he’d had any dates, or why he didn’t have a boyfriend yet. Hopefully, that meant she was finally taking his Junior Year Hiatus from Dating—as he’d dubbed it—seriously. How many times did he have to tell her that he was taking a break by choice and she shouldn’t worry? He had friends, and a full schedule of killer classes, so it wasn’t like he was sitting home pining for some man to come and sweep him off his feet. Hell, when it was time and if he met the right guy, he’d do the sweeping himself.

Mark passed a couple huddled together heading in the other direction, turned the corner to reach the sidewalk that led to the campus center, and ran smack into what felt like a wall. A split-second later he was flat on his back.

“*Oofffuck!*” he yelled as his bag went flying.

"Damn, are you okay?" asked a rough voice.

Mark opened his eyes to see the wall was actually another guy. His first impression was slender and tall, but Mark couldn't even be sure of that with the way the guy was bundled head-to-toe, including a scarf covering everything but his eyes. Nice eyes, though. Bright green.

Mark shook the odd thought away and sat up, assessing the damage. "Um, yeah. I think so." Could his day get any worse? The stranger didn't offer a hand as Mark managed to stand, but he did go and retrieve Mark's bag. "Thanks." As soon as he handed the bag over, he skirted around Mark to walk away. "Hey," Mark called out. "I'm sorry about that, I—"

"No problem." The guy kept walking and didn't look back.

How rude. Mark wasn't even sure why he'd tried to apologize—he was pretty sure it wasn't his fault—but he felt like somebody should have. *Oh well.*

He turned back around to get to the sidewalk and stopped in his tracks. Just his luck. As the rain touched down it was freezing... and turning the sidewalks into mini ice rinks. And since the rest of this flat part of campus was covered in a foot of snow—freeze his ass off or risk falling on it? Again.

Way to look on the bright side there, buddy. No, he thought, the bright side was the reason he was booking it all the way across campus in this bitter minefield, his mom's cryptic teasing that she'd sent him something special. Screw the slush and yuck. Who cared if his balls shriveled into raisins to hide? Oh, man, did he love-love-love his mom's care packages.

This walk was a pain at the best of times. The McAlister building, where he and Sam lived this year, was a long walk from the campus center where the all-important cafeteria was located, along with less important things like their mailboxes and the campus store. They really should have thought of that before requesting the building, but McAlister was the newest and nicest, with larger rooms. And even more important to Mark, it was close to the theatre building where he spent a good chunk of his time.

A group of students were coming out of the campus center when he got there. Two had umbrellas—obviously they were smarter than Mark—and the last one held the door for him. Stomping his feet to get as much water off as possible, and swiping off his wet hat so it wouldn't drip in his eyes, Mark made his way upstairs.

There was barely anyone in the common room as he walked over to the window next to the wall of mailboxes. Anything larger than a letter couldn't fit into their individual boxes, so packages had to be picked up. When the student worker behind the window handed over a medium-sized box, all thoughts of dreary days and homesickness fled. He knew what a box this size meant—goodies.

He dumped his bag on the floor by the closest chair and sat to rip open the package. And, *ooohhh*—the best kind of goodies. *Homemade cookies*. Inside the box was a large plastic bag decorated with white snowflakes and filled to the brim with what looked like chocolate chip and M&M cookies. With a groan of pleasure, Mark bit into one, ate it with glee, and grabbed another.

Oh, man, his mom was the best.

Mark would have happily stayed there and eaten more, but if he wanted to grab a coffee and still have time to catch his professor before other students got to class, he'd have to hurry. Even knowing that the walk would be miserable, and any part of him that was still dry soon wouldn't be, Mark was actually looking forward to his first class, Theatre and Society. The only thing better than starting and ending each week with a class he knew he'd like was that it was taught by Professor Daniel Walker, who also happened to be Mark's boss in the scene shop and a great teacher.

Acting was Mark's first love, and his job building sets had given him a whole new appreciation for the stage. Freshman year he'd entertained the fun idea of switching his major to theatre, but he was nothing if not practical. So, for a career and stability—an education major. And for his passion—a theatre minor. Made perfect sense to him.

The freezing rain was even worse on the walk back, but his mood didn't get any darker. *Must have been the cookies*. He shucked his wet coat and hat the second he entered the building, and was surprised when he got to the classroom to find other people already there. He thought he'd be early enough to catch the professor alone. But Professor Walker, Dan as he preferred the students call him, wasn't even there yet, which was odd. He'd been Mark's boss since freshman year, and they knew each other pretty well by now. One thing Mark always counted on was that Dan was habitually early. Glancing at the clock above the desk, he saw there were only ten minutes before class started, so he decided to settle in and talk to Dan later.

The group of three heads huddled in the corner whispering didn't look inviting. Especially when the squeak of Mark's wet boots caught their attention

and they all looked up. He didn't recognize either of the girls, and the guy he wished he didn't. They'd had classes together over the years, and Taylor was that know-it-all asshole type Mark tried to avoid. And now Mark would have to see him twice a week in class. Wonderful.

There was one other person sitting in the back, but he didn't look any friendlier than the other three. He was wearing a dark knit cap and was bent over a notepad, studiously ignoring everyone's existence. Great. Scanning the room, Mark picked the chair farthest from the others and settled in.

At least he had time to chow down on another cookie or two.

He pulled them out of his bag along with his books for class, and munched while he played a game on his phone. Only a second or two passed before he felt a distinctive prickle on the back of his neck. He looked up and saw the three in the corner staring at him as if he were an offensive bug. What was their problem? He shrugged, and one of the girls rolled her eyes before asking in an overly sugar-toned way, "Would you mind eating a little quieter?" and then went back to their whispering.

Mark didn't give a shit. Obviously the girls were in the same league as the asshole, nitpicking in that snooty way. The dirty looks for making noise reminded him of Sam's dream and Mark laughed to himself. It wasn't until he took another bite that he understood what the girl meant, stupid as it was. The cookie *was* crunchy, and the sound echoed with the odd acoustics of the room. Mark looked over his shoulder to see if he was irritating the student in the back as well, but the guy never looked up.

He was familiar, but, with his head down like that, Mark couldn't place him. A second ticked by and Mark watched, hoping he'd look up, but whatever the guy was writing in his notebook consumed all of his attention. Then Mark saw why he hadn't heard the loud crunching—he was wearing earbuds. Between the knit cap pulled down and the over-large black sweater, they weren't easy to see and from the little Mark could glimpse, he was decent-looking in that I'm-hip-and-brooding kind of way.

Turning back to the class so he wouldn't get caught staring as other students filtered in, he wondered about the guy. It might be a small campus, but that still didn't mean you knew everyone. Was the guy a freshman or a late transfer? He couldn't be involved in the theatre in any way or he'd be more than just familiar to Mark.

Dan rushed in at the last second, pulling his long, gray—and very wet—hair back into a ponytail.

"You don't own an umbrella either, huh, Prof?" Taylor said from the corner.

"Forgot it at home I'm afraid." Dan smiled. He did look a bit like a wet rag, although a friendly one. That was what Mark liked best about him, the constant smile on his expressive face. For a man in his fifties, he had a never-ending flow of energy that Mark envied. But how could the man not be happy when he had, according to him, the best job in the world and a loving partner of twenty-six years? And that partner was, again according to Dan, the reason the sun rose each day. Another thing to envy. "You look like you made it here okay, though."

"Oh, not me. Mark came in drenched to the bone." Taylor smiled at Mark, and it was beyond strange because it actually looked like a real smile. "I was just thinking I should take pity on him and lend him mine."

"Oh, uh—" Mark didn't know what to say to that. Was Taylor really trying to be nice or just be a smartass? "I'm fine. But thanks."

After the last student arrived, Dan started class as usual, with a theatre joke and introductions, reminding everyone to please call him Dan. The first half of class was spent with a getting-to-know-you session that was pretty typical for this small school. They were all supposed to introduce themselves, tell their year, why they were in the class, and a fun factoid about themselves. Mark was so used to it he had his answer down pat, and most of the others did, too.

Mark had almost forgotten about the knit cap guy—he'd stayed so quiet—until it was his turn. His name was Landon Hayes, he was a sophomore and a psychology major. He was taking the class as an elective, and he liked dogs. Even though he didn't offer any more information than what was asked, Mark learned a lot more than that about him. He learned that the guy had a quiet but very masculine and sexy voice, and that he wasn't a natural people-person. Mark could tell by the way he didn't really smile and looked down quickly when he was done talking. It was sort of cute. Or would be, if Mark didn't also get a strong stay-the-hell-away vibe from the guy.

Not looking for a date, Mark reminded himself and tuned in again as Natalie, a friend he'd made through the theatre, took her turn answering.

It wasn't until the end of class, when they were all packing up, that Mark realized that Landon hadn't said a word throughout class other than his introduction time. What was really odd about that was that Dan allowed it. Normally the professors were absolutely determined to promote dialogue in class. Not talking and participating was *not* acceptable.

Mark shouldered his bag and stood by Dan's desk to wait. He couldn't help but look Landon's way again because, well, he was curious. Landon was looking right at him, and all it took was one look at those eyes. Mark finally placed him. It was the same guy he'd run into earlier. Or who had run into him. Either way it amounted to the same thing—Mark in the snow and Landon not bothering to apologize.

Landon turned away without a smile or acknowledgement, but Mark kept looking. Now that he had a full view of Landon, he recalled seeing him around campus before. Wearing the cap inside should have tripped Mark's memory, because every time Mark had seen him he'd been wearing it, or one like it. Even when it was warm. He couldn't even think of what color hair the guy had. And for no reason that made sense to Mark, that was suddenly bugging the shit out of him.

Landon walked by, only a few feet from Mark, and nodded, quick and jerky. Mark smiled and nodded back and even opened his mouth to say something, but Landon just kept going.

"See you Friday, Mr. Hayes," Dan called out, teasing and friendly. Which made Mark wonder even more. If this Landon guy was a jackass, Dan would be polite, sure, but he wouldn't sound like they were friends. Maybe he'd ask.

But then Dan asked if he had the paperwork done for his summer internship, and Mark was reminded of why he needed to talk to Dan in the first place. They went over his options, and Mark was generous enough to share his cookies.

On the way back to his dorm to meet Sam before they headed to the cafeteria, Mark called his mom. The second she answered he professed, "You're the best mom in the world! Thank you, thank you, thank you! Pick a song, any song."

Her laugh was melodic even over the phone. "You got the tickets already? That was fast. I'm so glad you like them, sweetie."

"What tickets? I didn't see anything in the box but the cookies. To be fair, they are the best cookies you've ever made. After one bite, I forgot everything else in the world existed."

"Um, well, that's nice, hon, and it explains why you were going to pay me with a song, but I didn't send you any cookies. Unless you're just now thanking me for the Christmas tree ones I sent you back in December, but I'm pretty sure you sang me a lovely and loud Christmas song as a thank you." He could hear

the smile in her voice at the end, and remembered his over-the-top rendition of “O, Christmas Tree”, but at the moment he was too confused to find humor in that.

“They’re not from you?” Mark looked at his bag, but between holding that and his phone, he didn’t want to pull out the box of cookies in the rain and risk getting his other things wet.

“Well, no. But your auntie might have. She was baking up a storm last week. Or your grandma. We all love the payment we get for sending treats.” She chuckled. “Doesn’t it say who they’re from?”

“I don’t know. I didn’t look, I just assumed they were from you. I’ll look when I get back to my room. What were you saying about tickets?” He stopped under the eaves outside his building to fish out his keys.

“Oh, no, no, no. If you didn’t get my gift yet, I’m not giving any more hints than I have. You’ll just have to wait and see.”

“You are an evil woman, torturing your son like that.”

“Well, that’s a far cry from a moment ago when I was the best mom in the world. I guess I see how I rate compared to cookies, huh? And what was that you said about them being the best I’ve ever made? Is there something wrong with my baking, young man?”

Mark smiled as he let himself into the building and made his way upstairs. “No, ma’am. You know I love everything you make dearly. And Sam told me just this morning that he had a dream featuring your killer brownies.” Mark smiled. He wasn’t about to tell her *how* her brownies featured. “Which reminds me, I gotta go. I’m supposed to meet Sam for lunch and I’m running late.”

After their good-byes, Mark took the stairs two at a time. He left his room door open behind him and pulled out the box of cookies. There was no return address. Just like the two packages he’d gotten in December. Weird.

The first one had been a CD of current country artists singing Christmas songs. The note said, *Hope this helps you get into the Christmas mood, even without a tree and ten feet of snow.* It was exactly the kind of thing his sister, Sara, would send. When he’d called to say thank you, she didn’t know what he was talking about. The postmark was smudged so he couldn’t make it out, but he’d assumed it was from family or a friend back home who just forgot to sign it. That wasn’t the case with the next one. It arrived right before Christmas break and as soon as he opened the sketch—framed and all—of him on stage

from the fall production of *Assassins*, he knew it wasn't from someone back home. It was strange and flattering at the same time. There was a note, unsigned again, written in neat block letters. It simply said, *Merry Christmas*. Even though he didn't know if the two gifts were related, Mark wished he'd kept the note from the CD to compare handwriting.

"There you are," Sam said from behind him, before plopping on his bed. "I'm starving, man. Oh, yessss." Sam's eyes lit up as he reached for the cookies.

"Don't touch those!" Mark snatched the box out of reach, suddenly panicked. He'd already eaten some and—*oh, shit*—so had Dan. Surely if there was anything wrong with them, he'd feel it by now. Apparently, all those years of hearing adults warn about never taking candy from strangers hadn't sunk in.

"What the hell, man? If you don't want to share, fine. Don't need to be an ass."

"It's not that." Mark slumped back on his bed, a bit embarrassed but still worried. "They could be poisoned," he admitted and was fully prepared for the strange look Sam sent his way, so went on to explain about the mysterious gifts.

While he was talking, Sam pulled out the bag of cookies and found a note at the bottom. "*Thought you would enjoy something homemade. I hope you like them,*" Sam read out loud. "Well, it's simple. You have a secret admirer."

Mark grabbed the note, read it, and considered what Sam said. "Don't people who do that usually sign it, 'From your secret admirer,' or write flattering things in the letters? Or poems, or something? This doesn't seem like that at all. This could still be from my aunt, except"—he flipped the note over and back, just to make sure he wasn't missing something—"except this is the same handwriting as the last one. I'm almost positive."

"One easy way to rule out the people from back home. Where were the postmarks from?"

"I don't know about the first one, but the last one was Des Moines. I haven't checked this one yet. I thought it was from my mom so I didn't even look before I ripped it open." Mark turned over the now-empty box. "Shit." He felt Sam hover over him. "It's sent from right in town."

"Well, now at least you know it's from someone around here. Where's the sketch? And why haven't I seen it?"

"I brought it home over Christmas break. My mom saw it and loved it so much she hung it up. I wasn't about to tell her I didn't know where it came from, so I lied and said a friend drew it. I mean, who would do this? It's a bit on the creepy side, right?"

"It's not that weird, man. Actors get fan mail all the time, don't they? So it's probably a fan. Or some guy that thinks you're gorgeous. Oh!" Sam jumped a little, landing closer to the edge of his bed. "I know, I know!"

"What?" Mark was having a really hard time not laughing at Sam's wide-eyed excitement.

"Well, how many gay guys are out on campus? There are probably dozens who are in the closet. Didn't you say that once? So, it's some guy who's in the closet, and that's why he didn't sign his name. Yeah, yeah, it's perfect. This is exactly what a guy would do to get your attention. He gave you music, which is kind of like poetry, yeah? Then he stroked your ego with the sketch, and now he gave you food. Cookies, man. What man doesn't want baked goods?" Sam snatched one of said baked goods before leaning back on his bed, looking pretty damn proud of himself. "*Mmm*, good," he moaned through a mouthful of cookie.

"Yeah, they are. But remember, we don't know where they came from. For all you know, you could be eating lethal poison right now. They could have arsenic or something."

"Or a love potion," Sam said with a wink. "And that's a lot more believable than poison. Who the hell would try to kill you? Honestly. You theatre types..."

Mark didn't smile. At least he tried not to. "Oh, shut up. But you're obviously way off-base on the love potion. I ate a few earlier and I'm still not hot for your bod, so..." Sam threw a cookie at him, and Mark caught it before it fell and took a bite. While he chewed, a thought hit him. "You don't think it could be a girl, do you? 'Cause that would be awkward."

"Absolutely not. You're gay. I mean, not like it's obvious—you know, with your country boy flannels and shit—and yeah, I know it bugged you our freshman year 'cause nobody believed you, but still... you don't hide it." Sam waved a hand. "Nah, everyone who knows you knows you're gay."

"Maybe, but there are thousands of students on campus. Not all of them know me."

“This guy knows you. He knows you like country music. You said the CD was country, right?” Sam asked, and Mark nodded. “And he knows cookies are your kryptonite.”

“Or those are educated guesses,” Mark hedged. “I listen to music when I work out at the gym, and like you said, what man doesn’t want baked goods?”

“Well, it has to be someone that went to the play.”

“Not helpful. There’s no way to narrow this down from that.”

“Not yet. We just have to wait for you to get another gift.” Sam moved to stand. “Now can we please, please, please finally go to lunch? If I don’t get something to eat soon, I’m eating every one of those, poisoned or not, and leaving you with none.”

Chapter 2

Mark took a short break from painting the archway and looked around the scene room to figure out where he'd left his bottled water. There were twelve other students scattered around, all part of the set crew, working on various projects. Mark was content here, at home with the smell of paint, the sounds of people working or talking, interrupted for bursts at a time from the table saw in the back corner. It was colorful, active, and quiet all at the same time, and he loved it.

The rain had stopped and they'd had four wonderful days of sun, but clouds were rolling in and the forecast called for a rainstorm. Mark just hoped it would hold off until he got back to his room.

There hadn't been any more anonymous gifts. He wasn't sure if that was a good thing or not. He appreciated a good mystery the same as anyone else, but the more he thought about it, the more his curiosity killed him. A clue would be nice. Sam still teased that it was a secret admirer who was lusting after Mark's body. Mark wasn't too sure how he felt about that, either. It was weird, but it made him feel good in a strange way. The idea that there was someone out there who thought enough of him to admire him, to take the time to send him something special? He smiled every time he thought of it. He couldn't help it, strangeness be damned.

Even though there hadn't been any more mysterious mail, he did get the tickets from his mom and that gave him a whole new dilemma. They were for a dinner theatre, there were two of them, and they were for Valentine's Day. Not exactly a subtle hint, but he supposed he could forgive her. At first he'd laughed, because if her idea was to force him into a date, that was just ridiculous. He had tons of single friends who would join him just for something to do on Valentine's. But after thinking about who he'd ask, he reconsidered. Sure, Sam was single and his best friend, but he wasn't into theatre. And a dinner theatre? So not Sam's thing. Two of his other good friends, Grady and Carlos, would both really get into it, but Grady had a boyfriend and Carlos a girlfriend, and if they were smart, they already had plans.

He made a mental list of his other friends—his friends from classes, his theatre friends, and the ones who lived in his dorm. He wasn't really all that close to any of them, and about half were in a relationship. With some frustration, he realized his mom might be smarter than he gave her credit for.

"What's with the sour look?" Dan's quiet voice asked from Mark's side, making him jump. He hadn't seen his professor walk up.

"Nothing. Just thinking of my mother's manipulative ways."

"Uh-oh. Is she on your case about something?" Dan asked as he leaned forward, resting his arms against a painting bench.

Mark shook his head but grabbed his paintbrush to start back to work before answering. "No, not really. She's great. It's just that she bought me tickets to see a play on Valentine's, then waited till the last minute to send them to me so I can't even refund them for her if I don't use them. I thought I could ask a friend. You know? Platonic. And if it was any other day, I could. But on Valentine's Day? *Shit*."

"Is there anyone you're interested in? Anyone that you'd consider asking out as more than platonic?"

For some reason, Mark's mind went to the quiet guy in the knit cap, Landon, but he shoved the thought away. "No. And I told you before, I'm not interested in dating right now. I swear, my mom doesn't think anyone can be happy unless they have someone else." *Either that or she's just worried I'm out there hooking up with every gay man within thirty miles*, Mark thought, but didn't really want to admit that to the professor. "But after the previous three failed attempts, the last thing I want is a boyfriend."

"Sometimes, you need to break a few eggs to—"

Mark spun on him. "Don't you dare finish that—" Too late, Mark saw he still had the brush, freshly dipped with paint, in his hand. It hadn't only spun with him, but splattered across Dan's face and chest. Stuck between mortified and amused, he spluttered. "Sh—I'm sorry... I... oh shit." He clamped his mouth shut tight to keep from laughing and set the brush in the tray. "Sorry," he murmured.

But between the utter shock on Dan's face and the dark green paint dripping from his nose—Mark lost it. Damn, but he couldn't help it. Luckily for him, it only took a second for the shock to wear off before Dan cracked and joined him.

"Holy shit, kid. You wield a wild brush." Dan, still laughing, used his now-destroyed shirt to wipe at his face. "Point taken, though. No boyfriends—got it."

"No boyfriends, no blind dates, and no subtle nudges. I'm sick of it."

"I get that, Mark, really I do. Matter of fact, I respect you taking a break. If it's what feels right, then good for you for sticking to your guns. Even if sometimes you seem a little too mature for your own good." Dan paused and looked sincere, but Mark could hear a big "but" coming. "All I was going to say is, don't let a few sour experiences make you miss other opportunities. There's a lot of fun out there to be had. And a break is fine, but if a break means you put blinders on, you might not see Mr. Right when he walks past. That's all. Just don't close yourself off completely."

"I'm not. And I don't have blinders on. I'm just not actively looking. And besides"—he gestured to the room—"I'm busy."

"Really? So is that why you haven't been to a single GSA event this year? From what I remember, you were pretty active the last two years."

"Yeah, well, exes one, two, and three are all active as well, and it makes things a little awkward. Especially after Mitchell started dating Tony and Jeff took over as vice president." Mark was actually happy for Mitchell and Tony—they were well-suited, even if they weren't suited for him—but Jeff was another matter.

