

LOVE'S LANDSCAPES



Don't Read in the Closet 2014

ON EDGE

T.C. Blue

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

ON EDGE

By T.C. Blue

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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ON EDGE

By T.C. Blue

Photo Description

Fan art of Dean/Castiel from *Supernatural* almost kissing beneath a streetlight against a cityscape backdrop.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

~They are enemies.

Always have been. Always will be.

Nothing can change that. Nothing. ~

Something changes that.

Please write a contemporary enemies-to-lovers, slow-burn story with an HFN or HEA ending. There should be strong character motivations for hating each other and strong actions to help redeem their past wrongs.

The quote above should be included in the story.

Sincerely,

Anyta

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, first time (sort of), enemies to lovers, rampant assbattery, frat house, men being stubborn, non-cheating promiscuity, past betrayal

Word Count: 51,203

ON EDGE

By T.C. Blue

Chapter One

August 2010

“So, what about high school? Do you miss it?”

“Not really. It was... an experience, I guess, but not the kind I'd want to repeat, you know? But...”

The last thing—the very last thing—Shane Parks missed was high school.

“I was thrilled when it was over.” He didn't even like thinking about it, but the question brought back all sorts of memories, most of them bad. “It's kind of a long story, but...” Shane spoke on, though he was mostly talking to himself.

By midway through senior year, he'd known several of his one-time friends back home were already lamenting their shitty luck at either not being accepted to the colleges they'd applied for, or discovering they couldn't afford the schools they did get into. The rest, who hadn't planned on going to college at all, had been less disappointed with their lots in life. Most of those kids were either working or training in various professions as apprentices, of sorts.

The ones who hadn't ditched Carter, Wyoming, just as fast as they could, anyway. Shane's sort-of friend, Tommy, had shown up at graduation with everything already packed and piled up in the ragged-looking old Honda he drove. Tommy had bought the thing at age fifteen and spent the next three years fixing and replacing everything possible, on the mechanical side. The cosmetic aspect of the car had never mattered much to Tommy, whose motivational mantra “as long as it gets me the hell out of here and at least close to Hollywood, I couldn't give a crap how it looks” came as a surprise to those who didn't know him well.

Much like Shane, Tommy was the kind of kid who wasn't entirely welcome in their smallish town of four thousand or so, even if nobody ever said it out loud. It was a given, though, and everyone in Carter knew it—if you were different, by which people meant the nasty-wrong-bad G-word, you either made sure no one ever knew, or you left as soon as you were able. Preferably both. For Tommy, it had been both.

If Shane were asked and truly had to answer, he would admit that Carter hadn't been a bad place to grow up. He'd had a great childhood, full of the usual things kids loved. He'd played softball for the little league team his

stepdad's car dealership sponsored, then baseball in school. He'd had a spot on his school's bowling team, too, and the entire countryside had been his playground. Things could have been much, much worse, right up until his junior year of high school.

Even then, it hadn't been so bad. Not like what he'd read about on the internet, with kids like him cutting or killing themselves. He'd been beat up a few times, sure. Suspended for fighting when he responded in kind. If he never tasted toilet water again, it would be too soon, and sure, he'd bought more cans of spray paint than seemed reasonable, to cover the crap some of the other kids wrote on his locker, but he'd handled it. He'd been lucky, really. His mom worked for the town's mayor, so Shane hadn't gotten as much shit as others.

So Shane didn't miss high school at all. He might miss his mother and stepdad, Rob, a little, but he didn't miss anything else about Carter. If he was lucky, he'd never have to go back there again, except for semester breaks and holidays, of course. His mom was a big fan of family holidays, though Shane didn't really know why. It wasn't like they had much family to catch up with, but it made her happy, and she and Rob had been really good about the whole G-word thing. Rob claimed that he'd known for years before Shane ever admitted it, while his mom... Well, Mom hadn't been happy about it, right at first—she still wasn't, really—but one night when she'd had a glass of wine or three too many, she'd flat-out said, or slurred, that at least Shane's sin wasn't likely to have him in prison like his father.

His dad had died there, too, and while Rob was only his stepfather, the man had been more honest with Shane than Mom. Yeah, Dad was stabbed in prison and died, but he would have ended up dead anyway. Prisons didn't supply condoms to inmates, and Shane's father had been in for almost ten years when he died. Rob said it was probably a blessing by then, considering.

His father's criminal tendencies hadn't been an issue until after Shane became *out*, when someone, he still didn't know who, had dug up that bit of the past and spread it around. Like his biological father being in prison somehow explained Shane's bent. As if.