The little twit considered himself an activist, but in reality just loved attention. He spent more time whispering about drama than doing anything good. Jeff had actually had the nerve to tell Mark, right to his face, that he was a betrayer of gay men everywhere just because he had straight friends. Like you had to belong to a side or something. And that from the VP of the Gay-Straight Alliance. What a joke. What it really amounted to was Jeff's jealousy over Mark's friendship with Sam. Mark thought it was petty, and during their last argument, he'd been so fed up he'd accused Jeff of being a bigot against straights, which had ended the short relationship rather quickly. Mark felt his gut twisting over his bitter thoughts until Dan's quiet words brought him back.

"Yeah, I can see that. It's too bad though, that you're letting them keep you away. A little fun once in a while wouldn't kill you. And if you had attended any meetings lately, you'd probably have remembered why it's going to be nearly impossible to find someone to go to the theatre with you." Dan gave another one of his teachery pauses, where he thought the student should fill in the blanks. But that's all Mark was coming up with—a blank. His look must have shown that because Dan just sighed. "The Valentine's Day dance. The same one that happens every year, that the GSA hosts, and that almost everyone on campus goes to."

"Oh, damn, I forgot." Mark knocked his forehead against the archway before he thought better. The stickiness was his first clue that he really was an idiot. "Oh shit." He pulled back and rubbed at where he knew green paint would be.

Dan chuckled. "Hey, now we match. Seems only fair."

"Yeah, whatever." Mark was stopped from saying something inappropriate, like *screw you*—no matter how informal a small college was, you showed respect to your profs—by a freshman girl walking up.

"Professor Dan? Can you help me with something?" She was a little on the skittish side, like a lot of the freshman were until they got used to the atmosphere in the Theatre Department.

"Sure, Carrie, what's up?" Dan asked. She explained that she'd been sent for boards for the stairs, and Dan directed her on where to find them.

But then, surprising Mark, she turned to him with a big smile. "I heard about your admirer. I think it's cute. If I hear anything, I'll be sure to let you know."

"Wait, *what?!*" Mark almost shouted. Heads shot up to look at them so he lowered his voice and gritted out through his teeth, "How did you hear about that?"

"Well... um..." She looked away.

Sure, now she'd gone back to skittish. Maybe he couldn't blame her, even with his boy-next-door looks he knew he was intimidating when he was angry, but still, he wanted answers. Sam was the only one who knew, and if he'd told anyone, he was dead meat. But... what if it was the admirer himself? It could be a clue.

When she looked like she'd run away scared, he tried to gentle his voice, despite his pulse pounding in his ears. "That was a secret. Who said I had an admirer?"

"Um, Sam Henry. He's... he's in British Literature with me, and he was talking about it," she answered hesitantly. Mark fumed and she finished in a rush. "Oh, but you shouldn't be mad at him. He was quiet about it, in a way. Actually, um..." Her face twisted, making her look eight instead of the eighteen she probably was. "He didn't say anything to me, I just kinda overheard. He was talking to this other guy, Grady, like they were trying to figure out who it could be or something. I guess I shouldn't have said anything, huh? But really, it's nothing to be embarrassed about. Like I said, I think it's way cute."

"Thanks," Mark bit off and tried to smile. He really did. But right then he wanted to punch his best friend. She left, shooting him a twisted-up smile over her shoulder—half apology, half worried.

"What's this about an admirer? And why are you so pissed about it?"

Mark had forgotten about Dan for a second. Grudgingly, he decided that Dan's opinion on it might not be a horrible thing. After all, his mentor was like a third parent, his boss, and his therapist all rolled into one. "I'm not pissed about that. I wish Sam hadn't said anything, though. God, he's a jackass sometimes." He took a seat on the stool nearby and rubbed at his face. "And it's probably not an admirer. I've just gotten a couple things in the mail that weren't signed and didn't have a return address. It's a little weird, but that's all."

"Like what?"

So he explained about the gifts, and that with how spread out they were, it hadn't even occurred to him it could be an admirer until he got the cookies and told Sam about it last week.

Dan sat there quietly with a thoughtful expression for so long it made Mark nervous. "What? I should be seriously worried, right? I knew it! Damn."

"What?" Dan shook his head and smiled reassuringly. "No. No, I don't think so at all. There's nothing threatening about any of it, right?"

"No."

"Well, then." Dan nodded once, but still looked thoughtful. "And the cookies were the most recent? Are those the same ones you let me eat last week?"

"Yes, but I thought they were from my mom when I gave you some. Sorry about that, I never thought—"

"No, no, that's fine. And the sketch? Did it look like it was actually from the play, or just someone's interpretation from it? Was it a real drawing or a computerized one? Did you take it out of the frame to check for a signature?" Dan's head was tilted, and as he asked about the sketch his words were careful, almost like he was talking about a bomb instead of someone's art.

"Yeesss," Mark answered slowly. "It's real, and, yeah, I checked for a signature but there wasn't one. And I have no idea how to tell if it's an interpretation or not. Why?"

"Oh, no reason, just curious." Dan's extreme pretense of innocence was a bit too much, even if it was short-lived before the neutral expression took over.

"I'm calling bullshit. You know something." Mark pinned the professor with a glare.

"No, of course not. If I knew who it was, I'd tell you. I was only thinking. I'm familiar with a lot of students and some of them, like you, I know pretty well, so I was just running through a list of who has artistic talent and bakes." Dan looked around at the paint. "Well." He clapped his hands together. "I need to go clean up. Len is making pot roast, and our nephew has promised a chocolate dessert."

"Your nephew? You haven't mentioned him in a while. How is the little guy liking his new school?" Mark had never met the kid, but knew he'd lived with Len and Dan over the last year. It seemed like a touchy subject with Dan, so Mark hadn't asked for too many details.

"He loves it. Thanks for asking. I wish he'd make some more friends, though." Dan turned to go, stopped, swiveled all the way back—but then just stood there looking thoughtful.

"What?" Mark asked.

"Oh, nothing. Nothing."

"Dan, what? There's obviously something on your mind."

Dan tilted his head in that way again, so Mark waited. "Do you ever get the feeling there's something you should say, but don't know what that something is?"

"Oh, yeah. I do that literally all the time. Just last night when my dad called, I knew there was something about school that I wanted to tell him, but didn't remember until an hour later."

"Yeah, that's what I meant." Dan seemed to be struggling with it, trying to rack his brain probably, and Mark wanted to help.

"Was it something to do with the play? The set? Maybe about class on Monday?"

"Yeah, that's it. Class Monday." Dan perked up with obvious relief. "I was going to tell you we'll be watching a movie."

"Oh, okay. Sounds fun. Why did you want to tell me about it?"

“Well, no reason, really.” Dan dipped his head down just enough that Mark could barely see the small smile. “But I’m thinking you’ll like the project that goes with it.”

“And why’s that?”

Dan looked back up at him for a long moment before answering, “Well... sometimes students in college think they have things figured out, including themselves. But there are places they forget to look.”

Mark snorted. “Yeah, *suuurrrre*. You go on and keep thinking that. No, wait, you’ll be too busy thinking up cryptic professor-like answers to simple questions. You know. To make sure you sound smart.”

“Oh, to be twenty again and know everything. *Carpe diem*, kid.”

“Shush, or I’ll grab the brown brush and turn you into walking art.” Mark reached for the other paintbrush, joking of course, and Dan backed away, laughing as he walked out of the room.

Mark watched him go for a second, grabbed another drink of his water and went back to work on the archway. He didn’t think too much on Dan’s odd answer. All of the pretend, mysterious hints or quotes he gave on a regular basis were just the professor’s way of thinking he kept students interested in his classes, trying to pique their curiosity or challenge what they thought. Mark was used to it from Dan.

He smiled as he painted, until he remembered what little Ms. Chatty Cathy, or Carrie, or whatever the hell her name was, had said. It was a hard decision, whether he’d have to figure out a way to pay Sam the revenge he so deserved for opening his big mouth, or to just tear Sam a new one.

“Mark?”

“Yep.” He looked over his shoulder at one of the girls from the costume shop.

“I found this outside the door. It has your name on it.” She smiled, and set down a paper bag with the handles tied shut.

“Thanks,” he said as she walked away, but then looked down at the bag. There were no frills, wrapping paper or bows, but he had a sneaking suspicion it was another gift. He didn’t even need to open it to see what was inside.

The handle of an umbrella was sticking out of the top.

When Mark got back to the dorm after his set work—nice and dry, thanks to his new umbrella—it was to find Sam smiling all innocent-like. The feeling of betrayal returned, fast as lightning, and he tore into Sam. He couldn't believe his best friend, the person he trusted most, would blab about him behind his back.

Sam sat quietly while Mark ranted, until he ran out of steam, and plonked down into his desk chair. That's when Sam finally spoke, and using that ever-logical science-brain of his, defused Mark's fury with two simple points.

"I think you're forgetting something here, buddy. When you told me about the anonymous gifts, not once did you say they were supposed to be a secret. Not once," Sam went on, like he was talking to a child or trying to calm a tiger. Which, Mark guessed, wasn't that far off. It was still irritating, though. "And even then, the only person I talked to about it was Grady, one of our best friends and the only other gay man in our group."

"But why even tell him?"

"Because, you doofus, it was the only logical plan. I don't know all the theatre people you see on a daily basis. And not only does Grady know them, he also knows more gay guys on campus than either you or I do. I figured, between me, him, and Carlos, we have everyone you interact with covered."

"Don't *I* know everyone I interact with?"

Sam rolled his eyes. "Obviously, you're too close to it to think logically about clues and watch your back to see who might be watching you. It's like... we're trying to figure out M-Theory, right?"

"That makes no sense at all."

"Sure it does. M-Theory unifies—"

"Oh, shut up." Mark couldn't help but smile. "I don't want to hear how you're going to try to make this relate to string theory."

"Fine. My point is that four minds are better than one, and that way we're much more capable of solving your little mystery."

"I don't think it needs to be solved. It's a waste of brain cells. For all we know, there is no mystery." Mark didn't believe that, of course, but had to try to curb Sam's enthusiasm. He still hadn't told Sam about the umbrella yet, and wasn't sure he wanted to add to his friend's excitement. "And if Grady is the only one you told, how did the chick from your Lit class know all about it?"

Sam's expression changed completely, his nose going all scrunched and his eyes all squinty. Mark almost laughed. "It wasn't my fault that the nosy little freshman overheard. I thought we were alone." Sam seemed to completely forget about Mark's anger and their conversation, and went on to huff about how the chatty freshman, Carrie, had been trying to get Sam's attention for over a month. He wasn't interested, but was running out of ideas on how to shake her without being mean. Especially now that they had a class together. He described her like a squid, clinging, which made Mark smile. Apparently, it was beyond his capabilities to stay mad at Sam for long. By the time they were ready to meet Grady and Carlos to go to the on-campus Open Mic Night, Mark had forgotten all about it until they walked outside.

"Hey, where'd you get the umbrella? It's big enough for two—make room for me under there." Sam nudged in close to get out of the downpour.

"Oh, um, well..." Mark sighed. "It was another gift. I got it today. It wasn't sent this time, though. It was left at the theatre building for me."

"You ass. Why didn't you tell me earlier? And how do you know it's from the same guy?"

"There was a note. It just said, *Here's to keeping you dry*. And it was the same handwriting as before."

"This is weird. An umbrella isn't romantic."

"No, but it's useful." Mark bumped his shoulder against Sam's and laughed, and then quickly changed the topic while they walked. He didn't want to share his theories or tell Sam how just that week Taylor had said he noticed Mark didn't have an umbrella. There was no way it could be Taylor. Unless he was sending the gifts as some mean joke. They could barely stand each other. Of course, there *had* been that smile.

An hour later, they all sat at a table along with Grady's boyfriend, Jason, Carlos's girlfriend, Elizabeth, and two of her friends, Kenzie and Rachel. Rachel was next to Sam and kept doing that hair flip thing some girls did and batting her eyes at him. Sam was either clueless or not interested. It was rather entertaining to watch.

Open Mic Night was always fun, and Mark usually got up to sing at some point. But he just wasn't feeling it that night. He hadn't planned a song like he usually would have and tried to use that as an excuse, but the girls were egging him on and Carlos wasn't helping.

“What, are you nervous?” Carlos teased. “Is it stage fright?”

“Don’t be ridiculous, I don’t get nervous. And the day I get stage fright, you all have permission to smack me over the head to knock some sense into me. I’m just not in the mood for it.”

“Oh, wow. Never thought I’d hear that one. Mark Giorgetti isn’t going to do everything he can to try and be the center of attention?” They all turned at the snooty, familiar voice.

“Jeff.” Mark nodded at his ex-boyfriend before turning back around, but that was the only acknowledgment he’d give. Ignoring Jeff was always best.

“I’m serious. The attention whore that you are, I’m surprised you’re not dancing on tables. What’s really hilarious, though, is that you think you’re some big man on campus. But the only time that’s true is in that tiny little theatre group. No one else on campus even knows who you are.”

“Jeff, just go away,” Grady growled. All the guys looked like they were gnashing their teeth and the girls had varying expressions of confusion.

“Oh, don’t be like that, Grady. I’m not saying anything we don’t all—”

“He said to go away. And I’m adding that you should shut the hell up.” That voice was familiar too, but it was the last one he’d expect to defend him. Mark turned to find Taylor there, standing not too close but kind of looming over Jeff.

Jeff’s eyes were big, but he wasn’t backing down. “I never—”

“What you’ve never done is learn how to be a decent human being. Mark didn’t do anything to deserve the way you harass him and talk shit. And you’re the one with the big-man complex that’s only in his head. So go find some friends—or at least people that can actually stand you—and leave the rest of us alone.”

Mark watched as Jeff stomped away. He couldn’t believe it. He couldn’t fuckin’ *believe* it. “I... um...” Taylor was shaking his head and smiling, like he’d found humor in the confrontation. Maybe he had. “Um, Taylor? Why’d you do that?”

“That guy’s an ass. He goes around like that all the time, and it pisses me off.”

“But why would you defend *me*? I thought you didn’t like me.”

Taylor cocked his head to the side. "I never said that. Back when you were dating that weasel, I didn't really like you. But you can't blame me for that. If you picked a guy like him for a boyfriend, you had to have been either just like him or a really stupid judge of character."

"Gee, thanks," Mark muttered. Sam snickered beside him, and even Grady looked like he was trying not to laugh.

"Naw, I mean that's what I thought then. You seem like you're okay." Taylor winked at Mark. "Have a nice night, all."

Mark swiveled back to the table. "What the hell just happened?"

Grady finally let a little laugh go, more of a snort, and the rest of the table followed. Laughter, it seemed, was the theme for the night, and time flew. Mark was heading for a last trip to the bathroom before leaving when he tripped and fell into someone.

"*Ugh*, damn. Sorr—" He looked up into warm green eyes. Landon's eyes. "Sorry."

The corners of Landon's mouth curved into an almost smile. "Yeah. Hi."

They stood like that, looking at each other and not moving. The standoff was broken when Landon fidgeted and looked down. Mark did too, and saw he still had his hands on Landon's chest, where they'd landed when he tried to catch himself. Damn, that felt nice.

"Sorry." Mark dropped his arms to his sides and stepped back. "We really should stop meeting like this."

The little bit of a smile that was there disappeared. "I suppose." Mark could barely hear him over the noise of chatter and music. Landon looked down again and to the side, and Mark worried he'd said something wrong.

"I didn't mean it like that. I mean, we could still meet, just not by physically running into each other, you know?" Landon looked up, their eyes met, and Mark smiled. "I mean, much more of this and I'm going to get the reputation of a klutz."

That curve was back for a second before Landon bit the bottom corner of his lip, like he was trying to stop the inevitable smile from coming out. "Much more of this and people will think you're literally falling for me."

Hot damn. Landon was adorable when he flirted. Mark's smile grew but Landon's didn't. His mouth dropped and even though the lighting wasn't good, Mark could see a blush bloom fast.

“Did I really just say that? I didn’t... I mean... that wasn’t a come-on. I was just kidding.”

“Oh.” *Damn, he’s straight.* That explained why he looked on the extreme side of uncomfortable. “Well, no worries then, because it didn’t sound like a come-on. But it *was* funny.”

“Good. Um, I should...” Landon gestured towards the front exit and Mark remembered he’d been on his way to the bathroom.

“Yeah. Me too.” He started to go but stopped. “Hey, I’m Mark by the way.” He held out a hand.

Landon squinted at him. “I know. We’re in class together.”

“Obviously. But we’ve never officially met, so...”

That cute lip-bite was back. “Landon Hayes. Nice to *officially* meet you.” Landon took his hand to shake and Mark didn’t let his mind go to places it shouldn’t, like how nice Landon’s hand felt, warm and firm. But then Landon’s hand lingered before he pulled away slowly, which really confused Mark. *Is he or isn’t he?*

Mark almost did something really dumb, like blurt out his question, but was saved when Landon walked away. “See ya,” Mark called after him. *Wow, either any bit of gaydar I have is really screwy or that boy gives off strange vibes.* He thought about the other vibes he’d gotten from Landon, and admitted there was a good chance he was simply shitty at reading people.

He watched Landon walk away and took note of the burnt-red knit cap he was wearing. Then his eyes slid lower, and lower. It was impossible not to stare at the very fine ass in those jeans. Now that was a view Mark could get used to. *Nice.*

Down boy. On hiatus. Quit looking, because you’re on hiatus. And he’s probably straight. And he’s a little odd and maybe rude. And you need to quit staring because you really have to pee.

Mark laughed at his own thoughts as he finally made his way back to the bathroom.

Mark expected Sam to hound him about the anonymous gifts, but the topic wasn’t brought up at all for the rest of the weekend. He should have known the reprieve was too good to be true.

Monday arrived the way each one did, first with Sam's snoring—which Mark had gotten used to last year and barely noticed anymore—and then with breakfast at the cafeteria with Sam, Grady, and Carlos. Everything was normal until Sam ambushed him about the whole secret admirer thing right in front of Grady and Carlos while they were eating. Yes, Sam had already mentioned he thought it was necessary for their *investigation* to let Carlos in on it, and Mark had to admit, once Grady knew, it would be pretty shitty to leave Carlos out, but did Sam really have to bring it up right there? In the cafeteria, where anyone could hear?

So they'd sat around, discussing Mark's incoming mail like it was the only fascinating thing that had happened all year. It seemed to Mark that his three friends found an awful lot to conjecture about considering they had almost nothing to go on.

"Why an umbrella?" Carlos asked.

"It was raining." Grady's guess was obvious and came with a shrug.

"Yes, but for all the mystery man knew, Mark could have already had an umbrella. And wouldn't he need to buy it ahead of time? We don't carry nice big ones like that at the campus store. I'm pretty sure none of the little shops in town would have them either—not this time of year," Sam offered, like he was some expert on umbrellas.

"Well, actually—" Mark hesitated. "When it was raining earlier in the week, someone in one of my classes mentioned I looked drenched to the bone and offered to lend me his umbrella."

Sam smacked him on the shoulder. "What the fuck, Mark? Why didn't you bring this up before? It's gotta be him."

"No. It can't be." Although, Mark's previous argument against it being Taylor didn't hold as much weight now that he knew Taylor didn't hate him. "At least, I really don't think so. For one, I don't think he has any artistic ability, and whoever drew that sketch does."

"He could have asked a friend to do it. Aren't you going to tell us who it is?" Grady leaned in close.

"Oh, hell no. I don't trust you monkeys with that kind of information. You'd try to be all sneaky, asking him questions for your *investigation*, and somehow or another I'd wind up looking like an ass."

"Hey, excuse me? We would *not* do that!" Sam protested.

Mark raised his hands in surrender. "Okay, fine. But it doesn't matter. That guy mentioned it, but everyone in the class heard, and that doesn't mean anything. I spent three days last week complaining about the cold rain, and I'm sure dozens of others saw me running around getting wet."

Sam huffed and they went on, almost like Mark wasn't part of the conversation or his opinion didn't matter. Not that he gave them much of one. By the end of breakfast, he couldn't wait to get out of there, and wasn't all that surprised to see he barely had enough time to grab his bag from his room before heading to class.

He got there with a few minutes to spare and sat in the same seat he'd taken last week. He saw Dan at his desk, looking absorbed as he searched for something in a desk drawer. Natalie walked in, came immediately over to Mark, and settled beside him. He filled her in on the set progress and she caught him up on the drama currently brewing in the theatre department. There was always drama in the theatre department, and he'd heard part of it already this weekend, but he enjoyed listening to the way she told the stories, so rushed and animated.

Still, she couldn't hold all of his attention because his eyes kept flicking to the back of the room. Landon was in the last row, one seat over from last week, with his nose buried in a book. His clothes were dark again, all earth tones, and his cap was dark green and pulled low. The earbuds completed the antisocial look. Mark wondered briefly what kind of music the guy was listening to. He didn't look like someone who would like country or pop music. Would it be rock? Grunge? Rap? But then Mark snorted, because the obvious answer was that no matter what genre of music it was, it was probably all indie bands. That would suit Landon.

Natalie cleared her throat and narrowed her eyes, and Mark realized he hadn't heard a word she'd said. He started to apologize, but Dan walked to the front of the class to get their attention.

When everyone quieted immediately, Dan smiled and began. "We've all heard people say that life mimics art, or that art mimics life. And it *is* both. Artists, whether painters, musicians or playwrights, take their inspiration from life. Yes, even sci-fi. But what does art do to society? What does it tell us about what roles are and aren't acceptable to take? And I'm not talking about which acting roles you should go for." Dan paused, probably expecting a chuckle, but there was silence. "But in life. In the past, what part has it taken in the role a

woman takes, versus the role she feels she *should* take? You can't tell me there was a mother alive who watched *Leave it to Beaver* in the fifties, and no matter how good of a mom she was, didn't feel like a failure in comparison. And what has it told children, who watch and learn what they should or shouldn't be because of a movie they saw or their favorite television show?"

A girl, Masa, cut in, "But that's TV, not theatre."

"Well, we have to consider theatre in all its forms. The stage, the cinema, or television. Because it's all art." Dan went on. "And since the invention of television, it has even more impact. What impact do you think it's had on each generation over sexuality? Or on gender in general? All of these are the reasons for the movie today, *Stage Beauty*, and your first project of the class, which I'll assign later." Before anyone could ask about that, he walked to the back of the room and picked up the remote. "Mark, would you mind getting the lights?"