“Oh, man. That's messed up. My experience was nothing like that bad.”

Tyler, who Shane kept wanting to call Taylor, due to his resemblance to the wolf guy in the *Twilight* movies, sounded almost as freaked out as he looked, and Shane was pretty sure he'd just blown any chance he'd had of pledging the unofficial GLBT fraternity.

It was unofficial in that it wasn't sanctioned by whatever body ruled over frats and it didn't have any freaky Greek letters, but the University College of the State of Nevada recognized unofficial frats and sororities, as long as those organizations had at least one recognized, official chapter at an accredited school, and LKNG had chapters with at least six colleges that Shane knew of.

"Well, you're local, right?" he asked, cocking his head. "I mean, Vegas isn't anything like the same as Carter, Wyoming, you know? For one thing, it's way bigger. For another... I'm guessing there's no shortage of people here who are... different. Local is good. For you, anyway."

"Yeah." Tyler nodded, smiling a little. "I mean, I'm not 'gonna drive home for dinner every night' local, but it's only, like, forty minutes away. So that's your story, then."

Shane snorted. He'd already blown the *story of your life* portion of the hazing. He might as well finish it. "As if."

Tyler frowned, the tiny smile vanishing. "Huh?"

"There was this boy," Shane said quietly, leaning over the narrow coffee table between his chair and Tyler's. "I met him a little after I started junior year, and he was... God, Tyler, he was perfect. He lived in the next town over, so we didn't go to school together or anything, and he was a senior, so I knew it wouldn't last."

"Yeah?"

"Yeah." Shane forced himself to smile, though he suspected it looked fake as all hell. "How many high school relationships last after graduation? You see it all the time, right? Kids graduate and move on with their lives. Even when they swear they're never gonna change, and that's just if they're still together by the time someone graduates."

"I guess that's not what happened with you and your guy," Tyler said, pouring Shane another drink while the rest of the fraternity brothers remained in the background, watching and listening.

Shane wasn't exactly thrilled that his confession was being witnessed by the entire group, but it was the final step of the hazing. He was supposed to be completely honest, to prove that he trusted the men he would hopefully be able to call brothers one day soon. He wasn't sure that he really did trust them, but he believed Tyler when he said none of them would repeat anything Shane said. Even if they did decide to tell people his truths, he wasn't ashamed of himself,

for the most part. It was only the end of his story that he felt both satisfied with and slightly guilty for. Only slightly, though. Not enough that he lost any sleep over it.

“It’s a long story,” Shane said after a few seconds and a long swig of rum. “The short version is... I went to meet him at this diner in his town, and it turned out a bunch of guys from his football team ran into him before I got there. When I did, one of them started calling me a fag. Then he said if I was a fag, the guy I was seeing was a fag, too, and he wasn’t out, you know?”

Tyler groaned. “Oh, this has clusterfuck written all over it.”

Shane chuckled, even though there wasn’t anything funny about it. “You know it. So there I was, standing in this diner, confused because the guy I was seeing was just taking this kid’s bullshit, and I started to get pissed off. Then the guy I was there for was laughing with his buddies, saying that yeah, I must be a fag, but how was he supposed to know that since I played baseball and bowled. Next thing I knew, he and his friends got up and crowded me to the back of the diner, where the bathrooms were.”

Tyler didn’t say anything, but Shane saw the knowledge in the guy’s eyes and nodded.

“Turns out,” he said, “if a bunch of assholes decide to give you a swirly in a toilet that hasn’t been disinfected well enough, or possibly at all, there are a bunch of germs that can find their way into your system. Some of them can cause things like... Oh, completely unexpected explosive diarrhea during English class. And I do mean *explosive*.”

“Shit...” Tyler’s eyes were wide, his voice so hushed the guy might as well have been in church.

“Literally,” Shane grumbled. “For the next year and a half, I was shit-boy, or my personal favorite, *Come-Farts*. The rumor was that I’d taken so many loads up my ass, my body rejected them, and that was why I’d humiliated myself at school. Never mind that I had to go to the hospital in Cheyenne to find out what was wrong with me. Never mind that I was on three different courses of antibiotics to get well again, or even that I missed two weeks of school. I was suddenly out, even though I’d never really been in. I’d just never said anything and my best friend was a girl, so people kind of assumed we were together. So school wasn’t fun after that, and I think that’s the part that sucked the most. I *liked* school before it got so... mean.”

It had been even more difficult when Carrie cut him off, too. It still felt like one day she'd been his biggest supporter, and the next, she'd been... no. She hadn't gone from encouraging him to insulting him. He couldn't claim that. What she'd done was worse. One day, he'd been her best friend, but when he'd returned from Cheyenne with a clean bill of health, she'd acted like he didn't exist. It wasn't even because she'd just found out he was gay, because she'd known that since she'd tried to kiss him when they were twelve. He'd been unable to hide his discomfort, and when she'd asked what was wrong with her, he hadn't been able to let her think anything was.

He'd told her he didn't like girls that way, but if he did, she'd be the one he would like, but since she wasn't a boy... She'd kept his secret, too. Even when the rest of the school, including other former friends, had ganged up on him, tried to hurt him, Carrie hadn't added any fuel to the fire. She'd just pretended they'd never met and that Shane was invisible. He couldn't even hate her for it, after loving her like a sister for so long, damn it. He also couldn't forget that she'd left him to deal with the bullshit alone.

"So what happened to the guy you were seeing? The one who shoved your head in the toilet?" Tyler didn't seem to be asking out of pure curiosity. Shane had spent enough time with the guy to recognize the difference between idle curiosity and purposeful interest.

He almost lied. Almost made up some bullshit that would make it seem like he'd taken the high road by trusting fate or the universe or karma to punish the fucker who'd ruined his life, but he didn't. He wanted to be a part of the LKNG brotherhood, and if that was going to happen, it couldn't be under false pretenses. His father had been a habitual liar, even after going to prison. Shane refused to be like him. He just wouldn't.

"He called me the day after the swirly," Shane said, doing his best to sound merely factual and not at all like he was still pissed off. "Said he was sorry, but what else could he do when his friends were right there, egging him on. He wanted to know when we could hook up again." He snorted. "I told him 'never.' Then I got sick a few days later, and he texted me, like, fifty times, wanting to see me. So when I was better, I went to meet him."

God, he didn't want to say anything more, but he had to. First, he needed more rum, so he held out his glass and offered as much of a smile as he could when Tyler poured him another few inches.

Shane sipped quickly in small batches, then finally steeled himself and went on.

“He wanted to make up, or so he said, but he wasn’t actually sorry. And he wanted to fuck me, which we hadn’t actually gotten around to before, but he... God, he said it didn’t have to mean anything, because I’d let so many other dudes at my ass that—” Shane frowned. “He didn’t care if I’d had so much cock that fucking me would feel like throwing a hotdog down a hallway. His words. Because the story about the diarrhea had made it from my school to his, you know? And when I told him no, he got mad. I had to kick him in the junk to get away.”

He’d run faster than he’d ever done rounding third. Run so hard and fast that when he’d reached his car and thrown himself into the driver’s seat, it had taken him a good fifteen seconds to be able to fit the key into the ignition, his hands had been shaking so badly. Then he’d driven the forty miles home, heart still racing even after he’d passed the Carter Township limits.

“After that,” Shane said bluntly, staring right into Tyler’s eyes, “I was done playing nice. I outed him. Deliberately and undeniably. I had a picture on my phone of him blowing me. I don’t think he even knew I took it, but I’d wanted it just so... I don’t know. So I could look at it and know I wasn’t dreaming when we couldn’t be together, you know? And I did, right up until... what I told you about.

“So I had this picture, and even though his eyes were closed, there was no question about who it was or what he was doing. I posted it on the internet, tagging him and everyone I could think of, from my school and his.”

Tyler’s eyes went wide, and Shane nodded, closing his own for a moment.

“I took it down the next day. Deleted the post. Not because I’d changed my mind, but because I was still seventeen at the time, and I saw some show where a girl who posted a picture of herself in her underwear was somehow charged with child pornography. He was eighteen, so he couldn’t sue me, but I didn’t want to go to jail for posting a shot of my own cock in someone’s mouth.”

“What happened to your boyfriend?”

That was one of the other guys. Shane couldn’t be sure, but he thought it might be William. Or possibly Greg.

“He wasn’t my boyfriend, no matter what I thought before swirly-night,” Shane grumbled. “He was my... closeted hook-up, I guess. And I was his, but not quite so afraid. There’s no way to mistake that for being boyfriends. At least, I hope not, because when I do have a boyfriend, it’d better be way more than sneaking around to get off and the very occasional softy at DQ.”

He heard a few mutters but they seemed to be agreeing, so Shane didn't react to them. Instead, he took another swallow of rum and leaned back in his chair as he continued, saying, "As far as I know, he became a joke at his school, but he told some lies about me. In the end, he didn't lose his football scholarship. Not that he needed it. His family is loaded." Shane shrugged. "Either way, I'm sure he's fine. Probably dating some girl from an appropriate family by now. That was always his plan, from what I found out later. Marry well, have kids, work for his dad's company, and have guys on the side. Many, many guys. I wish him luck with that."