Mark got up and turned off the overhead lighting as the screen began to glow. There was just enough light to see his way back to his chair. The movie was already cued past the beginning credits, and Mark shifted to get comfortable.

The first glimpse of costumes tipped Mark off that it was a historical period piece, and he was a little disappointed. Even though he enjoyed some plays set in earlier eras, any movie set before the 1930s wasn't on his favorites list. But then he recognized Billy Crudup. Damn, that man was hot in his younger years. The first time Mark had noticed the actor was in *Inventing the Abbotts*. Mark had been only fifteen when he saw it, and was instantly attracted to that dark hair and tight body. Since then, he'd watched other movies the actor had parts in, and although Mark greatly admired his acting skills, had never felt that same attraction.

In this one Billy Crudup was a stage actor, like Mark, but unlike Mark, in the movie Billy Crudup exclusively played a woman's role. Or, more accurately, the role of a man pretending to be a woman. The first glimpse Mark had of him in a dress—ruffles, over-the-top makeup and all—Mark didn't recognize him.

But as the movie went on, Mark was enthralled. Spellbound by the way he moved, the way he spoke. At no time did Mark forget that it was a man, a man Mark usually viewed as the epitome of masculinity, because with each feminine gesture the contrast only heightened Mark's awareness. He liked it. A lot.

A few times he squirmed in his seat, and Natalie nudged him. "Stay awake," she whispered, so off base it was laughable. He wasn't about to correct her.

As confusing as his reaction to the delectable actor in a corset was, he didn't want to think about it now. If anything, he didn't want to risk missing a scene with Billy in it. It wasn't until the second time Natalie nudged him that he noticed how heavy his breathing had gotten and how unbelievably turned on he was. *Oh God*. He peeked around at the others, panicked someone would notice, but the room was dark and everyone else was watching the movie. Nobody paid him any attention except for Natalie, and that was only because she thought his heavy breathing was snoring.

He adjusted in his seat as discreetly as possible. *Damn, damn, damn*. He was completely hard and his skin felt hot. *This doesn't make sense*. He'd never been attracted to women, so he knew that wasn't it. And he'd seen guys in drag before and that hadn't done anything for him. What was different about this? And why today, in front of an entire class?

The movie was close to wrapping up and panic fueled him. The best course of action in situations like this—like when he had to share the shower room with Tim Derringer after gym class in high school—was to think of something else. Anything else. He ignored the screen and focused on the poster by the door he could somewhat see in the dim light.

Think about sports.

Think about the paper due in Educational Technology later today.

Or, better yet, think about Mom. No man could think about his mother and still be turned on.

Before much could help him or he even had a chance to focus, the lights came up and Dan walked to the front of the class. *Oh, no. No, no, no*. Mark sank lower in his seat. He knew he was going to be stuck there, squirming and embarrassed, while Dan brought up whatever point he wanted them to learn from the movie. And then the class would be expected to discuss it for another twenty minutes. What was Mark going to say? What would his enlightened contribution be? That apparently he got wood from seventeenth-century corsets? Or maybe something along the lines of how Billy Crudup's skirt was so nice and hooped in that one scene, that all Mark could think about was how perfectly someone could fit under it without anyone knowing, and imagining what was underneath.

Mark fidgeted, and his pulse pounded. He felt exposed. Raw. But instead of being put on the spot, Mark was surprised by Dan's announcement that his torture wouldn't be prolonged any further.

“We’ll have a discussion on the movie when we get together on Friday and go over the project then, but something’s come up so we’ll be wrapping up early today.”

That was it. Dan moved towards his desk and other students starting packing their things. Mark grabbed his bag and bolted for the door.

“Mark, wait up.” Natalie called.

“Later. I gotta go.” He didn’t even turn around, just kept his bag in front of him, hoping nobody noticed his bulge, and headed outside without bothering with his coat. For once, the cold air was beyond welcome relief. The only comfort he had was that even if someone did notice, it wasn’t like they would know why he was in this state. Hell, *he* didn’t understand why.

Chapter 3

"I'll just say, watching something that intimate in a room full of strangers gives you a weird feeling, you know?"

Mark's head snapped up. "Huh?" His mind had been drifting, like it had been on and off for days, but Ron's words sounded too much like his own thoughts.

Across the cafeteria table, Ron's nose crinkled. "What? Don't tell me you'd be one of the guys telling everyone to keep the porn on?"

"Porn? No." Mark shook his head. "I wasn't listening. What are you guys talking about?"

Carlos piped in. "He was at a party last weekend, and as a prank, someone put porn on the flat screen. It took, like, twenty minutes for people to notice. Then when they did, whoever put the DVD in had taped the player shut."

"Yeah, like some idiot. I mean, all you guys had to do was turn the screen off," Sam pointed out.

"Maybe, except people were drinking and didn't think of that right away," Ron admitted and snickered. "Then, like I said, there were a bunch of guys yelling that they should just leave it on. You should have seen the looks some of the girls were giving them. I'm sorry, I like sex as much as the next guy, but having porn playing in the background when..."

Mark tuned out again. Porn. Yeah, that was close to how the movie during class on Monday felt, but not quite. Intimate, though, yeah that word fit a little too well. He still couldn't put his finger on why. But did the why really matter?

He already knew he'd thought Billy Crudup was hot, so that part of the equation was easy. The muscular type usually caught his eye. Not bulky, but toned and sleek. But who's to say his tastes couldn't change or expand? He'd thought about it and decided he would be okay with that. He'd always believed in "to each their own" and all that.

So, over the last two days he'd looked at attractive guys on campus and pictured each of them in women's clothes. Corsets, miniskirts, you name it. The only thing it did for him was give him a few chuckles. Especially when he imagined Tommy Johnson, the lineman on their football team who probably weighed in around three-fifty, and was a total asshole, in a pink halter top and short shorts.

“Earth to Mark.”

“What?” He turned to Sam who had knit brows and worried eyes. “Sorry. Zoning again.”

“Yeah, you’ve been doing that a lot, buddy.” Sam looked around and lowered his voice so the other guys at the table wouldn’t hear. “Everything okay? You’re not still pissed at me for telling the guys about your admirer, are you?”

“No, I wasn’t even thinking about that.”

“Well.” Sam tilted his head towards the exit doors. “Is one of those guys the reason for your distraction?”

Before Mark could ask the obvious question, Ron interrupted. “Well, I’ll catch you guys later.” He stood and grabbed his tray.

“Yeah, I’m meeting Elizabeth to study,” Carlos added and followed Ron out.

Sam gave them a little salute as a good-bye and turned to Mark. “Well?”

“I have no idea who you’re talking about,” Mark admitted.

“Isaac and his friend. You were staring at their table.”

Mark looked straight forward and saw Landon sitting next to a short blond kid who was talking animatedly about something, waving his arms and laughing. Landon sat and ate, not saying anything but smiling at his friend. Seeing Landon smile like that, Mark had to admit he was more than just a little good-looking. Matter of fact, he looked downright gorgeous today. There wasn’t anything special, except... *Oh, wow*. Landon wasn’t wearing a hat. And Mark finally had one little mystery solved. Reddish-brown hair was cut short and spiked up in the front. *Cute*.

“You’re staring again. And grinning. Something you want to tell me?”

“Oh, um, no. And I wasn’t staring the first time. Or at least I wasn’t meaning to. They just happened to be in my line of vision. What did you say that guy’s name is?”

“You mean Isaac? The one who talks a mile a minute?”

Mark laughed. “Yeah, it does look like he does that. How do you know him?”

“He’s Tina’s brother, so I met him a couple times when she and I dated last year. He’s cool and all, but a bit on the derpy side. And he seriously never shuts up. I think it turns a lot of people off, so I’m glad to see he’s found a friend who will put up with him. So, who’s the other guy and how do you know him? And don’t lie to me—meaning to stare or not, the way you were looking at him it’s obvious you know him. Or just really, *really* want to.” Sam did that ridiculous eyebrow wiggle that never looked right on him.

“Christ, Sam, you should really never do that. Ever. Especially, if you ever want a date. And it’s not like that. He’s in a class with me, that’s all. And we’ve run into each other a few times.” Mark couldn’t help but smile at that. “I don’t really know him other than his name is Landon and he’s quiet.” Looking at him now though, Mark had to, once again, seriously readjust his first impressions. The antisocial vibe was nowhere to be seen, and instead of brooding, he looked borderline adorable.

“Whatever you say, man. Keep drooling while you’re at it. Just a heads-up though. I have no idea about this Landon guy, but I know that Isaac’s straight, so don’t go getting any hopes up until you find out which way Landon swings.”

“I’m not getting hopes. I’m on hiatus. Besides, you’re straight and I’m not. Sexuality doesn’t always work like gravitational pull.” He smiled, proud of himself for that one.

Sam cocked his head, mouthing, *Gravitational pull*. “Oh, I get it. So humor. Much funny... Wow.”

Mark picked up a fry covered in ketchup, threatening to throw it. “Shut it, Mr. Sarcasm.”

“Well, seriously. You’re such a dork. Just be careful.”

“I will,” Mark sighed. “Besides, you’re probably right. He didn’t seem to mind me touching him at all, but...” He purposely trailed off and waited for Sam’s reaction.

“Touching? Whoa, wait up here. Touching? That doesn’t sound like hiatus territory.”

Perfect. Mark laughed. “Not fun touching. Although... I did get to feel up a mighty fine chest. When I said we’ve ran into each other, I meant literally. I fell and he caught me, that’s all. I got mixed signals, but it doesn’t matter.”

A *ding* sounded and Sam grabbed for his phone. “Nope, not mine. Must be yours.”

Mark reached into his jacket to get his phone and swiped the screen. There was a new email from the school post office. He wasn't expecting anything, so that meant...

"What is it?" Sam asked.

"Oh, nothing. Just a text from my mom saying 'hi'. You know how she is with all the cutesy messages." The lie was out of Mark's mouth before he knew he was going to say it, and he had no clue why. Maybe he was more irritated with Sam for telling than he'd realized.

"Yeah. She's sweet. Wish my mom had that typical mom thing. Instead, I get a postcard from wherever the hell she's traveling, and stress every time a couple months passes with no word." Sam frowned as he picked up his tray and stood.

"Hey, she's an international photojournalist. It's her job."

"You don't have to tell me, I'm the one that had to live with her. Anyway, I gotta run. I've got class in twenty."

As soon as Sam was gone, Mark opened his email. Sure enough, there was a package waiting to be picked up.

Hmmm. Am I excited about this, or scared as hell? The pulse-pounding, butterflies-doing-the-cha-cha-in-his-stomach feeling wasn't clear enough to tell.

Seeing as the post office was right upstairs, he couldn't think of any excuse to put it off. Other than going over to say "hi" to Landon, just so he could say they'd talked at least once where Mark hadn't fallen like an idiot. But what would he say? The only topic that came to mind was the movie they'd watched, and Mark would rather fall on his head than discuss that. So, he cleared his table and took a left outside the cafeteria to go upstairs.

There was someone different at the window this time, a sophomore guy that Mark sort of knew. Hoping his cheeks weren't turning red, he showed his student ID and was handed a box. There was no return address on it, just like the others, and it was a local postmark again. It was wider and longer than the package of cookies, but much flatter. It weighed almost nothing, which for some odd reason made him more nervous.

What could it be?

Mark didn't want to open it there but it didn't fit in his bag, so he zipped it up inside his jacket before heading outside. The whole way to the dorm, his

mind raced with possibilities. The other gifts were sent spread out over a month, but this was the third gift in a matter of days. Didn't they say that stalkers became more and more obsessed as time went on? Like a serial killer starting with one kill a year, then once a month, until they're on a rampage.

Oh God. I really am a drama queen if I'm jumping from cookies and umbrellas to serial killers.

Walking through the common room, he said hi to a few people he knew, but used studying as an excuse to get away quickly. Once inside his room, he made sure the door locked behind him and placed the package—carefully, because you never knew what could be inside—on his bed. He took off his jacket and shoes, and even took the time to empty his bag before sitting on Sam's bed to stare at the box.

"Okay, man, you can do this. It's not going to blow up, and nothing's going to jump out at you," he muttered to himself.

Mark took the edge of his scissors to the tape and lifted the lid. There was a lot of tissue paper and a bit of material showing. With two fingers he lifted up the material and...

"What the *hell!*" He let go and white lace panties fell to the floor. "Oh shit! I was right. I was *right* and Sam can go screw himself." Mark dropped onto his bed and flopped back. "Oh, for fuck's sake. There's some psycho chick out there sending me her underwear. This is seriously disturbing."

After he'd finished his mini freak-out, he sat back up. He needed to see what the note said and if it gave him any clues. But pulling back the tissue paper, he didn't find any note. What he found was a pair of pink stockings still in the packaging. "Seriously?" He picked them up, his eyes growing wider as he took in the hot pink pinstripes and frilly little bow. "And what the hell am I supposed to do with these? Save them for her for when she decides I'm hers for the keeping? *That's* not going to happen."

But then he read the words at the top of the package. And then read it again. Yes, he wasn't mistaken; it very clearly stated that they were stockings made for *men*. Mark picked up the underwear, still gingerly but slightly less disturbed, and looked them over. They may have not been in packaging, but the tag was still on, and it read men's size medium. "Holy shit!" he whispered fiercely.

He felt the lace ruffles, running the back of his fingers over the softness before he caught himself and dropped them back on the bed. Who would send

him lace underwear? Hell, what kind of a freak sent underwear to anyone? His heart rate slowed down as he thought about it. So far, the gifts hadn't been sexual. But these were. Or intimate, at the least. And the others had all been personal—the music, the sketch and the cookies really were all personalized, even if he'd protested when Sam suggested it. So how was women's underwear—no, men's that looked like women's, he corrected himself—personal to him?

Then he remembered. The movie... his reaction... getting more turned on than he'd ever been without a naked man in the room. And all because he saw a sexy muscular man dressed in women's clothes.

Oh, no. No one had seen him. No one could know. Could they? Fuck. Someone had to have noticed. It was the only thing that made sense.

If that was the case, at least that narrowed down the possibilities for his secret admirer. Between this and the umbrella, it had to be someone from his Theatre and Society class, right? But who? There were eighteen students in the class, many of them he knew from other theatre classes or working in the theatre. There were only five or six who weren't in the normal theatre group. That didn't mean anything, though.

Thinking back, he remembered that Clara had been upset last year when she'd found out he was gay because she'd had a crush on him. But would a girl really send him men's underwear that was made to look feminine? It made more sense for them to come from a guy. And a gay guy at that—obviously. He thought of Max trying to flirt—trying and failing because that was back when Mark was with Jeff—but while Max was a theatre major, he wasn't in the class.

They felt so nice. Looking down, he saw that while he'd been thinking he'd picked the underwear back up, softly touching the white lace. Holding them in both hands now, he ran his thumb over the texture and wondered. What would they feel like on? He held them up and cocked his head, scrutinizing them. They looked like they'd fit.

Crazy or not, he thought, *Screw it.* He double-checked that his door was locked and got undressed. By the time he was pulling down his boxer briefs, his hands were trembling. He couldn't believe he was doing this, but...

Well, why wouldn't he? It wasn't like wearing lace was the wildest thing he'd ever done. Besides, all they were was underwear made out of a different material than what he was used to. He kept telling himself that until he saw the

lace slide up his legs. Then he slowed down for no reason he knew of. Once they were all the way on, he held his breath and turned towards the full-length mirror hanging on the wall by the door.

“Oh,” he whispered and ran his palm over his hip. “Oh, myyyy.”

A low, quiet, stuttered laugh filled the room. Perhaps it was a little on the hysterical side, but nonetheless filled with excitement. They were snug, like they were made for him, and soft. Mark turned to get a view of the back. *They looked fucking amazing.*

And if the underwear felt that great, what about the tights? Or stockings? Or whatever the hell you were supposed to call them. He glanced at the bed and the package, then back at the mirror. Then back at the package. Grabbing the scissors again, he cut along the top of the plastic, careful not to ruin the contents. He pulled them out, unfolded them from around some weird cardboard holder, and ran one through his fist. They were very silky and made a nice little *whoosh* sound.

Mark sat on the edge of the bed and brought a leg up, held the top of one stocking and stopped. He couldn't just shove a foot in. They were like silk and delicate. *Damn, how do you even put them on?* This was probably one of those things his mom taught his sisters how to do, but he laughed imagining his mom having the same talk with him. *Okay, so think.*

There was an image from somewhere in his early memories of seeing his mom do this, and he thought he remembered her putting a hand in first. So, he slid his hand in all the way down to the end, feeling the elastic pull against his fingers, but realized quickly that he had no clue why his mom did that. How would that possibly help at all? Was he really going to have to resort to looking it up online? Hell, no.

Logically, slow was the way to go. And that's how he managed it from there, but the damn things kept snagging on his skin. Even though there was still a long bit of material hanging off his foot, he was proud that he'd gotten it, inch by slow inch, up to his calf. He reached to start on that extra bit, slid off the edge of the bed and landed on his ass.

Dammit.

This was stupid. He was being outsmarted by a simple sock. That's when the solution came to him. It was so easy that he questioned if he was wasting his parents' hard-earned money on college if he was so dense that he hadn't

thought of it right off the bat. It was like dress socks, only longer—just roll them up.

Deciding it was safer to stay on the floor, he took the half-on stocking off and rolled the edges. He started at the toe and worked ever so slowly up. They still snagged on his skin, but nothing ripped, so the first stocking was a win. After that, the second was a breeze.

Mark stood and looked at his reflection. They were a little naughty, a little fun and silly, but he thought they were also a whole hell of a lot sexy. He smiled when he saw only one bow and turned to find the other one was on the side. The top was loose enough to adjust a little, but he couldn't get the bow all the way to the front. Oh well, lesson learned for next time—don't twist the stockings.

The panties were just see-through enough that he noticed a dark pink line running down the front that didn't seem to fit. He dug under the leg opening and found a strap. It didn't take a rocket scientist to figure out what they were for, and he hooked them to the top of the stockings.

"Oh, fuck, yes," he whispered as he admired the effect. He liked those. He liked them a lot.

Mark was getting hard as he watched himself, his hands roaming slowly over the fabric and his skin. Jutting his right hip forward just a little made the light catch in a perfect way so he could see through the almost sheer material. His thick cock gave a shadow and sent a new thrill through him. He was reaching to adjust himself and, yes, play a little, when he heard a noise by his door.

There was the sound of keys, a scraping, and a click. "*Shit.*" Mark dove for his bed and under his covers. He managed to get the blanket barely over himself, bounced off the bed and rolled onto the floor. "Owww. Fuck, ow, ow, ow."

"What? Um... Mark?" Sam was laughing at him. "What are you doing?"

Mark turned his head and glared. "What the hell, Sam, you know our rules. Knock!"

"I'm sorry. I thought you were working." Sam looked him over and grinned. "And you didn't answer me."

Mark's heart was still racing and didn't show any signs of slowing. He looked himself over too, just to make sure nothing was showing that shouldn't

be, and pulled the blanket tighter around his waist. "What does it look like? I'm adding to my collection of bruises by falling on the floor for the second time in ten minutes." *And the fourth time this week*, he added in his head. *God, this was becoming a problem.*

"Twice, huh? In *ten minutes*? Wow, you've got some stamina." Sam's little knowing smirk made it more than obvious what he thought Mark was doing. Not that he was far off.

"Oh, shut the hell up and get out. Aren't you supposed to be in class?"

"I was. It's done. But no worries. I'm meeting up with my lab partner—just came by for a book." Sam grabbed a textbook off the top of his desk, took another quick look at Mark and headed for the door. "The room is all yours to fall on the floor as often as you want."

"Smartass."

"Yeah, that's why you love me." He opened the door and Mark was just about to sigh with relief when Sam stopped and turned around. "Um, by the way, those would look a lot better if you shaved your legs."

"Huh? How did you...?" Mark sputtered, his mind racing and his skin burning with embarrassment.

Sam nodded to Mark's leg. "Your knee is sticking out. Of course, I also got an eyeful as you were rolling off the bed. I've gotta say, they look mighty nice on you." Sam smiled and left without giving Mark a chance to reply. Or maybe he'd given Mark plenty of time and Mark was too shocked to do anything but a guppy impression.

"Did that really just happen?" *Yes. Yes, it did. Oh, holy shit.*

Mark untangled from the blanket and stood, a little shaky but the panic was fading fast. Sam's smile at the end helped. It wasn't teasing or cruel, because that just wasn't Sam. He took another look in the mirror and burst out laughing.

He hadn't noticed it before, probably because he hadn't looked for it, but his dark leg hair stood out like a sore thumb under the sheer material, and in some places it even poked through the fabric. Sam was right, if he wanted to pull these off he'd need to shave. But did he want to pull them off? He'd only been trying them on for kicks, right?

It was something he'd have to think about, but he wasn't planning on any drastic measures yet. He fingered one of the ruffles and really looked at

himself. Mark imagined wearing this under his jeans while walking around campus and his pulse jumped. He might not know what that meant, but he was okay with not having it all figured out that very second.

One thing this did mean was that whoever was sending these things to Mark had to be paying closer attention than he'd realized.

Chapter 4

“For other projects I’ll let you pick a partner, but since some of you don’t know each other and, quite frankly, I’m always interested to see the results when I pick at random, I’m going to assign partners.”

Everyone was quiet, but Mark saw heads swiveling to nod at each other as Dan picked names off a list. It wasn’t a big class, and as the list got close to the end, Mark hadn’t heard his name yet and he was pretty sure the only one left was...

“Mr. Hayes,” Dan finished Mark’s thought while he ran a finger down the page. Mark didn’t know why he was bothering to search. He had to know Mark was the only one left, didn’t he? “You’re with... Mark Giorgetti.”

There was something about how casual Dan sounded that made Mark positive the professor’s choices were anything but. He didn’t even know what the project was yet, and was already dreading it.

“So, what’s the project?” Natalie asked before Mark had the chance.

“It’s an easy one, Nat. I want you and your partner to pick either a play to experience—by viewing it or reading it—or a movie. Make up a list of questions to ask the person about the story and what impact it may or may not have on people as a society. I want you to brainstorm with each other, be creative, because some messages may be harder to find than others. I once had a student who picked the cartoon *Toy Story*, and he came up with more insight than another student who had gone to see *Hair*. So be creative and have fun with it. After you’re finished discussing, write a summary of what you’ve found. Bare minimum is five hundred words, but other than that, it’s up to you.”

“So I can pick—” Taylor started.

“No porn.” Dan interrupted, glaring and smiling at Taylor at the same time. “It has to be something a general audience would see.”

“I wasn’t going to say that.” Taylor’s smirk said otherwise. “I was going to ask if I can go see, like, *Anchorman 2* or something like that.”

“Yeah, that will be fine. As long as you collaborate with your partner. Why don’t you all find seats together and I’ll give you fifteen minutes to discuss and make plans before I force you to listen to me lecture for the next thirty minutes.”

Mark turned in his seat to better see Landon where he was sitting, yet again, in the very back. The guy didn't look like he was going to move or even acknowledge Mark, hunched down in his seat the way he was, but then he shot a quick glance Mark's way and started to pick up his stuff. He didn't look like a happy camper. Was he disappointed to be stuck with Mark, or did he begrudge having to move?

Mark hated sitting in back, but there was something in that uncomfortable glance that made him snatch his bag and go up the few wide steps before Landon could finish standing.

"Hey," Mark said, and was relieved when Landon looked surprised but pleased to see Mark standing next to him in the back. It was a full smile this time and, *oh holy hell*, what that smile did to Mark now that he was up close. Mark decided right then and there that if something as simple as moving to the back got him a sweet smile like that, he would do just about anything to keep them coming. But for now, he figured he should probably just sit down instead of standing there like an idiot. "See, I made it all the way up the stairs and I didn't fall even once. Aren't you proud of me?" he asked as he moved the seat next to Landon so it was angled to face him.

"Um, yeah." Landon put his bag back down and took out a notebook and pencil. "Most people learn to walk at one, but twenty is good too. Very proud." His tone was dry, and his eyes showed mischief.

Mark chuckled. "Ha ha, funny guy. I'll have you know I was a very accomplished walker until the day I met you. Then one look at you and there I was, tripping all over myself." *Uh-oh. No flirting with the maybe-straight boy. You remember what happened the last time and—*Yep, there it was. Landon broke eye contact, opened a notebook and fiddled with his pencil while Mark tried to figure out how to apologize without sticking his foot in his mouth. *Dammit.* "I, um..."

"So," Landon interrupted. "Have any idea on what we should see? Or would you prefer to read a play?" Landon asked and glanced up briefly through his lashes. Mark's pulse skittered while something in his chest yanked, quick and sharp and warm. Not only did Landon not look upset, but that sweet smile was amplified. The way Landon was trying to hide it was the most adorable—and at the same time *sexy*—thing Mark had ever seen.

In his mind, he did a little happy dance as he answered. "No, going to see one sounds better to me. I have to do so much reading for my other classes right now that my eyes are killing me. What about you? Movie or play?"

"I like both." Landon looked down at his notebook to doodle while he spoke. "Being a theatre person, I'm guessing you'd prefer a play, but I don't know if there are many plays running right now to choose from. At least not ones close by. I guess we could go online and check."

As lost in Landon's voice as he was—was there a hint of someplace southern in it? Mark was a sucker for a southern accent—it took Mark a second to make the connection. "You know I'm a theatre person?" he asked.

"Yeah, most of the people in this class are. It's required for a theatre major, right?"

"Oh. Yep. But I'm in the education program. Theatre minor." Mark replied, distracted by the way Landon's fingers moved as he scribbled out little cartoons along the edge of his paper. "You draw?"

"A little. Not much." Landon's gaze flickered up to Mark. "Why?"

"Oh, no reason." Then the other shoe fell into place and Mark looked over his shoulder at Dan. Did he do this on purpose? Dan knew Mark had tickets and no one to go with him, but... No, Dan knew better. He wouldn't set Mark up like that. "I know of a play, but," he stopped and considered the intelligence of what he was about to suggest. "I, um..." Why was he nervous?

Landon looked up again, right into Mark's eyes this time, and stayed there. "Yes?"

The intensity of that bright green had Mark swallowing before he answered. "I already have tickets, but I'm not sure you'll want to go. You see, they're for tomorrow night. You know, Valentine's. And you, um, probably have a date. Or plans."

"No date. Why do you have tickets? Who were you going to take?" Landon winced at the end, and then rushed on. "None of my business. Sorry. I don't really care, you know, just wanted to make sure I wasn't stealing your boyfriend's ticket or something. Don't need some guy pissed at me for going out with you on a romantic night." He sucked in a hiss of a breath, winced, and kept babbling. "I didn't mean *going out with you*, going out with you. Just that we'd both be there. Not that it would be romantic. I mean, because it's Valentine's. Valentine's is supposed to be romantic. But this would just be—" Landon clamped his mouth and eyes shut and buried his face in his hands. "This is why I should never, ever, talk." The words were muttered, but Mark understood them just fine.

And he was having a hell of a time not laughing at the absolute cuteness that was Landon Hayes. "Oh, quite the contrary. I think it's why you should talk more." Yeah, laughing wouldn't be good. He highly doubted Landon would appreciate that right now, especially since he could see red creeping onto the strip of skin visible around Landon's hands.

"So I can sound like a babbling buffoon? No thanks."

"No, because at first I thought you were a snob or a jackass, and you have no idea how relieved I am to be wrong."

Landon's hands dropped. "You think I'm a..." He sat back in his seat, hurt flashing across his face before he hid it and that vibe, the one Mark really didn't like, floated off Landon like steam. "Oh."

"No!" Mark hadn't meant to say that so loud. The room went silent and he guessed he'd caught everyone's attention, but he didn't really care. "Landon, I was kidding. I swear. Do you always take everything so literally?" Landon squirmed and looked away but didn't answer, so Mark rushed on. "Either way is fine by me. Just the first of many interesting personality traits I get to learn about you. That, and I'm sure it will help greatly in our friendship."

"Friendship, huh?" The indifferent vibe went down a notch, but Mark hadn't been gifted with the smile yet.

Mark feigned surprise. "Of course. It's obvious, isn't it? The way we keep bumping into each other, and now getting assigned as partners. It's fate," he announced, as if Landon really should know better.

There was a ghost of a smile as Landon picked his pencil back up. "And how is me being literal to the point of awkward going to *help* in our friendship?"

"First off, that's not awkward. You want to see awkward, I'll introduce you to my friend Ron. That man blurts out the most ridiculous things at the worst times. But we still love him. And I like it when people talk a lot. So, you see, it's going to help because now I'll know to never tell you to 'shut up'. Because you might do it, and that would be *tragic*."

Landon laughed and a thrill shot through Mark, like an electric zing. It was close to the one he felt when he got a standing ovation, only this was so much better because he knew, right there that very minute, he'd accomplished something great. And it was him, not some character that had done it.

"If you like people who talk a lot, you should meet my roommate, Isaac."

"He's the blond you were sitting with the other day at lunch, right?" Mark registered Landon's surprise before he'd even realized what he'd said, or what he'd given away. "My roommate, Sam, pointed him out. He used to date Isaac's sister and said that Isaac has a motor mouth, but that he's a really nice guy."

"Yeah, he is." Landon tilted his head to the side, and Mark would swear there was something he wanted to say, but wasn't letting himself. Mark waited, but Landon only shook his head and got them back on topic. "So, what's the play?"

"It's a dinner theatre, actually, and they're doing *A Servant of Two Masters*. I've heard it's cool."

"Me too. I—"

"Hey, Mark." Mark turned to see Taylor walking towards them. He stopped one row down and leaned against the back of a chair. So strange. Almost no interaction with the guy for the two years he'd known him, and suddenly he was everywhere, approaching Mark left and right with smiles. "Nat and I were wondering if you'd want to go see *Breakfast at Tiffany's* with us. It's showing tomorrow at the Cineplex for their Classics Saturday matinee." He acknowledged Landon with a nod. "You too, of course."

"What happened to *Anchorman 2*?"

"Aah." Taylor put on a poor excuse for a pout. "She said she'd rather watch porn than that. I told her that could be arranged and she smacked me."

Mark laughed, but when he looked over, hoping to see Landon's smile, Landon was ignoring them, drawing on his paper. "Well, thanks for the invite, but we already have plans."

"Alrighty, then. Have fun, guys." Taylor winked at Mark and walked away. Mark was confused, and Landon didn't look thrilled.

Landon stopped drawing and was giving him that wary look again. This time Mark didn't want to let it pass. He raised his eyebrows and was about to tell Landon to spit it out when Landon finally asked, "Why didn't you say yes?"

Mark leaned closer. "Because we're going to see something else. The matinee is earlier in the day, so I guess we could have made both if you'd wanted to, but you weren't exactly showing excitement for the idea." From this

angle he could see the little cartoon characters better and chuckled. "I like this one best." He tapped his finger over one that was obviously supposed to be Dan. It was cute and funny.

"Yes, well." Landon didn't say any more, but he smiled, and that's all Mark really wanted.

It did funny things to his insides—a skittering around his stomach, a warm tingle that started in his chest and spread to his skin, and, yeah, his cock was taking notice too. *Stop staring and drooling, you idiot.* "So, yeah, um. The dinner starts at seven, and I can drive us there if you're okay with that." Mark hoped his voice didn't sound as shaky to Landon as it did to his own ears. Landon was quiet for a minute but it was a different kind of silence than before. His green eyes sparkled, his smile held a hint of mischief and confidence, and the combination, for some reason, made Mark's heart race. "What?" *Oh, God!* Did his voice just crack? *Really?*

"You didn't answer before, and I've decided that it is my business if I'm going to risk life and limb just for a class project." Even if Landon's voice was casual, Mark sensed the answer was important.

Mark had to think back. "Oh! You mean where I got the tickets? My mom sent them to me."

Landon rolled his eyes, and the exasperation was clear. "No, you dork. Do you have a boyfriend or not? Last I heard you were single, but things change. And, I mean, I always see you with that guy, Sam. And you look pretty cozy. But Taylor's been making eyes at you for weeks, so I thought maybe there was something there, and..." The words were rushed with frustration until the end when Landon trailed off, looked embarrassed for all of a second and then smiled. "I did it again."

"Yes, you did." And Mark loved it. "Did you really just call me a *dork*?" He tilted his head to the side and grinned. "'Cause, you know, thanks. I've been homesick, and right then you sounded just like my baby brother."

Landon snorted. "Glad I could help."

Their eyes met and held and neither spoke a word. Mark thought he could gladly stay that way for the rest of class until he realized Landon was waiting for him to answer. "No boyfriend. I've been single for over a year."

Landon did that quick jerky nod thing. "Good to know. I mean, just so I won't have to worry about getting mauled or anything."

“Oh, I see what kind of man you think I am. I’ll have you know, I don’t make a habit of mauling on a first project assignment. You have to make it to the second assignment for that kind of fun.” Mark purposefully misunderstood and enjoyed the shock, sputtered snort, and blush he got for it.

Landon mumbled something that sounded dangerously close to, “I wish.” Or maybe that was Mark’s wishful thinking. He didn’t get to find out because Dan interrupted.

“Okay, people. Time for me to teach, and for you to pretend to listen.”

This is not a date. This is not a date.

Mark adjusted his tie—again—and smoothed it over the blue dress shirt he’d pulled from the back of his closet. Even though it was clean, he’d rewashed it. He didn’t want to smell like dust, after all. And so what if he’d borrowed an iron to get the creases out of his black dress pants? And used the iron on the shirt, and the tie, just to make sure.

He took a final look in the mirror and groaned. Mark hadn’t seen himself this clean and pressed to perfection since he was ten and his mom was still in charge of what he wore.

This is not a date. This is not a date.

“Hey, man.” Sam strolled in, did a double-take and whistled. “Holy shit. Have a job interview I don’t know about?”

“You know damn well where I’m going. Don’t be a jackass.”

“Yeah, but still. *Damn*. I know impressions are important and all on a first date, but I’ve never seen you quite this, um... prim.” The last word was said with a laugh barely in check.

“It’s *not* a date.” Mark’s voice was petulant, even to his own ears. “I... it’s... Oh, fuck-a-duck. The tie’s too much, right?”

“Just maybe.” Sam settled himself on his bed and rested against the wall as Mark pulled off the tie. “There you go. And open the top two buttons—that’ll help.”

“I just wanted to look presentable because it’s a nice dinner theatre. It’s not like running to grab pizza or a dark theater with sticky floors.”

"If you say so," Sam sang out and when Mark glared at him, laughed. "Oh, come on. You can't think I'd believe for a second this doesn't have anything to do with Landon. You haven't shut up about tonight for two days, and you asked me at least six times what I thought you should wear."

"Two—not six." Mark didn't try to deny more because he wasn't about to lie. Not to Sam when Sam could see through him so clearly. "Fine, it's not a date... technically. But I wish it was. Happy?"

"Ecstatic. And the hiatus?"

"Screw the hiatus." Mark turned his desk chair around to straddle it and rest his arms across the back. "There's something about Landon that's..." Mark shrugged. "I'm not stubborn enough to ignore that. He's just so—"

"Yeah, yeah, I've heard. Adorable. Sweet and shy. And if I hear one more time about the way he bites his lip or blushes, I swear to God I'm going to dye your hair purple in your sleep. Or shave off your eyebrows."

Mark snickered. Sam's *I'm serious* face was just too funny. "I said that once, you idiot. Stop exaggerating. And you'd never do either of those things. You love me too much."

"Yeah, well." Sam narrowed his eyes and scrunched his nose. "I don't love you that much. So, do you think Landon's your secret admirer? You said he had some mad drawing skills, so that could make sense."

"No. Absolutely not. To tell you the truth, I'm almost one hundred percent positive I know who it is."

"Who?" Sam perked up.

"Now, this is just between us. I mean it, Sam. No sharing with Grady or Carlos." Sam nodded, crossed his heart and locked his mouth for good measure. "Taylor Whitcomb."

"No shit? Seriously?" Sam didn't look convinced in the least. "Mark, other than him being decent the other night, that doesn't fit. I can't see him sitting long enough to sketch, and Taylor baking? No way in hell."

"Yeah, that's what I thought at first. But he could have gotten someone else to do the sketch or bought the cookies. Or maybe he has hidden talents. Who knows? It's not like we really know him. What I do know is that he's been overly friendly to me for weeks, and he even asked me to go to a movie. Do you remember when I said someone brought up that I didn't have an umbrella?"

Well, that was him. And the next day I got an umbrella. Plus someone mentioned that he's been leering at me a lot lately."

"I still think Landon is a better bet. Taylor's more the type to come right out and tell you what he wants. If he was going to send anything, it would be sex toys, not Christmas music or umbrellas."

Mark rested his chin on his forearms and stayed quiet.

"What?" Sam asked. "I know that look. There's something you're not telling me."

"The other day," Mark started. "You know, when you came back to the room and I'd fallen off the bed?"

"Yessss?" Sam waited patiently, and Mark had to give him credit. There wasn't a snicker or smirk or the slightest hint of censure, even though Sam had to know exactly what Mark was referring to.

"The stuff I was wearing? That was another gift. That's why I think it's Taylor."

Sam stayed quiet for a couple seconds. "That makes so much more sense now."

"See? That's exactly something Taylor would do."

"No, that's not what I'm talking about." Sam waved a dismissive hand. "I mean about you being embarrassed by it. I have to admit—" Sam stopped and must have noticed how Mark had stiffened. "No, moron. Geez, you know me better than that. But that's exactly what I'm trying to say. You never said anything before. I thought I'd done a good job of showing you I was cool with it, but you acted all uncomfortable, which you seriously shouldn't have been. And even though I already saw you, and you know I saw you, you haven't brought it up since. Like it didn't happen or it was nothing. So, I had to wonder how long you'd had this little secret, 'cause it didn't feel like something that should be a nothing."

"Sam, what in the hell are you talking about?"

"You. You hiding shit from me. I know that just 'cause we're best friends doesn't mean we have to talk about everything. Like sexual details that will gross the other out and crap like that. Even though I do remember a long, detailed conversation about why we don't like boxers that included ball support and butt sweat. Of course, that was at three in the morning during finals week,

but still. Do you have any idea how many times I bit my tongue this week, trying to be a good friend and have patience in case you weren't ready to talk yet?" Sam put a foot up on his bed to wrap an arm around his knee. Mark was still trying to figure out what to say when Sam got a strange look and continued, "You do know that, right? That if you wanted to wear girl's clothes, or to wear makeup and grow your hair long, or hell, if you decided you wanted a sex change, that I'm here for you. Bros, yeah? I mean, I'm not saying that's the case here, but if it's what made you happy, I'd stick right by you, and if anyone gave you shit, I'd be the first in line to knock 'em out."

Mark's smile stretched, and his eyes burned a little. Damn, he was a lucky son of a bitch. "Yeah, Sam, I get that."

"Okay, then. Just making sure. But knowing the embarrassment thing was all because you thought... I mean, the whole secret admirer thing—that makes it a little better. You were the same way about the sketch and stuff, so I think I can forgive you about not talking about the lacy things."

"Gee, Sam, thanks for the forgiveness." Mark shook his head. "And just to clear everything up, I like my man bits where they are, I'm not into makeup—I don't think—and my jeans and flannels are comfortable. And that was the first time I'd ever tried on 'lacy things'. But, also for the record, I um..." He took a big breath. "I liked 'em."

"Ah, yeah. I already figured that one out." Sam looked way too proud of himself. What did he know that Mark didn't?

"How?"

"All the leg hair clogging the drain in the shower today. Way to commit, man."

"Oh, God," Mark groaned. "See, you have no reason to worry about me hiding things. You always have a way of knowing everything, don't you?"

"Pretty much." Sam eyed him up and down. "Speaking of... you're wearing them now, aren't you? For your date."

"It's not a—"

"Yeah, yeah, whatever. You're hot for him. Trust me, by the end of the night, Landon's gonna be grabbing a hand full of lace." Sam leered with a smirk.

"Ugh. He's not going to be grabbing anything, because it's not a date. Not yet, anyway." Mark squirmed in his chair—God, why did Sam have to put that

image in his head? “Besides, even if it was a date, Landon’s not like that. He’s way too shy.”

“Oh, that’s right, I forgot to tell you.” Sam sat up. “Okay, now don’t get pissed until I explain.”

“Saaammm, what did you do?” Mark whined.

“Nothing. That’s my point. You can’t get pissed. Just listen. I ran into Isaac at lunch and—”

“Oh, shit.”

“Listen. I didn’t say anything. I asked how’s he’s been—you know, since I haven’t seen him in a while—and he went on for at least a half hour. He’s the one that brought up his oh-so-awesome roommate and went on and on about him. I didn’t have to say jack-shit. Oh, did you know Landon’s from Tennessee?”

“Ha. I knew I was right about his accent. He has the sexiest, deep voice—”

“Whatever.” Sam was quick to interrupt with both hands up. “I don’t need details on how he gets your motor purring. My point is, the only thing I did say was that Landon looked like the quiet and shy type. Since you’d said that, it was the only thing I really knew about the guy and I was kinda trying to get Isaac to stop talking. But you know what he did?”

“I’m not sure I want to know anything, but go ahead.”

“He laughed his ass off. Isaac said that Landon wasn’t a talker like Isaac was, but he’s not all that quiet either. I should warn you, Isaac did say he’s a bit of a grumpy pants. His words—not mine. He also said that he’d never met anyone as confident, or less shy, than Landon. Doesn’t that seem a little odd?”

“Not at all. I’m different around you than I am with other people.”

“Maybe. But it also means you shouldn’t exclude him from the list of possible secret admirers.”

Mark sighed. “Fine. But it’s not him.”

“Then why are you wearing the underwear for him?”

“They’re not for him. They’re for me. I like them. They—” Mark stood up and just stopped himself from running his hands through hair he’d spent way too much time trying to get to look messy in a good way. “Grrr. Fine. They make me feel good and tonight I wanted to feel... *you know*. Happy now?”

“Ecstatic. And I suppose it’s almost time for you to go so Landon can make you feel extra good.”

Mark looked at the clock. “Shit.” He grabbed his keys off the dresser and put his wallet in his back pocket before heading to the door.

“Aren’t you forgetting something?” Sam questioned.

“If you want a kiss good-bye, I think you’re forgetting that you’re not my mother.”

“No, dumbass. Your shoes.”

“My shoes?” Mark looked down. “My dress shoes. Shit,” he whispered. He couldn’t believe he’d forgotten all about digging them out. He looked around his room in a panic and started towards his closet.

“I think they’re still in that box under your bed. And you probably need to clean them up a bit, since the last time you wore them was when it was snowing. From what I remember, you put them away covered in salt residue.”

“Shit. Shitshitshitshit.” Mark dove to the floor to scramble under his bed. Hearing Sam’s rolling laughter behind him, he’d never wanted to hit his roommate so badly. Couldn’t he have reminded Mark of the shoes earlier?

Chapter 5

Mark forgot all about his nerves, or the fact he was five minutes late, the second he saw Landon waiting for him in the common room. He looked amazing. The knit cap was gone, the dark green shirt made Landon's eyes practically glow, and the small happy smile made Mark's heart stutter.

"Hey. Sorry I'm running late."

"No problem. The drive shouldn't take long. We have plenty of time."

"Yeah." Mark just stood there, unsure what to say. A student on the other side of the common room laughed, and that finally restarted Mark's brain. "Ready to go?"

Landon nodded and turned. Mark reached out a hand towards Landon's back and dropped it. *Not a date.* When they got to the door, they reached for it at the same time, and their hands collided. Mark quickly pulled away. "Ah. Sorry. Go ahead."

The walk to the car was pure torture. Neither of them spoke and Mark could feel the tension inside him building. He wanted to reach out and touch Landon, to tell him how gorgeous he looked, but he wasn't sure if he should. This wasn't a date. He was so off his game he felt like an idiot.

Once they were in the car it was a little easier, if only because Mark's hands were busy driving so the insane urge to touch Landon couldn't be indulged even if he wanted to. "So, you're from Tennessee, right?"