Not really. Shane actually hoped his asshole ex would be miserable. Forever. It just wasn't nice or polite to say so.

"And what do you want? For yourself, here at UCSN?" Tyler's head was cocked in the way that announced sincere interest. Shane honestly wanted to play poker with the guy, because God, Tyler had about a million and one tells.

Shane sighed and drained his glass before setting it down on the low table.

"I want to do well in my classes. Pre-med is a tough curriculum and I'm not even sure it's right for me, but I'd rather kick ass at something I change my mind about later than do badly at something I decide I really want, you know?" Shane let the corner of his mouth twitch up in a wry sort of half-grin. "I want to be surrounded by people who won't judge me for *what* I am, but for *who* I am. And if I ever manage to find five spare seconds to have a personal life, I want it to be in a place like this house, where the only comments that'll be flung at me and any prospective boyfriend will be about how hot he is and how we should try to keep it down after midnight. I know I probably totally destroyed every chance I ever had of that by telling you how I outed the asshole, but it'd be cool if we could be friends and stuff, even without being brothers."

Shane was facing away from all the frat guys except Tyler, so he couldn't be sure what was happening when Tyler looked past him and arched a brow. He was completely baffled when the swarm of white ping-pong balls, and just a few blue ones, started to fly over his head. Many of them hit Tyler, who laughed and batted at the missiles.

"Anyone abstaining?" Tyler asked before nodding once. "Noted, and I understand why. I also appreciate your sense of fair play. So the votes are cast and Shane Parks is accepted into our band of brothers. That makes four this year. Awesome! Shane, welcome to LKNG. We all hope you'll be happy here."

He wasn't sure if it was the rum or just the fact that he'd been so certain he'd be sent away, but for some reason, Shane found himself staring at Tyler, even as the rest of the guys surrounded him, offering hugs and high-fives. A few stood back and Shane somehow grasped that they'd been the ones to toss the blue balls, which presumably signaled a no vote. He couldn't blame them, but he did hope that they'd become closer over the coming years. Outing people wasn't his go-to, but they had no way of being sure. Not that they needed to worry. If they lived in the LKNG house, chances were good that everyone already knew they were gay. Even so...

"I. Are you serious?" He stood quickly and almost toppled over when the motion had all the booze rushing to his head. "Whoa. Head rush. Um, are you sure?"

William, the LKNG brother who Shane thought had asked about the ex, laughed and wrapped a long, lithely muscled arm around his shoulders. "We were pretty sure even before tonight, man. Most of us, anyway. I voted yes, in case you're wondering. It's not that I think it's cool that you outed that dude, but I like that you were honest about it. And I guess I can't say I wouldn't do the same in that situation. I mean, he sounds like a total douchelord."

Shane sighed and leaned against William's side, the liquor hitting him harder by the moment. "He wasn't always, but yeah. At the end? Yeah, he pretty much was. Um, I should go. I need to get to bed, or fall down or something."

William chuckled and turned him, until Shane was staring at William's nose. It took a second for him to realize he could tilt his head and meet the guy's eyes. The guy's light brown eyes.

"You're tall," Shane said, as though he'd just noticed. "Six-three?" Something like that. Way taller than Shane's own five-eleven, anyway.

"Six-four," William answered, grinning in a way Shane wasn't sure he liked. He didn't dislike it either, though. "You could crash here. In my room. My bed is big enough for two."

Tyler appeared beside them and laughed. "Your bed is big enough for *four*. I know because there have been four people in it on more than one night. Now stop trying to seduce our new brother while he's drunk. You know that's against the rules, man."

Right. Rule six. Something like that. *Thou shalt not take advantage of the drunk or otherwise impaired.* It was a good rule, and while Shane wasn't quite

drunk, he wasn't far from it, either. It would be better to invoke the rule than tell William that no matter how attractive he was, and how funny, he just wasn't Shane's type. Some guys took that as a challenge, and Shane kind of thought William might be one of them.

"Can you call a cab for me?" Shane asked Tyler, trying to seem as sober as he wished to be. He'd been fine until he'd stood up, damn it, and the last thing he needed was to try walking back to the monthly rental across town.

"I can," Tyler answered, prying William's arm away from him and replacing it with his own. Shane smiled when he realized they were the same height. Less neck strain, thank God. "Or—and don't take this the wrong way, because I don't mean it the way William did—you can crash with me tonight. I can't swear there won't be any cuddling, because I'm totally a cuddler, but any snuggling will be totally innocent. Mostly innocent."