Landon looked at him in surprise. "Um, yeah. And you?"

"Minnesota."

"Oh," Landon replied.

And the silence reigned once again. *Think, Mark, think.* But the only thing he could think of was the temperature difference between Tennessee and Minnesota. And what kind of a boring nitwit started off a night talking about the weather? Especially when he really, really, *really* wanted to impress Landon? *Come on, Mark, you can be entertaining when you want. Even witty at times.* Then the phone call with his mom popped into his head—his sister's first date and all the laughs they'd had about it. So he went with that.

He kept telling stories about his big, insane Italian family for the entire drive to the theater. Landon didn't say much, but he laughed a lot, and overall

Mark thought they'd gotten over their awkwardness. Until they reached the lobby.

Landon had finally been talking, just idle chit-chat about what he'd heard about the play as they'd taken off their coats to hand to an attendant by the coat room, and Mark went and had to open his big mouth. But could anyone really blame him? With the coat on, Mark hadn't gotten the full effect, but with it gone he took in how formfitting Landon's shirt was, how it showed off wide shoulders and veed down to a narrow waist. And the rest of him? The slim cut to Landon's slacks fit him like a glove and the view Mark got as Landon turned to hand over his coat was nothing short of artwork.

The second Landon looked at him, he blurted out, "Fuck, you're gorgeous."

Landon's eyes went wide, and he darted a look at the people around them before dropping his eyes to the floor.

"Sorry. S'pose I shouldn't have said that so loud, huh?" Mark whispered. "Or maybe shouldn't have said it at all."

"No. Um, that's okay," Landon whispered back. Mark wanted to kick himself when Landon didn't say anything else and still wouldn't look at him.

Man, I'm such a fucking idiot. When would he learn? He gestured with his left hand, about to put his right on Landon's lower back to guide him, and dropped it fast before Landon noticed. "How about we go over here?"

They moved out of the way of the crowd and people-watched for a while before Mark worked up the courage to look at Landon. What he saw wasn't what he was expecting. Landon was looking right at him, not people-watching, and he had a very satisfied smile on his face.

"You look gorgeous, too," Landon said in an intimate, hushed tone.

"I'm sorry I embarrassed you."

Landon shook his head. "You didn't. I just wasn't expecting it. But I liked hearing it."

The twisting in Mark's gut stopped, and he smiled. "Good."

"To tell you the truth, I wanted to say that to you back at school. How nice you look all dressed up, I mean. But I wasn't sure how you'd take it."

"I'd take it as a compliment. And coming from you, a high one."

Landon did that bite thing again, but it was starting to irritate Mark as much as intrigue him. On one hand, he wanted oh so badly to lean in, suck that bottom lip into his own mouth and save it from the abuse Landon was giving it. And on the other hand, he knew the lip-bite was to prevent a smile and he wanted the smile. Desperately.

He turned so his shoulder was against the wall and leaned in to Landon. "Why do you do that?"

"Do what?"

"Bite your lip like that. Like you're trying to stop yourself from smiling."

"Well, that's probably because I don't want to smile." Landon's manner was flippant, but Mark just tilted his head and raised his eyebrows, waiting. "I had braces when I was younger. I always had a dorky smile and it became habit."

"Oh, but the braces explain why you have such a perfect smile now." Landon rolled his eyes at that. "You do," Mark insisted. "If it weren't for the—" Mark was stopped from embarrassing himself—what with how he was about to wax poetic about Landon's smile—by a theater worker opening the doors next to them, almost hitting Mark in the back. "I guess we should find our table."

Landon nodded and smiled at him with no lip-biting getting in the way. *Screw it.* As they turned to walk inside, Mark stepped closer and placed his hand on Landon's lower back. Landon jolted, looked at Mark out of the corner of his eye, and settled in against his side. *See, sometimes a risk pays off.*

Dinner was fabulous, and the play was one of the best Mark had ever seen, but the company was better than both. To be fair, Mark hadn't caught all of the play. He was fascinated listening to Landon laugh, or simply watching Landon's profile, how he reacted to a scene or a particular line. During the intermission, he watched as Landon talked with the other people seated at their table. They were complete strangers, yet Landon was perfectly at ease. He was the picture of a confident, strong man as he charmed the sixty-year-old woman sitting next to him with his southern grace. It was a side of him Mark hadn't seen before. It was great, but it troubled him too. Was Sam right? Was the shy person Mark was starting to get to know not the real Landon?

By the end of the play, he'd almost forgotten about it. Landon was saying good-bye to Mrs. Peterson, so Mark offered to retrieve their coats. It wasn't until they were alone out on the sidewalk and Landon turned quiet that the

thought wiggled itself back in. Mark tugged on Landon's sleeve to stop them at the edge of the parking lot.

"There's something I've got to ask you."

Landon faced him, but a look of panic crossed his face before he looked down. He sighed, big and a little shaky, before he said, "Yeah. Okay. Ask away." He looked like a little kid the way he shoved his hands in his pockets and kicked at the loose gravel.

"Ugh. There you go with that again. Being all adorable. So, I've gotta know, is it all an act?" Landon's head jerked up, confusion clear on his face. "The shy thing," Mark clarified. "Sam said you're not shy at all. Or that's what Isaac told him. So I don't get it. Is that Landon," Mark gestured towards the building, "the real you? Or is this?" Mark flipped his hand toward the man standing in front of him.

Landon closed his eyes, and Mark watched him swallow. "Both. I guess." That didn't help Mark at all so he waited for more. "No, I'm not shy. Or, at least, I've never thought of myself that way." Landon finally looked at Mark. "Normally, I'd say I'm confident. Normally, I'd say I'm comfortable with who I am. But... but... I'm not *normal* around you," he finished on a growl and turned back towards the parked cars.

As he stepped away, Mark caught his sleeve again. "What's that supposed to mean?"

"Uhhgg. I don't know." Landon spun on him. "No, I do. It means that any time I'm anywhere near you I get completely tongue-tied. I've never had that happen before, and I don't know how to deal with it. You're right. That's not me. But the first time I met you—" Landon laughed, but it wasn't a happy sound. "God, the first time I met you, it was at the play last year, and I went up the line of actors and congratulated everyone on a great performance, and then I got to you. You looked at me, and I swear I was struck dumb and mute. I stood there like an idiot." Landon, talking with his hands, frustrated and fierce, was a sight to behold. Mark felt hope in everything Landon said, but knew he'd have to wait until he cooled down before going anywhere near him. Landon paced away and growled again. "And to make it even more humiliating, that blond god you were dating, the one who was so beautiful he looked fake, came up and made some joke, and I scurried away like a little chicken with my tail between my legs."

"Chickens don't put their tails between their legs." Mark hadn't meant to say that out loud, and the glare he got for it shut him up pretty fast. "Sorry."

"Yeah, well." Landon crossed his arms over his chest and sighed. "I'm only a freak around you. Happy now?"

"Actually, yeah." Landon's glare intensified so Mark rushed to explain. "Landon, do you know how long it took me to get ready for tonight? Or that I had a tie on until my roommate came in and laughed at me. And that was an hour before it was even time for me to leave."

"So?"

A shaky chuckle escaped. "So, I was a nervous wreck. All because of you. I was sweating bullets just asking you to come with me tonight because I was scared you'd say no. If you want more, I can give you more."

Landon shook his head as he looked down.

Mark recognized it now for what it was; Landon was trying to hide his blush, but Mark went on. Those red cheeks were a major turn-on, because it showed he was getting to Landon. He stepped closer while he spoke. "I was late tonight because I was so excited I almost left without my shoes. And last week I could barely sleep because I was afraid I'd scared you away at the Open Mic night, and—"

"I think I get the picture," Landon said quietly, grinning.

"Oh, I don't think you do." Mark closed the distance between them and matched Landon's intimate tone. "I know we went to the play for the project, and I wasn't trying to trick you into going out with me, but maybe, for the rest of the night, we can consider this a date?" Landon didn't answer, but he had that same look as before, the wide eyes and stuttered breath, and Mark decided to assume he was tongue-tied again. "I hope that's a yes, because there's something I've been dying to do for weeks now."

This close, he could feel Landon's heat and he wanted more. He moved closer, brushed Landon's lips with his own and waited a heartbeat. Landon's firm grab of his jacket and shaky exhale against his lips told him everything he needed to know.

Exploring, tasting, he kissed Landon slow and sure, so there was no way Landon wouldn't understand exactly how much Mark wanted him. It was wonderful and amazing, and one of the best parts was that Landon kissed him back in exactly the same way.

Landon's arms snuck under his jacket and around his back, and they fit so damn perfectly. Mark groaned and pushed closer.

"Oh, fuck," Landon breathed against his lips. Mark used the opportunity to lick and taste. Damn that was good.

Mark had forgotten they were standing in a public place until he heard the sudden echo of footsteps approaching. It sounded like a large group of people, and though Mark didn't want to, he knew he had to step away.

"I suppose I should have waited for your answer before I did that, huh?"

Landon's laugh was more of a huff. "You know very well you had my answer." He backed up a step at the same time Mark did, so there was a respectable distance between them.

"Coffee? I think there's a diner close to here," Mark suggested.

"Yes. That sounds perfect," Landon said with a smile that was fast becoming Mark's favorite sight.

The crowd passing gave him a few seconds to compose himself. They watched as the group split up between two cars not far from where they stood. Mark turned left, and when Landon fell in step, it felt like the most natural thing in the world to take his hand. Landon jolted again at Mark's touch.

"I'm sorry. I—" Mark started to pull away, but Landon held onto his hand firmly.

"Stop saying you're sorry. I was surprised, that's all." He winked and tangled their fingers before starting back towards the road.

"This is okay then? In public, I mean. Because if it's not—" Landon shut him up with a peck on the lips. "All right. I take it that means you're out?"

"Since I was fifteen."

They talked about the play while they walked and looked for the diner. The night air was chilly but not uncomfortable. At least, not for Mark. He noticed Landon shivering a time or two and, after two blocks, wished he hadn't suggested they walk. Right as he was going to ask if Landon wanted to turn back, Landon spoke up.

"Hey, there it is," Landon pointed out a brightly lit window across the street and about a half block up. He smiled and tugged on Mark's hand, his enthusiasm obvious. The street was clear so they jogged across and kept up the pace, laughing the whole way to the diner's front door. Landon let go of Mark's hand to open the door and waved Mark in with a flourish.

“Ah, so you’re a gentleman, huh?” Mark chuckled as he stepped in. He took in the worn, faded vinyl booths, the clatter and murmurs from the dozen or so other people, and the strong smell of coffee. It was a typical diner, through and through. The paper hearts hanging from the ceiling were proof of why Mark should have put more thought into this. “We can go somewhere else if you’d like.”

Landon turned to him, a quizzical smile in place. “Why? This is great.”

“It’s just not... well, it doesn’t really fit the occasion. You know? Considering it’s Valentine’s and all.”

Landon rolled his eyes. “It’s warm, it’s cozy, and they have pie. Come on.” He nodded his head to the side, indicating that Mark should follow as he made his way to a front corner booth by the window.

They took off their coats, and when Mark put his on the seat, his gloves fell out. *Dammit, I forgot I had those. I should have offered them to Landon.* Or... “I have an idea,” Mark started as they got settled across from each other in the booth. “When we leave, I’ll run and get the car and pick you up here.”

Landon gave him a narrow look. “Why would you do that? I’m pretty sure I can make it a few blocks safely.”

“No. I just mean because it’s cold. You were shivering the whole way here.”

“Well, yeah.” The look on Landon’s face added the unsaid, *duh*. “I’m from the South, and it’s frickin’ freezing way up here.”

Mark laughed. “I suppose. Back home it’s worse than here, so most of the time it feels like a heat wave for me every time I come back to school. Hey...” Mark had a thought. “Is that why you wear a hat all the time? Even indoors?”

Landon looked hesitant. “Um, partially, yeah.”

The waitress, a pleasantly-plump woman with gray hair and a large smile, appeared. “And what can I start you young gentleman off with this evening?”

“Actually, you wouldn’t, by chance, have any banana cream pie, would you?” Landon’s accent sounded stronger as he turned on the charm. The woman seemed to eat it up as she remorsefully told him no, but listed every other pie and dessert they had available.

Mark barely listened. All he could think about was how banana cream pie would taste on Landon’s tongue. He watched those plump lips as Landon spoke and pictured himself licking whipped cream off of them.

"And you, dear?" She aimed the question at Mark, jolting him out of his fantasy.

"Oh, um." He realized he had no idea what they had or what he wanted. "Uh, same as him." She nodded and left. Mark rested his forearms on the table and leaned in towards Landon to whisper, "Please don't think I'm an idiot, but what did I just order?"

"Don't think you're a..." Landon shook his head. "Weren't you paying attention?"

Mark hunched his shoulders up in a half shrug. "I was thinking about something more important."

"Like what?" Landon sounded much more amused than offended.

Mark looked back down at Landon's mouth, licked his own lips, and admitted in a low voice, "Kissing you."

"Ooh," was all Landon managed at first along with a long exhale. "I... ah..." He cleared his throat. "Well, then."

Mark knew he'd caught Landon off guard but wasn't sorry at all. He smiled. "What can I say? You're very distracting."

Landon chuckled silently and shook his head again. "You lay it on thick, huh? I should have known you'd be a flirt. Not that I'm complaining."

"Good. Because you seem to bring it out in me naturally."

Landon tilted his head to the side and gave Mark a shrewd look. Whatever he'd been about to say was aborted by the waitress bringing their coffee and pie. *Ah, French silk. Good.*

"So," Mark said after the waitress walked away to help another table. "What were you saying about the cold only being a part of why you wear the caps? Is it more of a fashion thing? Because it's a good look on you."

"No, not really." Landon focused his attention down at his pie and forked off a bite, but didn't bring it to his mouth. "But it's a long story, and I'm not sure it's really first date material."

"Oh." Mark was disappointed, but he was intrigued as well, knowing there was a long story that hopefully, someday, he'd get to hear. He took a bite of his pie to stall and cover the awkwardness.

Then Landon sighed. "Actually, it's not that big of a deal. I have a couple scars and the hat hides them. That's all."

“Okay,” he said lamely, not knowing how to respond to that. Mark was filled with questions—what were the scars from and where were they, because he’d never noticed them—but he kept his focus on eating instead and waited. The last thing he wanted to do was to pry into something that clearly made Landon uncomfortable.

Landon’s low chuckle surprised him. “Mark, shit, it’s fine. You don’t have to look so nervous. Really.” Mark looked up to meet Landon’s eyes. All he saw was a calm sincerity that made him relax. Landon went on to explain, “I didn’t mean to make it sound like some ominous mystery. I’m sorry. I’m just not used to being the one to bring it up. Usually people see the scars and bombard me with questions.”

“Well, I’d like to know what happened, but how about instead of bombarding you with questions, you just tell me what you want to tell me.” Mark put down his fork and gave Landon his undivided attention.

Landon took a drink of his coffee first, looking contemplative for a moment. “Well, the simple answer is I was in a car accident. It was a few years ago, right before I was supposed to start college. I had a broken arm and a head injury. Hence the scars. And this.” Landon tipped his head to the left and tugged on his ear. The tip was missing completely, making the top a flat, horizontal line instead of rounded.

Mark winced, thinking of the pain Landon must have gone through. “Ooh, ouch, babe.” Mark felt stupid as soon as the words were out, but Landon laughed.

“You’re telling me. Anyway, I was in the hospital for a long time, and even after I went home, I had to go in for rehabilitation for the head trauma. After the accident, I started wearing my hair long enough to cover my ears and so the scars wouldn’t be as obvious. But last summer my mom insisted I get my hair cut because her side of the family was having formal family portraits done. Since the hair around the scars takes longer to grow out, I’ve had to keep it shorter than I like. So, I wear the hats. It’s easier than everyone asking what happened.”

“Yeah, I get that. I don’t know if this’ll make you feel better or not, but I never noticed the scars.” Now that Mark looked closely, he could see a line visible along Landon’s hairline by his neck.

“I’d say you must not be very observant, except I know they’ve faded and aren’t as visible as they used to be. Rationally, I know that, but I’m still stupidly self-conscious about them.”

"I'll have you know, I'm extremely observant of the things that are important. Like your eyes, your lips, and your killer ass. How am I supposed to pay attention to any other part of you when I have those to stare at?"

Landon's burst of laughter had a few heads turning in their direction. "Like I said. Flirt."

Mark picked up his coffee and smiled. But his smile faded completely as he pictured Landon in the hospital, hurt beyond what Mark could even imagine. "That sounds like it wasn't a simple fender bender. You're okay now, right?" Instinctively, he reached across the table for Landon's hand, needing to touch.

"Yes, I'm fine. I'm not exactly like I used to be, but that's not a bad thing. The accident made me take stock of my life, you know? Appreciate it more. It's the reason I decided to come here for college. That, and the fact that my mom was always overprotective—what with me being a scrawny, gay boy out in a small town filled with bigots and all. And after the accident? Damn, she was in gorilla-hovering mode for months. I had to get out of there for both of our sanity."

"Yeah, I can relate." Mark relaxed back into the booth as the waitress came over to refill their coffee. "Where were you going to go to school before? Somewhere in Tennessee?"

"Yeah. I'd been planning on going to art school. If you can believe it," Landon leaned in and whispered, "I wanted to make comic books for a living."

"I could see that. The cartoons I saw the other day were awesome."

"Thanks." Landon's smile was timid and it flickered a little. "But that was the dream of a kid who spent way too many hours in his room doing nothing but drawing. All that time in the hospital made me really think about what I want to do with my life. Only one thing made sense—I want to help people. Other than that, I wasn't sure. It wasn't until my dad was in therapy after the accident that it came together for me."

"Oh, shit. Your dad was in the car, too? Was he hurt?"

"Not physically, no. But he blamed himself for a long time. He was driving, and, um... drinking. That's the part of the story that gets to be long."

"I'm not in any rush, and I'd like to hear it." Mark extended his foot to slide it between Landon's under the booth and gave Landon's hand a squeeze. He wanted to reach out, even if it was something as simple as the leather of their shoes touching. "I mean, if you want to tell me," he added sincerely.

For the next several minutes, Landon told him about his parents' divorce when he was nine, and how his dad gradually slid into alcoholism in the years after. He could tell Landon was trying to give an abbreviated version, but he couldn't help but ask questions, to draw more out of Landon. He wanted to know everything. And the more he learned, the more in awe of Landon he became.

After yet another refill of coffee—they asked for decaf this time—Landon continued. "I dreaded going over to his apartment when I was a teenager, mainly because I hated to see him like that, but even when he was at his worst, I never once doubted how much my dad loved me. A lot of people don't understand that, or they don't believe me, but it's true. Just because someone has an addiction, that doesn't make them horrible or mean. So, after the accident, when he went into rehab, to see him struggle, to watch how hard he worked to fight his addiction..." Landon cleared his throat and then suddenly smiled. "And the counselors who encouraged him and believed in him? They're my heroes just as much as he is. You see, they didn't just help him quit drinking. No, when my old man does something, he goes the whole damn distance. He turned his entire life around. And they were there for him. Now he jogs every day, last year he started taking night classes, and—" Landon laughed. "I think he's actually addicted to learning. It's hilarious. He calls me every week to talk, and there's always something new he's learned that he wants to tell me about. Oh, and he has a girlfriend, too. She's great," Landon ended with a big smile.

The way Landon's eyes lit up as he spoke and the expression on his face, tranquil and energized at the same time, Mark was pretty sure, right in that moment, that he fell just a teensy bit in love with Landon Hayes. He wasn't completely off his rocker—he wasn't about to go down on bended knee or anything—but the beginning of something was definitely there, and Mark liked it a whole lot.

Mark's adoration must have been written all over his face, because a lovely shade of pink bloomed on Landon's cheeks as he looked down at his now-empty pie plate.

"It's funny—how something good can come out of something bad, isn't it?" Mark offered.

"Yeah. Actually, I've never told anyone else this before, and you'll probably think I'm nuts, but to be honest, I'm thankful for the accident. I'm

glad it happened.” Landon looked up at Mark under his lashes. If he was waiting for some type of criticism, he’d be waiting a long time.

“So am I,” Mark said over the lump in his throat. “Well, maybe not glad, exactly, since you had to go through all of that pain, but grateful. Because of your dad, but also because it brought you here. With me.”

“Cheesy, Mark. That’s a bit on the cheesy side.” Landon joked, but it was weak. “Yikes. I really can’t believe I practically blurted out my entire life story. Really not-great first date conversation, huh?” He sighed quietly, and fiddled with his fork.

“For us it is. Usually a first date is spent getting to know all the superficial stuff. We already know a lot of that from going to school together, so it fits perfectly that we’d dive into deeper waters. Hey, I already told you all about my crazy family on the drive to the theatre.”

Landon’s smile looked grateful. “Yeah, I suppose.”

“I have a great idea,” Mark announced and pushed aside his pie plate. “How about we order another dessert?” The pie had been extremely good, but more than anything, he really didn’t want their night together to end yet.

Landon eyed him skeptically. “On one condition. We each pick a different kind and share.”

Mark laughed. He liked that condition. The next time the waitress passed, Mark flagged her down so they could order. The next couple of hours flew by, and it wasn’t until Landon noticed it was almost one in the morning that they decided to call it a night and head back to campus.

Their conversation continued on the drive back to campus until Mark pulled up in front of Landon’s building and put the car in Park. Over the hum of the engine, the sudden silence in the car was loud and filled with anticipation. Mark shifted in his seat while he tried to decide if he should offer to walk Landon to the door, or just lean in for the kiss he wanted right there in the car.

“There’s something I’ve been wondering all night. Well, not all night, but for the last hour at least,” Landon’s voice was hushed and intimate in the small car.

Mark turned to face him and inched closer, mimicking Landon’s tone, even as his heart rate sped up. “What’s that?”

“How apple pie and chocolate cake would taste mixed together.”

Mark almost laughed, until he caught on. “Let’s find out.” Mark moved in slowly, sliding his hand around the back of Landon’s neck and guiding him in. Only a breath apart, they both stopped for the briefest moment, smiling at each other while their eyes locked.

Landon was the one to close that last small gap between them, capturing Mark’s lips in a soft kiss that lead to another and another. Mark loved the way Landon’s lush lips felt against his own, and the gentle kisses lasted until he couldn’t hold back anymore. He used his tongue to part Landon’s lips and deepen the kiss. He got a deep moan out of Landon as a reward.

He slid his tongue over Landon’s before he sucked on it, tasting. Landon responded immediately by wrapping his arms around Mark—one at his tailbone and one tangled in his hair—and tugged Mark as close as they could get. Mark’s tongue explored some more before he pulled back for a breath. “Mm, I’d say they mix perfectly,” he mumbled, his lips still pressed to Landon’s.

“Oh, hell yeah,” Landon growled and dove back in.

Mark felt the heat radiating off of Landon and snuck a hand up under Landon’s shirt. He wanted to touch that hot skin—*all of it*—but knew he couldn’t. Not in the cramped front seat of his car, at least. But, damn, he wanted more.

It didn’t take long before the windows were fogged and Mark could barely catch his breath. He was nowhere near happy when Landon broke the kiss, panting, and leaned his forehead against Mark’s.

“I should go in.”

Mark hated hearing that, even if it was true. A glance at the clock on his dashboard showed it was almost two. “Yeah, I suppose,” Mark grumbled and pulled back reluctantly.

His disappointment must have been obvious, and funny, because Landon laughed. “We’re still meeting up tomorrow, right?”

Mark perked up and smiled. “Yep. Do you want me to meet you here?”

“No, Isaac has family visiting this weekend, so they could be stopping by at any time. How about I’ll meet you at your room? Say, eleven?”

Mark nodded and leaned in for one last kiss. Landon kept it chaste when Mark tried to linger. “Grrrr,” Mark actually growled, which got him another happy laugh.

“I’ll see you tomorrow,” Landon whispered as he opened the door and got out. He shot Mark a wink before he closed the door and jogged to the front door of the building.

Mark watched to make sure Landon made it in okay, and also because the view was spectacular.

Chapter 6

“Good morning, sleepyhead.” Sam’s amused voice was way too cheerful. Mark grunted and turned onto his back to stretch. “Have a nice dream?” Sam snickered.

Mark cracked an eye open to look at him, knowing he shouldn’t ask, but... “Meaning?”

Sam laughed and stopped pretending to read a textbook. “Meaning? ‘Oh, yeah. Landon. Mmmm, *Landon*. Yeah, baby.’” Sam crooned in a horrible imitation of Mark’s voice.

“Fuck you.” The pillow he threw at Sam’s head hit square on, but instead of shutting him up, it only served to make Sam laugh harder.

Sam went on, groaning between words. “Ohhhhhh, yeah. Mmm. Right there. Yeah, right there. God, Landon, yes. Yes. YES.” Sam finally stopped when he collapsed on his bed from laughter.

“You are such an ass. I didn’t say any of that, you perv. Even if I was dreaming about Landon, I don’t talk in my sleep.”

“Yeah, and I’m the Dalai Lama.” Sam sat up and leaned against the wall to face Mark. “You’ve always mumbled in your sleep.”

“If I do, then why haven’t you ever said anything?”

“Entertainment value, of course.” Sam smirked again. Mark was starting to seriously dislike that smirk. “And, okay, usually I can’t understand much of what you say. Just a lot of yeahs and mhmms. I may have exaggerated a bit, but this time I definitely heard you whisper Landon’s name. You may have also been grinding your mattress a little, but if you’d really been into it, I would have just left.”

Mark groaned and covered his face with his arm. “Oh, God.” Sam wasn’t laughing anymore so Mark knew he was serious, and the hard aching in his cock supported what Sam said.

“Chill. I just thought you deserved some payback for embarrassing me the other day, giving me shit about my snoring right in front of Grady and the other guys.”

"Yeah, at least my murmurs aren't as bad as you." Mark was taken aback by the flash of panic in Sam's eyes.

"I, um, talk in my sleep?" Sam's brow furrowed and he cleared his throat. "Do I, ah, you know... ever say, like... a name or something?"

"No." Mark looked closer and saw Sam's relief. What was that about? "You don't talk in your sleep at all. I was talking about your snoring. Loudly. Why are you worried about what you'd say if you did?"

"I'm not. I was just curious. Maybe my subconscious would have told me who the love of my life is supposed to be or something." Sam smiled and changed the subject. "So. How was your hot not-date last night? You must have gotten back late, because I didn't go to bed till almost one and you weren't back yet."

"Mmm." Mark smiled, remembering. "I tell ya, it was so good we can take the 'not' part out. After the play we made it into an official date."

"Official, huh?" Sam smirked. "Goodnight kiss and all?"

"Oh, hell yeah. More like a goodnight make-out session that lasted for, God, I don't even know how long."

"Way to go, stud. About time you jumped back in the saddle—or got jumped, at least."

"You think you're so funny, dontcha?" Mark asked as he rubbed his face with both hands, trying to wake up. Sam hummed his agreement. "Well, funny man, I need coffee." He glanced at the clock. "Damn, it's almost ten. Coffee, breakfast and a quick shower. Landon's coming over at eleven to go over our questions and write up our report."

"Oh, *realllly*? Do you want me to make myself scarce?"

"No need. We really are going to just work on the project. Until lunch, anyway." Mark stretched, scratched a bit and got up. He didn't bother to hide the tent in his briefs since it wasn't anything Sam hadn't seen before, and from the sounds of it, much more innocent than what Sam had witnessed that morning. As he grabbed a pair of sweats to put on, he remembered something he wanted to tell Sam. "By the way, you were right. Landon isn't that shy at all. It was just nerves or something because he likes me. Which is great, since I'm seriously into him, too." Mark shot Sam a toothy grin. "I still don't think he'd send someone underwear though, even though I wish they were from him."

"I agree completely." There was something odd in Sam's tone, like excitement.

"Why do you sound so happy about that? Yesterday you thought it was him."

"That was before you got a visitor last night. Guess who."

"The president. I don't know." Mark rolled his eyes, but laughed at Sam's enthusiasm. It was too early for this.

"Taylor. He showed up when I was getting ready for the dance and asked if you were here. And not just that—he was *nervous*. Ha! I never thought I'd see the day, but he was all fidgety, like he didn't know what to say once I told him you weren't here. I tried to make conversation with him for a minute, but I had to get ready, so..." Sam shrugged. "You were right. Mystery solved."

"Huh." It felt rather anticlimactic to Mark. More than likely, because he'd already suspected Taylor ever since he invited Mark to tag along to the matinee he was going to see for the project. *Wait, that didn't add up.* "But Taylor knew I was going out with Landon last night. I said so when..." Mark thought back to their conversation and realized he was wrong. "Oh, I guess I never said when Landon and I had plans. Just that we couldn't go to the movie yesterday afternoon with him."

"Trust me, he was bummed when I said you were out. I kind of felt bad for the poor guy. I saw him at the dance later, though, so he couldn't have been completely heartbroken. He came over and talked with us for a while. I don't know if he was just trying to put on a good show because he's after your bod and figures being nice to your friends will give him an in, or what, but he was being really nice the whole time. Like, charming-nice."

"Who knows?" Mark walked into the bathroom to grab water for his coffee pot. After he was done, he asked Sam, "How was the dance last night? Did you have fun?"

"It was fine at first, but I got bored. When all the couples were getting lovey-dovey, I decided it was time to head out. I got back here around eleven or so and watched a movie. Which reminds me." Sam said the last sentence slowly and paused. It was one of those ominous pauses that gave Mark a bad feeling.

He stopped halfway through filling a filter with coffee grounds. "Uh-oh. What did I do now?"

“Nothing. Nothing bad, anyway. I just thought I’d let you know that you should really close your browser on your laptop when you offer to lend it out.”

“What the hell, Sam?” Mark’s mind scrambled, trying to remember what the last thing he looked up online was, and when he remembered, “Oh, shit. Who the fuck said I gave them permission to use my laptop? And why would you give it to them?” He’d been looking at shopping sites for men’s lingerie, and if anyone saw that...

“No one, dickhead. You said *I* could borrow it to watch movies on your Netflix account. Which is what I did after the dance last night. But what if one of the guys had been here with me? I’ll be careful in the future, I promise. I know that you’re not quite comfortable with this yet, so I just wanted to give you a heads up, that’s all.”

“Yeah, I suppose.” Mark finished pouring in the coffee grounds and turned the pot on to brew. “Don’t scare me like that again, though.”

“I didn’t mean to scare you. Sorry.” Sam did look genuinely sorry, and then thoughtful. “I liked the thing you were looking up. It was nice, like actually *real* lingerie.” Mark shot him a questioning look. “I mean...” he trailed off and tilted his head to the side. “It’s not kinky or anything. I half-thought that if you bought underwear type stuff, that it would either be something like the last one you got in the mail or something, I don’t know... on the risqué side.” Sam looked serious, and just because of that Mark smacked him. “Ow! Hey, be nice. All I’m saying is what you picked out was more—” He pursed his lips and hummed, thinking. He finally decided on the right word. “Elegant.”

Mark thought about the sleepwear set he’d been looking at. It was like a tank, except in black satin with a lace trim. *Simple* had been his goal, but elegant? “Elegant.” He snorted out loud and looked over at Sam. “I don’t mean to be the pot calling the kettle black, but you know what? You’re strange sometimes,” Mark chided.

“Yeah, well.” Sam shrugged. “What can I say? You’re the one who picked me as a best friend.” Sam leaned forward and pulled his knees up to prop his arms on. “That black shiny one was pajamas, right? Lisa used to have some just like that except in peach.”

“Oh, great. So if I wear them they’ll remind you of your ex-girlfriend,” Mark grumbled, but then thought about what he’d said. “Not that I’m going to even buy them, but—”

"Why wouldn't you? They're nice. And they look comfortable," Sam added sincerely.

"Be-because—" Mark sputtered, "God, I can't even imagine the shit you'd give me. And, um..." He trailed off, unsure what other excuse to use.

"I wouldn't tease you. Not about this." Sam winced and sighed. "Listen, I know we give each other shit, and if I was crossing the line by giving you a hard time this morning about your dream, I'm sorry. But you have to admit you'd have teased me just as badly. This is different." He nodded at Mark's laptop, even though it was off and closed. "If I teased you about this, it would be like giving you shit for being gay. Right?" Sam didn't really look sure but he barreled on, "Matter of fact, I think you should buy it. Right now."

"What? I'm not going to—I—"

But Sam wasn't listening to Mark at all. "I'm not taking no for an answer. If you don't buy it, I'm buying it for you." Sam nodded once, his mind made up apparently. "This will be good for you." He snapped his fingers and stood up. "I have an idea. I'll kill two birds with one stone. I'm going to run for breakfast, and bring it back here. You'll have the place to yourself for a while so you can decide which one you want, and by the time you're done with your shower, I'll be back with food. It'll save you some time since Landon will be here in less than an hour." Sam walked towards the door, but stopped and turned when Mark called after him.

"Sam?" Mark managed, but then had to swallow over an unexpected lump in his throat. "You rock."

Sam popped an imaginary collar. "Yep. I know."

Mark caved almost as soon as Sam was out the door. Sam was great, giving him time to choose and all, but Mark didn't need it. He knew exactly what he wanted; the black satin looked so nice—sexy and comfortable at the same time. Just imagining feeling that soft fabric against his skin gave him goose bumps. He wasn't sure why, out of all the options he'd found, he'd picked that one, except that it was something he could see himself in. The panties and stockings he'd gotten from the admirer—Taylor, apparently—were sexy and fun, but they were something you wore for a lover. He'd been looking for something that he'd wear for himself.

After he put in the shipping information and pressed *Confirm*, Mark took a deep breath and let it out in a whoosh. "Holy shit, I did it." He ran a hand through his hair and shook his head.

Does this make me a cross-dresser, or do I just have a fetish for soft materials? He paused a moment to consider that. *Hmm. Maybe a little of both?* It was something he'd have to explore.

A quick look around his room proved he needed to straighten up, quickly, so Landon wouldn't think he was a complete slob. After shoving the last of his dirty clothes into his laundry basket, he grabbed a towel and hopped into the shower. Good to his word, Sam returned with what looked like the mother lode of food right as Mark finished getting dressed.

"Wow, I must be a pig if you think I'll eat all that."

"Some of it's for Landon, dipshit. What kind of a host doesn't offer his new boyfriend some food for a study date?"

"Don't go jumping the gun. He's not my boyfriend yet."

"*Yet* being the operative word."

Mark rolled his eyes at his friend's mothering. There was a knock on the door and his pulse jumped. Sam took a step that way, but Mark beat him to it. "Don't embarrass me," he whispered at Sam just before he opened the door.

And there he was. Landon looked at him from under those beautiful, heavy lashes, and Mark's pulse gave another jump that kick started it into double time. "Hey."

"Hey." Landon's shy smile had his brain spinning with so many thoughts he couldn't pick one from the next.

So Mark just stood there, and smiled, and looked his fill. The knit cap was brown today and it matched the scarf, one of those decorative, wraparound kinds. Mark reached out and tugged on it. "I like this," he said quietly. "Especially, since I can use it to do this." He pulled Landon to him, their lips meeting for a sweet hello kiss. And then another, until the kisses blended together. Mark wrapped an arm around Landon's waist to pull their bodies flush, and they melted into each other, lost in taste and touch.

A throat cleared behind Mark and he jumped. "Jeez, Mark, let the guy at least get in the room before you devour him," Sam chided, laughing.

“Shit.” Mark stepped back, opened the door wider and gestured vaguely behind him. “Yeah, ah, that’s my roommate, Sam.”

Sam and Landon both chuckled at Mark’s awkward introduction. Landon stepped in past him, and Mark scanned his room to make sure he hadn’t forgotten a mess anywhere in his hasty cleaning. Sam was sitting on his own bed, looking comfortable and not about to go anywhere.

“Hey, man.” Sam nodded his greeting. “It’s great to finally meet the man my best bud’s been drooling over for weeks now.”

Mark’s, “*Hey*,” collided with Landon’s, “Weeks?”

Sam ignored Mark’s glare and addressed Landon with a smile. “Well, yeah. It was only, like, the second day of term the first time I caught him staring at you in the cafeteria. The drool puddle on the table was embarrassing.”

It was official—Mark was going to murder his roommate in his sleep. He would have gladly started right then, but when he glanced at Landon his anger faded marginally. The happy, almost smug look on Landon’s face saved Sam’s life for the moment.

“Really?” Landon asked, eyes narrowed at Mark.

Mark sighed and bit the embarrassing bullet, considering he’d told Landon almost the same thing last night. “Yeah. Well, not the drool part.” Mentioning that he wasn’t actually staring at Landon the first time seemed like a moot point—he’d stared plenty before and after that day. He scratched the back of his head and remembered his manners. “Here, let me take those for you.” Landon handed over his coat and bag and Mark put them next to the futon, where he figured they’d be out of the way. “Sam grabbed us some food.”

“Cool.” Landon’s smile was stretched so wide that Mark was almost thankful to Sam for being a traitor. But then the silence stretched a second too long, Landon looked down and the lip biting started.

“Oh, no.” Mark glared at Sam. “What’s about to happen is completely your fault, so I don’t want to hear any whining out of you that I forced you to witness it.” Sam looked understandably confused. Mark moved quickly, grabbed Landon to yank him close and sucked on his bottom lip, smoothing his tongue over it. “You can’t keep doing that, babe,” he whispered against Landon’s mouth, gave another peck to his bottom lip, and pulled back to look into his eyes. “Your poor lip is crying out in pain every time you do, and I can’t stand to see something so luscious suffer.”

Landon's eyes were wide as he sputtered and laughed. "I... uh..." He looked over at Sam. "Is he always this outrageous of a flirt?"

"Um, no. Yikes." Sam was laughing quietly as he stood up. "Okay, boys, that's my cue to get outta here. I know you said you were only going to work on your paper, but I'm starting to think you were lying."

"We are going to work on our paper." Mark turned back towards Sam. "But considering I'm scared to hear what will come out of your mouth if you stay, I wholeheartedly agree that you should leave."

Landon sat down on the futon and rummaged through his bag before pulling out his laptop. "Don't go kicking your roommate out. He didn't do anything wrong."

"See, your new man likes me." Sam stuck his tongue out at Mark. "So." Sam started in on the questioning Mark knew would come eventually. "What's your major?"

"I already told you, he's a psychology major," Mark answered before Landon could. He settled on the couch and grabbed the plate he knew Sam made for him, considering Sam would never touch a pancake covered in that much syrup, and hoped his friend would behave.

"I forgot. What's your minor?"

"GWS studies," Landon answered for himself this time.

"I never understood that. I mean, why do they list it like that? Gender *and* Women studies. Like women aren't a gender and are something different altogether." Sam sounded truly puzzled.

"No. It's Gender, Women, and Sexuality studies," Landon clarified. "Like in Gender studies, Women studies, and Sexuality studies. There aren't enough classes in any of those to be classified as a major on its own, and a lot of the classes overlap, so they're put together."

"Oh." Sam looked thoughtful, and Mark had to admit that he hadn't known that either. "So you actually study sexuality," Sam said slowly, in a way that gave Mark a bad feeling. "Holy shit, Mark. You're dating a sex expert!"

Mark groaned. "*Ugh*. You promised you wouldn't be an ass. Or embarrass me."

"No I didn't. You told me not to embarrass you. I never agreed." Sam's smirk was triumphant.

"I am so, so sorry," Mark said to Landon. "Please ignore him. He's leaving now."

"No, I'm not. I have another question."

"No. Nononono," Mark pleaded with his voice and eyes.

Landon's abrupt laughter filled the room. "Oh my God. You guys are worse than brothers."

"Not worse than. We are brothers. Okay, so not blood, but better." Sam snatched a bagel off the tray and stepped back. "So, my question." Mark groaned, yet again, but Sam ignored him, as always. "If you study gender and sexuality and all of that, you must be pretty open-minded, right?"

"I like to think so." Landon quirked his eyebrow—just one, and Mark wondered how he did that—like he was waiting for a punch line.

"Okay, good. Three questions. Do you think it's sweet, sexy, or creepy to send someone sexy underwear? Is it normal for a person's sexual preferences to be flexible? And since you study this stuff, you wouldn't have a problem with a guy that, let's say, cross-dressed or something like that, right?" Sam ticked each question off on a finger.

"*Sam*," Mark warned.

"What? It's just hypothetical questions." Sam was the picture of innocence. Correction—the picture of very false innocence and Mark wanted to kill him. There was no way Landon wouldn't see through that.

Landon settled back in the corner of the futon, looking like he was putting a lot of thought into the questions. "My answer to the first one is all three, depending on the intentions. The last one, no, I'd never have a problem with that. The flexibility one I think would take a lot longer to answer, but it would be interesting to talk about some time." Landon paused, gave Sam a look Mark couldn't read and went on. "Honestly, I don't believe it's a black and white thing. Everyone's different. I think if it's normal for that person, then it's normal. Any other questions?"

"Oh, please, please don't encourage him," Mark begged Landon. "And you." He turned to Sam. "Can we not scare the nice guy away?"

"He's not scaring me away. Besides, he got us all this great study food," Landon said with a smile.

Sam shot Mark a nasty look, laughed and grabbed his coat before going to the door. "Fine. I'll be the awesome guy that I am and save any other silly questions for next time." He stopped when he got to the door. "Landon, it was great to meet you. And Mark, I'll be gone all day. If I don't hear from you by dinner, I'll know it's because you're too busy saving his poor lip from crying."

"Shut up, you ass." Sam was out the door before Mark could find anything to throw at him.

"Your roommate is seriously great," Landon offered.

"Yeah, well, you don't have to live with him."

"True." Landon fiddled with the notebook and pen he'd set next to his laptop. "We're not really going to spend the whole time working on our paper, are we? I mean, it's not due until Thursday."

"Did you have something else in mind?" Mark moved closer with anticipation, hoping he was right about where this was leading.

Landon pushed the notebook aside and closed the distance between them. He pressed a firm hand to Mark's chest and moved it up slowly to his neck. "Something like what we started at the door would be good," he whispered, low and rumbley.

"Yeah, I like that idea." Mark turned in and captured his lips. They were eager and pliant at the same time. The kiss deepened and Mark explored, slipping his tongue in for taste after taste. Intoxicating.

Landon's hands slid under Mark's shirt, those long fingers sending trails of heat over his skin. Mark moaned quietly, wrapped one arm around Landon and used the other to steady them as he pressed Landon back to lie on the futon. Landon went willingly and spread his legs to make room for Mark's hips.

Their lips never parted and Mark was drowning in the kiss.

"Oh God," Landon breathed against Mark's lips. "So good."

Mark couldn't agree more. If he felt that kind of heat, that intense of a spark, just from a kiss, what would more be like? He hummed as he mouthed up Landon's jaw. "You smell so good," Mark whispered as he moved to nibble and tease Landon's neck. Landon made the most beautiful breathy little noises as he arched up against Mark.

There was a thud just before a yelp filled Mark's ear and ripped him out of the moment. He started, jumped and looked down at Landon.

"Crap." Landon broke away and rubbed at the side of his head where he'd hit it against the arm of the futon. Mark couldn't help his silent laugh. Even now, the damned cap stayed on. He wanted to pull it off, but stopped himself and ran his fingers over Landon's ear instead. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah, fine." Landon leaned up to resume their kiss, but Mark stopped him.

"Do you really need this on? Are you cold, or just..." He tugged on the brown knit cap.

Landon yanked it off and threw it to the floor. "I'm so used to it I forgot I had it on."

"You know what's funny. Until a week ago, I didn't even know you were a redhead." Mark ran his fingers through the thick, short hair. "And I've discovered something."

"What's that?"

"I'm a sucker for redheads," Mark confessed as he leaned down to resume his nibbling on Landon's neck.

"That's... that's good," Landon replied on an exhale, tilting his head to give Mark better access and knocking his head in the same spot again. "Fuck."

"Sorry. Maybe the bed would be more comfortable," Mark offered sheepishly.

Landon blinked up at him. "Yeah. Let's do that."

Mark helped Landon up and led him by hand to the bed. Suddenly self-conscious, Mark asked, "This isn't moving too fast for you, is it?"

"Mark," Landon kissed the curve of his neck. "Let's get one thing straight. I'm not a wilting flower or a southern belle." He looked up at Mark through his heavy-lidded eyes and Mark's cock throbbed in anticipation. Landon smirked, slowly pulled his shirt over his head, his scarf going with it, and reinvaded Mark's space. "You?"

Mark didn't reply, too engrossed in the sight and feel of Landon's upper body as he let his hands roam. Broad shoulders, long, defined muscles that rippled under Mark's touch. Everything about him made Mark's mouth water. That sexy collarbone called to him first, so he swiped his tongue in a broad stroke over it, then moved to Landon's neck and did the same. "Holy fuck, you're hot."

There was a quiet whimper and Landon's long fingers twisted in Mark's shirt. "Mark, please."

He didn't need to ask what Landon wanted. Not willing to stop touching, he fumbled with one hand at his T-shirt. Landon helped, and a second later they tumbled onto the bed. Landon's hands roamed over Mark's back, the light touch making him shiver.

They didn't have much more room on the bed than they had on the futon, but that was fine by Mark. The tight space meant they stayed close, their limbs tangling together, as they kissed until they were out of breath. Landon's body felt amazing, smooth and hard in all the right places, and Mark was lost to everything but sensations.

"Mmm," Mark hummed when Landon slid down to kiss and nip at his chest. Landon moved to his nipple, first licking in long, messy strokes, then sinking his teeth in, just enough to make Mark whimper and beg for more. "Landon, oh fuck." Mark put a hand on the back of Landon's head, more to ground Mark than to guide Landon.

"You like that?" Landon asked with another lick.

"Yes," Mark's voice shook with pleasure. "It's perfect."

"Good." Landon looked up and flashed Mark a smile before moving to Mark's other nipple and giving it the same treatment. "God, Mark. Your body..." He flicked Mark's hard nipple with his tongue while he spoke. "It's so... so fucking hot. And edible... I want to lick every inch."

Damn. Mark could picture that all too well—getting a tongue bath from Landon. He pushed into the touch at the same time that he grabbed onto Landon's arm to pull him up. "I want..."

"What, Mark? Tell me what you want," Landon asked, his voice husky.

But that was the problem. Mark wanted everything, but he didn't think that was exactly the answer Landon was looking for.

Mark was usually more confident in the bedroom, but this felt like an entirely new experience. With Landon it was different, important, and the desire to please Landon was so strong it left Mark fumbling.

Instead of answering, Mark pulled Landon up and kissed him. "Pants," he gasped as he decided that the one thing he truly needed right then was to be able to feel Landon everywhere. Mark reached down between them and tried to

open the top button of his jeans with shaky fingers, but he was uncoordinated with need and excitement.

Landon sat up, pushed Mark's hand aside and finished the button for him before attacking his own tight denim. Mark shimmied out of his jeans, lay back on the bed and waited, enjoying the view immensely. Landon's skin was flushed and his lips were swollen, which was sexy as hell. And watching Landon wiggle out of his tight jeans was a sight to behold.

Black briefs hugged his narrow hips and firm ass, and when he slid those briefs down... *Hot damn. Now that is something drool worthy.* Landon's cock was long and beautiful, and Mark couldn't wait to get his hands on it. His mouth around it.

Mark licked his lips and stared, transfixed. "You're gorgeous."

The corners of Landon's mouth tilted up. "Well, I think *you* are a bit overdressed," he teased.

Mark knew how to solve that problem. He hooked his thumbs in his waistband, and was about to get rid of the offending material when he wondered what it would be like if he had on the lace instead of cotton? His cock jerked. For a brief second, he closed his eyes and pretended, just for his own pleasure.

Opening his eyes again, he watched Landon as he took his underwear off slowly. His dick slapped against his stomach, and he heard Landon's low hum of appreciation. As he kicked the briefs the rest of the way off, to the end of the bed, the smooth skin on his calves rubbed together. He could almost imagine the sound the stockings would make if he had them on. Landon's eyes tracked every movement like he was memorizing them. Mark enjoyed the tactile sensation one more time, the silky skin so much more sensual than the rough hair that used to be there, before he bent his knees and spread them, putting on a show.

Landon sucked in a sharp breath, but stayed where he was, absorbing the sight of Mark.

"What are you waiting for?"

"I... I never thought I'd see you like this. Laid out in front of me and so damn beautiful." Landon's tone was hushed, reverent. Mark didn't know how to respond to that, so he didn't say anything. Landon climbed back on the bed

and slowly, oh so slowly, slid his way back up Mark's body with his hands and mouth, starting at Mark's thighs.

"*Landon*," Mark choked out, but couldn't finish. His brain shut off and he could only gasp and moan as Landon mouthed his balls. "*Yesss*."

He kissed the inside of Mark's thigh while he cupped Mark's balls in one hand, and smoothed his other over the hard length of Mark's cock. Mark pushed up, his body naturally responding to Landon's touch.

"Oh fuck, Landon," he moaned again. He wasn't going to last long, he knew it. If Landon put that talented tongue on his cock, Mark was done for. "Come up here. Please. I need... I need your mouth."

Landon looked up and met Mark's stare. His eyes—those gorgeous, sexy eyes—were so fucking green and so filled with lust. "Mmm, yes," Landon agreed, but then did exactly what Mark didn't want, and licked a long stripe up Mark's cock. Well, no that wasn't true, he did want it. Too much.

"No, not there. Not yet." *Please, not yet*. Shaking with need, Mark grabbed Landon, dragged him up the bed, and flipped their positions all in one move.

Landon's chuckle was raspy. "Maybe you should be more specific," Landon said while trying to catch his breath.

"You're a bit of a smartass, aren't you?" Mark smiled down at Landon fondly, tracing a finger over the arch of his cheekbone.

Landon threaded his fingers through Mark's hair, scratching at the nape of his neck. "Maybe a bit," he conceded, his voice husky with want.

Mark used his weight to press Landon back against the bed and kissed those lush, swollen lips exactly the way he'd wanted to, deep and desperate. Landon wiggled and Mark adjusted, sliding an arm under Landon's back to pull their bodies closer. When Landon bent his knees so his thighs cradled Mark's and pushed up, the friction was delicious.

"Mmm, babe. Oh, hell yes." Yes, that's what he needed. To feel Landon wrapped around him. They fit together so perfectly. Gradually, their tempo accelerated, setting every cell in Mark's body on fire.

Mark wanted to prolong it, to tease and pleasure and make Landon just as needy as he was. But soon, beads of sweat rolled down Mark's back and he couldn't hold out anymore. He braced himself up on an arm and made enough room between them to fit his other hand snugly around Landon's cock.

Landon whimpered into Mark's ear, and it was so damn sweet, Mark almost lost it. He loosened his grip enough to fit his dick alongside Landon's and moved his hand faster.

"*Fuck. Yeaahhh*," Landon hissed. "Jus'... just like that." Landon grabbed tight to Mark's ass with one hand and dragged the fingernails of the other down the flesh of his back, digging in and making Mark howl.

Somewhere in the back of his brain he had enough sense to worry someone would hear, so he tried to be quiet, but that required more control than Mark had. Especially with Landon writhing and panting beneath him.

Heat coiled low in his stomach and spread. "I'm... I'm gonna... soon." That's all Mark managed before Landon kissed him. That's all it took. In the next second, his orgasm hit, he saw stars and then black.

Mark collapsed, his body too heavy and happy to move, but tried to keep the bulk of his weight off Landon. Landon was boneless beneath him, other than the still-hard cock sticking into Mark's stomach. *Oh*. Shit, he'd wanted to make Landon come first.

But now you get to suck him.

Mark moved with renewed energy, his mouth watering for a taste, until he saw Landon's stomach splattered in come—a *lot* of come—and observed his blissed-out state.

"That's not all mine."

"Oh, wow. Too bad you're not a physics major. You're a regular Einstein," Landon drawled, with a lazy stretch under Mark. His eyes slowly blinked open. "Wait. Einstein was physics, wasn't he?"

"Um, yeah." Mark smiled. Seeing Landon like that, so relaxed and sated, was probably the highlight of Mark's year.

Long fingers skated up Mark's back, causing him to shiver and goose bumps to break out on his skin. Landon's chuckle was slow and husky. "Sorry."

"Uh-huh." Mark grazed Landon's collarbone with a kiss, licked a little at his throat and ended with a nip at his jaw. "I'll get us something to clean up."

Mark and Landon lay together, silent, long after they caught their breath. Mark was sated, drifting, and comfortable in a way he couldn't remember ever

being before. Landon stretched against his side and Mark pulled him closer, his fingers trailing a line up and down Landon's spine. It must have tickled, because Landon shivered and pulled away from the touch. That was fine by Mark, because the end result was getting Landon closer.

Slowly, Landon moved onto his side and propped up on an elbow. His fingers lightly dragged along Mark's chest and stomach, and his eyes following the path. Mark hummed, kissed Landon's temple and asked, "Do you have anywhere else you need to be today?"

"Is that your way of asking me to stick around?"

"As long as I can have you. Yeah."

"Nowhere else I need or want to be."

"Good," Mark hummed. Landon's touch was soothing. Mark closed his eyes and was close to drifting off when Landon's words snapped him awake.

"I have a small confession to make, but I wanted to ask you about Sam's questions first."

Mark squeezed his eyes shut again. "Damn. I was really hoping you'd forget about those."

Landon snickered. "Not a chance. How about we start with the one I think was about you?"

"Yeah, okay," Mark grimaced and prepared for the worst.

"When did you start cross-dressing, and how long do I have to wait before I get the privilege of seeing you in kickass sexy heels?"

"Privilege?" Mark chuckled. "I don't know. I've never owned heels. I don't really cross-dress. I mean, maybe I do, but..." He sighed. "It's a new thing. And only my, um..." God, how was he going to put this? "Just, you know, underneath things."

"Underwear? Or bras and stuff, too?"

Mark pinched the bridge of his nose. He never imagined in a million years that he'd be having a conversation like this. "Just underwear that's kind of... on the feminine side, I guess. Like I said, it's new."

"Mark?" Landon's voice was so gentle and coaxing, Mark finally opened his eyes to meet Landon's dark green gaze. "I didn't mean to make you uncomfortable. It's fine if it's not something you're ready to talk about. But for

the record, the second I saw your shaved legs and put it together, I haven't been able to get this image out of my head. I like it. *A lot.*"

Landon's soft kiss against his chest sent a tingle over Mark's skin. "What's the image?" he had to ask.

"Of you. Of all this muscle wrapped in something soft and frilly. Actually," he glanced up at Mark and went back to trailing kisses over his chest, stopping to give Mark's nipple a little extra attention. "The picture was more defined than that. Red lace," another kiss, "matching stockings and heels." Landon bit gently and licked over his mark. "You'd look amazing in red."

"Oh, God," Mark gasped. "You keep that up and you'd better be ready for round two." Landon stopped, making Mark whine. "I didn't mean you should actually stop."

Landon smirked. "But I'm not ready yet. And neither are you," he needlessly pointed out while reaching to fondle Mark's soft cock.

"Landon," Mark warned.

"Sorry," Landon said, obviously not meaning it. "I'm curious about something else Sam said, but I'm trying to bite my tongue."

"Why?"

"In case you haven't noticed, I tend to blurt out what's on my mind. I'm attempting to exercise thinking before speaking." Landon said the last sentence in a haughty tone that reminded Mark eerily of Dan.

"Whatever it is, ask. No need for caution around me. I like that you say what's on your mind."

"Fine." Landon paused and twisted his mouth up before asking, "Is there someone he wants to send underwear to, or was he trying to talk you into sending some to me, or what? It just seemed a little out of left field." The scrunched up confusion on his face was adorable, but it cleared and he rushed to add, "Or is it something personal that I shouldn't be asking about?"

"No. Nothing like that. It isn't even a big deal. You see—" Damn, for not being a big deal it was still embarrassing to talk about. Which was stupid. "It's not about either one of us sending anything. Someone's been sending me things and its killing Sam not knowing who it is. I think he sees himself as an amateur detective or something. He thinks it's a secret admirer."

Landon was silent for several seconds. "And what do you think?"

"I don't know what to think. At first, I just thought someone from back home was forgetting to put their name on it. A couple weeks ago, I got some cookies in the mail and that's when I put it together. I flipped at first." Mark laughed. "And not in a good way. Sam laughed his ass off at me when I thought they could be poisoned."

"What?!" Landon stiffened.

"Oh, don't worry. It wasn't anything like that," Mark soothed. "That was just my overactive imagination. They were actually seriously kickass cookies. After a while, I thought it was kind of sweet, until the last gift. Now I'm back to being creeped out."

"But what could be creepy about—" Landon paused with a frown, "about the last one?"

"The last one was underwear."

"Underwear?" Landon whispered, his tone skeptical.

"Yeah. Well, not just underwear. That's actually—" he stopped, looked at Landon's concerned face and plunged ahead. "That's why the cross-dressing thing is new. It was lace panties and stockings. I was curious, so I tried them on. Sam walked in and, well..." He shrugged. "I told him I liked them, and I guess now he's bent on making sure I know he's accepting of whatever makes me happy. It's not too hard to figure out that's why he asked you that question. Even though I'd like to smack him for embarrassing me, I know that was just him being protective. My last boyfriend played mind games with me and made me feel guilty anytime I didn't do what he wanted."

"The blond god?"

Mark snorted. "He's only a god in his own eyes." Landon hadn't relaxed since the topic of the secret admirer came up, and Mark really didn't like the frown. "Hey," he whispered, and tilted Landon's face for a quick kiss, "don't worry. The gifts are innocent, not like a stalker or anything." Mark thought about Taylor. The guy may be forward and ballsy, but he wasn't dangerous.

"Hah, yeah."

"What? You don't believe me?"

"It's not that. It's just..." Landon lay back down, resting his head on Mark's shoulder as he started up the patterns on Mark's chest again. "Are you sure they're all from the same person?"

“Yes. None of them have had a name attached. And it has to be the same person. What are the chances of two different people sending me anonymous gifts at the same time? I know there are coincidences, but that’s too farfetched, even for me.”

“I suppose. You probably want to know who it is, right? Isn’t it eating at you?”

“Yeah, I’m curious. But mainly I want to know so I can tell him he’s wasting his time. I’m taken.” Mark realized what he’d just said and was quick to correct himself, “I mean, if things keep going well, I *will* be taken. We’ve only had one date, so—”

He felt Landon’s silent laugh shake the bed. “Technically, this is our *second* date. And if you’ll have lunch with me tomorrow after class, that will be three.”

“True. Man, I can’t believe you’re not running for the hills. Date two and I maul you at the door, you find out I have a secret underwear fetish and a possible stalker. I’m just a barrel of laughs, huh?”

“I considered running, but something stopped me.” Landon pushed up to look down at Mark, his expression completely serious.

“Yeah, and what was that?” Mark asked as he reached up to smooth down a tuft of reddish-brown hair sticking up on top of Landon’s head.

“The sex,” Landon answered simply, with a shrug.

“Oh really. The sex?”

Landon nodded. “It was really great sex.” There was a crack in his stony expression, a quirk to his eyebrow and lips. “I mean, amazing. Why else would I be here?”

“You little shit,” Mark growled. Landon cracked up laughing before Mark even touched his ribs, but after that it was fair game. The tickle wrestling began on the bed and ended on the floor in a pile of two sweaty men, covered in come for the second time.

Mark’s smile stretched to the point of painful as they lay there. The covers were still on the bed, but he didn’t have enough energy to move to get them. “You’re right. The sex is fucking *exceptional*. I think I’d even put up with someone crazy like me for it.”

“You’re a nut.” Landon shoved his shoulder. “Come on. We need to get cleaned up. Then we should eat some more of that food before it goes stale.”

“Ooh, bossy, huh? I like it.” Mark managed to make it off the floor in time to see Landon’s sweet ass walk into the bathroom. The image of Landon, wet in the shower, had Mark’s interest piqued, and he didn’t waste a second scrambling after his hot man.

The next day Mark sat with Landon in the back of class and got another sweet smile as a reward. The only downside was seeing Taylor look over at where Mark normally sat, then search the room until he spotted him in back by Landon. The disappointment was obvious even from there. Mark didn’t feel bad—he’d never led Taylor on, but he knew he’d need to talk to the guy at some point. After class, Taylor was stalling and trying to catch his attention, but Landon was right there next to him, waiting to go to lunch together. There was no way Mark was going to tell Landon to go ahead on his own to their lunch date, so he ignored Taylor’s look and walked out.

Mark had hoped for an intimate meal with Landon where he could get to know the man who was consuming his every thought. What he got was very different and lunch was more entertaining than Mark could have dreamed. Instead of being a quiet affair with just the two of them, Isaac found them and plopped down in the seat beside Landon, completely unaware that they’d picked a corner table for privacy. Landon looked pained, but Mark shrugged and smiled. He was happy to get to know Landon’s roommate, and it wasn’t worth hurting Isaac’s feelings over. Especially when, not ten minutes later, Ron and Sam joined them. Between Ron’s outrageous stories of his weekend, and Isaac’s nonstop chatter—which was great because the guy was surprisingly hilarious—Mark couldn’t remember when he’d last laughed that much.

By Wednesday, Mark was flying high and driving Sam insane with his happiness. No new presents came, and Mark was relieved. There was little doubt in his mind that they were from Taylor, and Mark assumed he must have gotten the picture that Mark wasn’t single anymore. That is, until Wednesday afternoon when Mark was walking across the quad and heard his name shouted out.

He stopped and turned to find Taylor jogging up to him. “I’m glad I caught you. There’s something I wanted to talk to you about. Or ask you, I guess. Um.”

Mark had never seen Taylor so uncomfortable before. He knew and dreaded what was coming. “Listen, Taylor, I wanted to talk to you too.”

“You did?”

“Yeah.” Mark took in a big breath and plunged ahead. “About the gifts. I know they’re from you. I liked them, I mean, they were sweet, and I’m really flattered, but I’m with Landon.”

“Yeah. I *know*.” There was a clear *duh* at the end of Taylor’s sentence, even if it wasn’t said out loud. “What gifts? What are you talking about?”

“The anonymous gifts. The ones...” There was a small chance that Taylor was simply trying to save face, but the clear confusion in his expression had Mark second guessing that theory. “The ones that obviously weren’t from you.”

“Sorry, man. No. Why did you think I was sending you gifts?”

“Honestly? I don’t know. I thought it had to be someone from Theatre and Society. You mentioned I needed an umbrella, and the next time it rained the secret admirer sent me an umbrella. Not to mention, I mean, you’ve talked to me more in the last couple weeks than you ever did before, and Sam said you came over to see me the other night.” Taylor had made the most sense, Mark was sure. “Oh, plus someone else in class said you keep looking at me.”

“I looked your way a time or two, yeah. You’re nice to look at.” Taylor winked, “But I have my eye set on someone else. Which is why I’ve wanted to talk to you. Do you think... Holy shit, I can’t believe I’m going to ask this. But... do you think you could put in a good word for me with Sam? Or if that feels like elementary school shit, then maybe we can all hang out together sometime. Or something?” Taylor shoved his hands in his coat pockets and looked out at the quad. “I wouldn’t put you on the spot and ask you to set us up on a blind date or anything, but I don’t have any classes with him, and we don’t have many friends in common, so it’s really hard to find an excuse to talk to him.”

“Sam? As in, my roommate, Sam?” Mark couldn’t believe it.

“Yeah. Why?”

“Sam. As in the slightly geeky physics major who wears a size ten shoe in his mouth most of the time?”

Confusion flashed across Taylor’s face and then he was laughing. “Yeah, that one. He’s so damn cute with that foot stuck in his mouth, though. Actually, he’s cute no matter what he does.” Taylor blurted the last and then looked shocked he’d said it.

“Shit, Taylor. I’m sorry to tell you this, but he’s straight.”

“No.” Taylor shook his head. “But I thought... are you sure? Well, obviously you’re sure, you’re his best friend. Damn.” Taylor heaved a large, unhappy sigh and shrugged. “I guess I shouldn’t have assumed. But I’ve never seen him with a girl, and he comes to a lot of the GLBT events on campus.”

“Yeah, I dragged him to the first couple, and then we met Grady, who never misses an event. So now it’s funny, because Sam’s usually the one dragging me with him,” Mark explained, but he doubted it helped Taylor at all. “I really am sorry it’s not possible. If it were, I would have fixed you up. And I’ve got to say, you have good taste.”

“Yeah, a fat lot of good that will do me. But thanks, Mark.” Taylor’s eyes caught something behind Mark and his mood lifted. “Hey, there’s your man. Hi, Landon.”

“Uh, am I interrupting?” a familiar, deep voice asked from behind Mark, sending a welcome shiver over his skin.

“Not at all.” Mark turned and beamed. Not only did he not have to feel guilty about letting Taylor down, but he was getting to see Landon unexpectedly. “We were just talking about, um...” Mark stalled out, realizing he couldn’t tell Landon what they were talking about without divulging Taylor’s feelings, and his mind failed to come up with another topic on the spot. “Are you on your way to class?” he tried instead.

“Yeah. I guess I’ll see you later.” Disappointment and jealousy showed on Landon’s face before he could hide it. Taylor must have seen it too, because he stepped in, smooth as always.

“No, we’re done. Landon, you are seriously lucky to have such a nice boyfriend. I was just telling him about someone I’m into, and I think Mark actually felt guilty that he had to be the one to tell me the guy is straight.” Taylor clapped Mark on the shoulder. “I’d appreciate it if you didn’t tell the object of my misguided affections about this.”

“Of course not.”

“Thanks, man. See you guys around.” With a brief wave, Taylor walked away.

“Um.” Landon looked at Mark in confusion. Mark shrugged and took his hand as they started towards the west quart buildings. “That was odd.”

"You have no idea." Mark looked at Landon out of the corner of his eye. "You were jealous for a second there, weren't you?"

Landon rolled his eyes. "Maybe for a second. But no longer than that." He bumped Mark with his shoulder. "And by the way—boyfriend? Are you spreading that around before you've even told me of our changed status?" The lilt in Landon's voice was teasing.

"*Me tell you?* Here I've been waiting for you to tell me. Of course, I'm not against the idea. So whenever you decide the status works for you, feel free to spread it anywhere you want."

Landon's laugh bordered on a cackle, "I must be one sick puppy, because that sounded dirty to me."

"That works, as long as you're my sick puppy."

Landon spun to face Mark, keeping an iron grip on his hand while walking backwards and pulling Mark over to the shade of a building. "Yeah." Landon stopped up against the brick and kissed Mark; short, hard, and possessive. He pulled back long before Mark was ready to let him go. "Okay then. I've got to get to class."

"Yeah, I'll walk you." Mark stepped back in a daze.

Landon smirked. "I'm already here." He nodded towards the building they were leaning against. "You have that group study session tonight?" Landon asked as he straightened up, and started to walk backwards again towards the front of the building. Mark nodded. "I'll see you at class tomorrow. And then lunch?"

"Sounds good," Mark called. Landon winked and disappeared around the corner of the building.

Damn. Mark smiled to himself. *I think I have a boyfriend. One fine, sexy, funny boyfriend.*

Chapter 7

Mark left his advisors office ready to burst. *Holy shit, I actually, frickin' got it.* His advisor in the education department had congratulated him on the internship, but her always reserved demeanor didn't come close to the excitement bubbling inside Mark. He needed to share the news with someone who'd understand his enthusiasm, and he only had to think for a second to know which direction to take once he was outside. After all, Dan had not only helped him get his resume put together for the internship at the kid's theatre camp, he'd also written Mark an amazing reference.

It hadn't really sunk in yet—that he was going to get to spend the summer mixing two things he loved, teaching and the stage—and Mark was flying high, knowing that his life was coming together. Hell, he even had a boyfriend. Mark smiled as he entered the building, wishing he could call Landon and tell him the good news. But that would have to wait. Yesterday, when Mark had invited Landon to breakfast, he'd said he had some family thing in the morning, and that he'd meet Mark outside the theatre building before class.

The entryway was eerily silent, which was normal for this time of the day, and the whole place felt deserted. Mark knew that wasn't the case, though. Dan and one or two other professors would be in their offices or classrooms getting ready for the day, and a group was meeting downstairs in the costume shop. Mark headed down the hall towards Dan's office and heard what sounded like a muffled argument. The voices echoed in the halls, so he wasn't sure which way they were coming from until he turned the corner.

It was very obviously coming from down at the end near Dan's room, but it wasn't Dan yelling. More worried for Dan than thinking about his privacy, Mark picked up his pace. He was a little over halfway there when he recognized the other voice and stopped.

Mark was positive it was Landon's voice yelling, but that couldn't be right.

"You promised!"

"Landon, settle down. I saw an opportunity to help and I took it." Dan's voice was more subdued, but the words were still clear.

"Well, I didn't need your damned help!" Landon's voice rang down the hall.

Mark backed up a step, common sense telling him to leave. He wasn't about to eavesdrop or interrupt. But something wasn't sitting right. Landon was the one yelling. *Landon*. Yelling at a professor? Undecided on what to do, he stood frozen to the spot.

"I see that now. But at the time... I thought you were playing it safe and just needed a little nudge. You know, they say the road to hell is paved with good intentions."

"What the hell is that supposed to mean? You and your stupid philosophical... I—" There was a pause. "*Gaahhhh!* I'm so pissed I don't even know where to start."

What could have made Landon—quiet, sweet Landon—blow up like that? And at *Dan*?

A noise behind Mark reminded him that the building wasn't empty. How many other people could hear what was going on? Before he could do what was smart, he moved closer. The door was open a crack, which explained the volume and clarity.

Mark rapped his knuckles on the wood door and it swung open. "Hey guys. I'm sorry to interrupt, but I thought you should know that everything you're saying is echoing down the hall. Maybe you should—" Mark stopped. Landon's eyes had gone round and his jaw slack. "Landon, you okay?"

"You heard... *everything*?"

"Ah, shit," Dan muttered and pinched the bridge of his nose.

"No. I just walked in. But I'm guessing that anyone else in this section of the building has." Mark stepped farther into the room and shut the door behind him. Landon didn't look too good. "Dan, what's going on here?"

"I think that's up to my nephew to tell you," Dan offered, and received a glare from Landon.

"Nephew?" Mark asked. "I'm confused."

"You hadn't told him? I understand you not wanting the general student body to know, but I thought you'd at least admit to your friends that you're related to me."

Landon stopped glaring, but he wasn't smiling either. "Don't take offense, I just hadn't gotten around to it yet."

"You're his nephew? But I thought..." Mark turned from Landon to Dan. There wasn't a single resemblance. "Wait, I thought your nephew was a little kid." Mark directed his question to Dan, since Landon seemed to be avoiding even looking at Mark.

"To me, he is. And for the sake of clarification, he's Len's biological nephew, which is how he can be in my class. But I'm still just as much his uncle considering I changed his diapers, and helped him learn to walk." Dan looked over to where Landon was standing halfway across the room, his hip propped against the wall and his arms crossed. "Hell, I was the one to give him 'the talk' when he was fifteen after he came out."

"Daaaann." Landon groaned as he knocked his head against the wall.

Mark chuckled. "This sounds like payback for Sam embarrassing me last weekend. So this was the family thing you had to do this morning? Yell at your uncle?"

"Yes," Landon gritted out between his teeth. He opened one eye and peered at Mark. "Don't give me that look. I have every right to be pissed."

"Enlighten me. Unless it's private family business. If that's the case, I'll leave you to it. Just don't yell so loud that everyone in the department thinks you're about to kill him."

"That's exactly the problem. It wasn't *family* business, it was my *private* business. Dan promised—*promised*—that if I came to school here, family life and school life would be kept separate. On campus, I would be just another student, and he wouldn't get involved in my private life." Landon's gaze flickered to Dan before meeting Mark's eyes. "That was our deal and he broke it."

"Well, your first mistake was asking him to treat you like every other student." Mark smirked. "He meddles in all our lives."

Landon snorted. "I highly doubt he goes around trying to find boyfriends for his other students." His look was intense as he went on, his words slow and precise. "He set us up. On our project? He purposely assigned partners, just to get us to go out together."

Even with what he'd suspected confirmed, Mark couldn't summon anger if he tried. Hell, he wanted to hug the man. He looked over at Dan but spoke to Landon, "Yeah. I already wondered about that the day he assigned us together. He knew about my tickets."

"Mark, I'm sorry. I know you were adamant about not getting fixed up, and I had every intention of honoring that, but there was more to it." Mark had never seen Dan look anything but confident, but right then his picture belonged in the dictionary next to 'shamefaced'. "And you said you didn't have blinders on—that if the right man was there in front of you, you weren't going to ignore it. All I did was put you within sight of each other."

"Thanks." Mark smiled when Dan squinted in confusion. "Dan, it's okay. Seriously, do I look mad to you?" Mark turned back to Landon. "What I don't get, is why *you are*. I know he broke his word, but isn't the result worth it?"

"You don't get it," Landon growled and flung an arm towards Dan. "How would you feel if you finally met a guy you like. I mean, really, really like. And the only way you can get a date is for your uncle to set it up? And not just that. I mean, when I said my mom was hovering, that wasn't the half of it. What I should have said was that she's the world's most overprotective, smothering, meddling woman I—"

"Landon," Dan warned. "Your mom may go overboard, but she cares."

Landon sighed and closed his eyes. "Yeah, I know. I just thought I'd get a little freedom from the overboard part here." When he opened his eyes there was a sarcastic twist to his smile. "The last thing I expected was for her to call and start in with a hundred and one questions about the nice young man that I was seeing, and how Uncle Dan approved of him."

Mark chuckled. "Seriously? Wow, Dan, I think I'd be plenty pissed too. You don't go snitching about a guy's love life to his *mom*."

"Um, yeah." Dan winced. "She calls every week, and I just wanted her to stop worrying so much. Sorry about that."

Landon was calmer now and Mark could tell he was more hurt and disappointed than angry. He closed the distance between them and wrapped his fingers around Landon's wrist, rubbing his thumb over Landon's pulse. "So, what did you tell her about me?" he whispered, a seductive tease in his voice.

"Oh, the usual," Landon's eyes lit up as he whispered back. "That your ass is very grabbable and you have a mouth made for blowjobs."

Mark laughed. "Good to know. Nothing about my kissing skills, though, huh?"

"Okay." Dan clapped his hands. "I really didn't need to hear that. Why

don't you young men get out of here? Class isn't for," he checked his watch, "over an hour."

"Yes, Professor," Mark said at the same time Landon chimed in, "Sure, Uncle Dan."

"Am I forgiven for my misguided, but still good intentions?" Dan asked to both of them.

"I guess," Landon huffed. "But if you ever meddle again, I'm telling Uncle Len on you."

Mark was glad to see the ruffled feathers smoothed out, but he was curious about something. "One thing, though. You said that you had every intention of honoring my no-dating policy, but that you didn't because there was more to it. What did you mean by that?"

"Um." Dan gave Landon a pointed look. "Maybe you should tell him. I don't want to get into any more trouble."

Landon nodded, hesitated, then stepped towards the door. "Yes, but privately." He tugged on Mark's hand to get him to follow.

Mark thought about stopping their retreat when he remembered he'd wanted to talk to Dan, but that didn't feel nearly as important as getting Landon alone.

"Your place?" Landon wagged his brows.

"Sam's there. But I know of a place."

Getting Landon alone in his dorm room would be nice, but the spot Mark had in mind was almost as good. He led Landon down a hall and up the stairs to behind the main theatre.

"Here." It was a small loft room above and behind the stage used for extra props and equipment. "I've heard rumors that this is on the top-ten list for make-out places on campus, but I haven't had the pleasure of trying it yet."

Landon laughed. "Looks good." He spun in a slow circle, taking in the odd assortment of things cluttering the room. "No bed though," he said with a wink over his shoulder at Mark.

"Nope. But that's probably a good thing. Can you imagine how gross that would be, stashed up here and used by who knows how many people? Yuck." Mark shuddered. "Besides, I thought we were looking for privacy to talk."

Landon's slump of disappointment and small pout would've been comical if Mark didn't feel it just as acutely. "Yeah, I s'pose," Landon said, resigned, as

he took a step closer to a large wall shelf and leaned against it. "So, you wanted to know about why Dan fixed us up? You see, that's mainly why I was so mad at him. He had insider information that he only had because he teaches here. Uncle Dan didn't just set us up because he thought we'd be good together, he knew that I liked you."

"There's nothing wrong with that. If you told him—"

"No, I didn't. You did. Without meaning to, of course. But..." he trailed off with a heavy sigh, like the world was about to come crashing down around him.

"Landon, you're talking in riddles."

"Remember, last weekend when I told you I had a confession to make?" Landon asked.

Mark thought for a second and the memory—they naked in bed, freshly sated and talking quietly, made his body go warm all over again. "Oh yeah. We got a little distracted, so I forgot about that."

Landon nodded, but he must have been remembering what distracted them too, because a knowing smirk followed. "Anyway, I was going to tell you—" he paused and looked down towards Mark's shoes. "I—I'm your secret admirer. That's why Dan set us up. Because you told him about the gifts, he put it together that it was me, and he thought he'd help out, all sneaky-like."

"Seriously?" Mark's head cocked to the side as he thought back. Landon was his admirer—*Landon*. Except... "You didn't know anything about the underwear."

"That's because I didn't send them. I know you said it would be too big of a coincidence to have two different admirers, and I don't know what else this other person sent you, but I *swear* the underwear wasn't from me."

"I believe you, but that's really weird." Mark walked over to stand next to Landon against the shelf, their shoulders almost touching. Now that he could put a face to them, the gifts didn't seem nearly as ominous, and he found himself almost desperate to slot them in place with what he knew about Landon—to give each of them a new, personal meaning. "What *was* from you? The CD?"

"Yes. It was, well, it was kind of impulsive. I overheard you tell a friend about how you couldn't get in to the Christmas spirit because we didn't have any snow here yet. And, I don't know," Landon shrugged, "I was Christmas shopping the next week and saw the CD, so I bought it. I wasn't even sure if you liked country music, but it's my favorite and it was Christmas songs, so..."

"Are you shittin' me? You like country music too?"

"I grew up not far from Nashville. So, southern rock and country, yeah."

"Cool." *Something else in common. Sweet.* "What else? The sketch had to be you."

"I drew it last summer from a picture someone else took of the play." He looked sideways at Mark, one corner of his mouth lifted. "I thought you looked hot. But then I didn't know what to do with the sketch once it was done. It was sitting in a drawer in my room, hiding under other stuff where no one could see it. I thought, what the hell, and sent it to you for Christmas because at least you'd get to put it up somewhere. I mean, if you liked it."

"I love it. My mom has it on the mantel back home." Mark propped his shoulder against the shelf so he could watch Landon's profile. He took Landon's hand and lifted it to kiss the back. Landon flushed pink, which was growing to be Mark's favorite look on him, so he kissed Landon's hand again before letting their joined hands settle between their bodies.

"And then there were the cookies. I saw you one day in January looking really down, and I guess I hoped they'd put a smile on your face. And they did." Landon laughed softly. "You have no idea how it felt to see you eating them in class that day. I don't think you realized you were practically moaning after every bite, and I had to keep my face down so nobody would see me smiling."

"Oh, really? You're so cute."

"Shut up." Landon bumped his shoulder against Mark, but then stayed there, settling in against him. "And the last one was an umbrella. You did get that, right? I wasn't sure with leaving it outside the scene shop, but it was going to rain, and I had two, so..."

"Yeah, I got it," Mark said softly. "Thank you."

"Um, Mark?"

"Yeah?"

"Do you still think it's... I mean, I swear I'm not a weird stalker or a crazy person. I didn't even mean for it to turn into a secret admirer thing. I just liked you, and... Shit. Do you think I was being creepy?" Landon blurted the last question with an exhale.

"No." Mark leaned in and whispered in Landon's ear, "Can I tell you a secret?" He felt Landon's slight nod. "I wished it was you."

Landon twisted and looked Mark in the eye so they were only a few inches apart. "Yeah?"

"Yeah." This close, Mark could see little flecks of yellow and brown with the green of Landon's eyes. *God, he's beautiful.* "Right from the start. If you'd asked me out, I would have jumped at the chance."

"Well, I didn't know that then." Landon smiled as he reached out, first softly rubbing the hollow of Mark's neck with his thumb, then sliding his knuckles up and down over the same spot, his eyes never leaving Mark's. "After that first time when I made a fool out of myself, it was so hard to get up the courage to try again. The couple times I was going to, you were never alone. You have all these friends and ten times that in confidence. And me? I was the idiot that every time I got within ten feet of you, I forgot what speech was."

Mark scooted closer to kiss the corner of Landon's mouth. "We're a matching pair then. Because I was the idiot that even after you ran me over in the snow, and I thought you were a rude jerk, still spent a week thinking about you."

"Well, I am unforgettable that way." Landon preened.

"Damn right you are."

"Any other questions?"

From the look on Landon's face, Mark couldn't tell if he really expected there to be more questions, but... "Um, actually yes." Mark felt stupid for asking, for feeling unsure and wanting to hear it out loud, so instead he asked the first thing he could think of. "Why'd you keep Dan being your uncle a secret?" His face heated, but he plunged ahead. "And, you were probably kidding around yesterday, but I thought I'd, um, you know... check, in case you really wanted it official between us. And, I guess I was curious if you meant what you said about lace turning you on, or were you just being nice?"

He looked up, realizing he'd been focused on a button on Landon's shirt instead of Landon, and for the first time in a week, witnessed the lip-bite to beat all lip-bites. To be fair, the smile did look in extreme danger of escaping and running rampant all over Landon's face. Maybe even causing harm with muscle cramps in his cheeks.

"Yes," Landon whispered and took the small step in to press against Mark.

"Yes? How does that answer any of my questions?"

"It's the answer to the only one you really wanted to know." Landon put his hand on Mark's chest, rubbing slowly but much too softly. Mark wanted to push into it, to get closer.

"And how do you know that?"

"Usually, when someone has a list of questions, they put the one they really want to know in the middle. They hide it between things that aren't as personal. And since you've brought up relationship status three times in a week, it didn't take a genius to figure out that what you were really asking." Landon moved to within a breath of Mark's ear and whispered, "My answer is yes, I'm yours." He gave Mark's earlobe a tug with his teeth.

Mark's breath hitched. "Oh, you little brat. Now all I want to do is kick Sam out of our room." Landon's husky laugh didn't help the bulge growing in Mark's jeans. "One last question," he growled, pulling Landon closer. "How do you feel about testing out if this room really should be rated in the top ten?"

The instant heat in Landon's eyes answered before his words. "Hell yes."

They made it back to class with only seconds to spare, laughing and ignoring Dan's knowing look as they rushed in. Mark tried to concentrate on the lecture, he really did, but the secretive smiles and nudges from Landon were quite the distraction. By the time Dan let them loose, Mark wasn't sure if he'd absorbed a single thing the professor had said.

"You never did answer my other questions." Mark said as they walked across campus towards the campus center for lunch.

"I thought I answered the last one quite well. And enthusiastically."

"I'll agree with you there." Mark hummed and smiled to himself. "I meant about the lace," he clarified in a hushed voice, so the other students around them couldn't hear.

"Oh, I thought you were just asking that for filler. Wasn't it obvious? Yes, I like it. Um..." Landon gave Mark's body a slow once-over from the side. "A lot."

Mark nodded. "Good."

"Matter of fact, if you wanted, I could be your not-so-secret admirer and send you something. Maybe something red?" Landon teased, but Mark could see the sincerity and excitement there too.

"Mmm, I'd like that. I, um," Mark laughed and shook his head as he opened the door to the campus center, letting Landon in first and following closely behind him. He grabbed the back of Landon's coat to bring them a little closer before he admitted, "I ordered something else."

Landon stopped and spun around. "Wow. Do you, um, already have it?" The heat in Landon's eyes was back.

"Not yet. But you'll be the first to know."

Landon slapped Mark on the hip. "I better be the only."

"Of course." They started walking again and were halfway up the steps when Mark had a thought. "Except it's something to sleep in, so Sam might see it on occasion. Since he helped me pick it out..." Mark stopped short at the cafeteria doors.

"Aren't you coming?" Landon asked over his shoulder. He must have noticed Mark's stunned look, because a crease appeared between his brows as he turned and asked, "Mark, is everything okay?"

"Mystery solved," Mark whispered, more to himself than Landon. "I know who sent the underwear."

"Who?"

"Sam. It makes perfect sense."

"Do you think Sam has feelings for you?" Landon asked, looking concerned.

"Of course not. He's straight. But he was borrowing my computer that whole week. Even when he said something about how I should close my internet browser, I didn't put it together, but I'd been looking up cross-dressing, and bam, a few days later I get the underwear. There's no way that could be a coincidence. And, not only has he spent the last couple weeks trying to prove how supportive he is, he didn't blink an eye when he walked in and caught me wearing stockings. Like he expected it." The more Mark thought about it, the more obvious it was. That was so like Sam.

"That's right, you'd said he walked in on you, but I was paying more attention to other things at the time." Landon gave Mark a wicked smile that indicated what he'd been focused on. "Holy shit. That had to be interesting."

"You have no idea. I dove under the covers so damn fast, I fell off the bed."

"But if it's him, then why would he try to make it seem like it was from your admirer? You guys are close. Why wouldn't he just buy them and give them to you?"

"First, you'd have to know Sam better, but that's exactly what he'd do. He'd never feel comfortable giving me something like that, but he probably thought I'd never really find out who the admirer was, so it was a safe. The only part I'm not sure about is if he meant it to be one of our typical pranks, and then felt badly when he realized that it was..." Mark shrugged a shoulder as he thought of how to put it, "something that maybe shouldn't be used as a joke, or personal or something. Or if he saw what I was looking up and ordered the underwear to be helpful."

Landon stayed quiet for a long moment. Finally, he blurted out, "Are you sure he's completely straight?"

"Wh-what?" Mark sputtered. "Yes, I'm sure. Sam would tell me if he wasn't."

"Yeah. Yeah, you're probably right." Landon sighed, but he didn't look convinced. "For the record, if he was the one who sent the underwear, I think it was to be helpful. Just," he paused, his expression unreadable, "just promise that when you ask him about it, that you'll keep an open mind. Don't put him in a box, just because that's how you know him. And don't treat it like a joke. You know, be sensitive about it, just in case."

Landon actually looked worried, which was sweet in a way. "Babe, I promise I'll be as sensitive as I know how." A large group was walking their way, and since they were blocking the entrance to the cafeteria, Mark took Landon's hand and pulled him out of the way. He wasn't ready to have to share Landon with all of their friends yet, so once they were out of the group's path, he kept walking to the next hallway. He turned the corner and tugged Landon closer. "You know, you are going to make one kickass psychologist one day."

Mark could tell by the bashful downturn of Landon's head that he'd caught his man by surprise, earning him a sweet smile.

"Why is that?"

"Because you care so much about other people. And you don't judge." Mark wrapped his arms around Landon's waist and slid his lips across Landon's cheek. "You're wonderful. And you may be pissed at your uncle for setting us up, but I want to buy the man a damned fruit basket."

Landon chuckled and leaned in closer. “You are an absolute nut.” He turned his head to capture Mark’s lips.

Mark could hear the low hum of conversation in the cafeteria, but the hall was vacant and just theirs for the moment. The kiss lingered, and just when Mark started to think that lunch could wait indefinitely, Landon pulled back.

“Tell you what,” Landon began as he took a deep breath and composed himself. “I’ll go in half on the fruit basket.”

The End

Author Bio

Jessa Ryan grew up in Oregon, where she fell in love with rainy days, the beach, and books. Now she lives in Minnesota with her amazing husband and four wonderful children, who not only put up with her crazy writing and general zaniness, but actually look at it as a bonus.

Other than her family, there's nothing she loves more than hiding under a quilt with a mug of coffee, and either a good book or her laptop.

Contact & Media Info

[Email](#) | [WordPress](#) | [Facebook](#) | [Goodreads](#)