Tyler grinned, and it set Shane's mind at ease.

"Okay. I've never cuddled, but it sounds like fun. You can be my Yoda."

October

School was fun, and hard, and the more he studied, the less sure he was that he wanted to go into medicine, but he wasn't the sort to give up without truly applying himself. It was when he realized that he was applying far more effort to hitting the gay bars and collecting phone numbers—though not actually calling them—that Shane accepted the truth. His mom's dreams for him, and his stepdad's, too, weren't *his*. Becoming a doctor sounded really cool, but the more he thought about it, the more he knew it wasn't his calling. He just didn't know what was, and he'd already started the curriculum, so he could finish out the year, couldn't he?

He might as well, especially with Tyler and William helping him study. They'd even made flash cards. It would be rude to change curriculums right then, after all the effort they'd put in.

He still slept with Tyler every once in a while, in the sense of actually sleeping. Hard as Shane tried, he couldn't quite manage to be interested in Ty. He wanted to be—God, did he ever want to be—because Tyler was smart and hot and all sorts of nice, but for whatever reason, the attraction just wasn't there. On Shane's side, anyway. Tyler had made it more than clear that if Shane gave him a shot, Ty would be the best boyfriend ever.

Shane couldn't swear that he'd never feel that way, but he didn't think it was likely. He'd even said so, more than once. "I don't want you to wait for me, Ty," he'd said softly but seriously, just the night before. "You're a great guy. You should find someone who'll treat you right, and I'm pretty sure that's not gonna be me."

Tyler always smiled and shook his head. "Pretty sure isn't the same as a hundred percent certain, is it? So, no. I mean, I'm not exactly waiting. If I meet someone and it seems right, I'll be all over that. But for now, I... Just let me have this, okay?"

Shane's agreement was reluctant, but familiar to him. He liked Tyler; liked the comfort he felt with him. He was almost sure that Ty's feelings were similar to his own, too. Comfortable affection, rather than any sort of... grand passion, as the romance novels his mother read called it. There wasn't any sort of sex going on between them, in any case. No matter how many times Shane woke up in Tyler's bed with Ty's cock hard and pressed tightly against his spine.

Shane wasn't having sex at all, with or without Ty. He wanted to, of course, because he was almost nineteen and tired of his own hand, but... He wasn't his father, he wasn't his ex, and he wasn't William.

As nerdy and uncool as it might be, when he had sex, he wanted it to mean something. He wanted it to be special, damn it, and while he was sure Tyler or William would make him feel special during the act, he wanted his first foray into full-on penetration to be with someone who made him feel special *all* the time; not just when they were getting down to the bump-and-grind.

Ty would try. Shane knew that. But while Tyler did always make him feel special, it wasn't the right *kind* of special. Probably because Shane didn't see Ty that way. At some point, he hoped, Tyler would recognize the deep, abiding friendship Shane felt for him and stop hoping for more.

In the meantime, Shane was happy to accept the kindnesses Tyler extended—the nights snuggled together under Ty's blankets when Shane couldn't sleep, he was so anxious about the courses he didn't even want to be taking, or those times when Ty just didn't want to be alone.

There would be a reckoning someday, Shane was sure, but he'd never lied to Ty. Never said anything to imply that they would be more than friends. With any luck, they would be best friends for the rest of their lives. At least, that was what Shane hoped.

And thus passed his first year at the University College of the State of Nevada.

Chapter Two

May 2011

“Peckerbinge! What the hell are you doing in town, *Peckerbinge*? Run out of cocks to suck in Miami?”

Chance turned slowly, free hand clenching into a fist at his side as he stared at Jimmy Hopkins, who'd nearly shouted the words. Fucking asshole was the one who'd come up with that nickname after the photo incident. It had made the rounds like wildfire, too, until the only people not using it by high school graduation had been the teachers. It still pissed Chance off almost as much as the way god damned Shane Parks had outed him, but Chance's last two years at Mid-Miami State University had taught him to hold his temper. That, and he had bigger things to worry about. Like his scholarship, after the bicycle accident that had blown out his knee just two months before summer break.

The doctors he'd seen were good, but neither they nor his surgeon could say for sure whether it would ever recover enough to play again at the college level. He was under strict orders to follow his physical therapy schedule and not overdo it, but there was no way of knowing how things would turn out until he returned to school in the fall.

Coach had been nice about it, but the truth was, if Chance couldn't play, MMSU wouldn't be able to continue his scholarship past the next semester. Fuck knew what he'd do if that happened. His family could afford to pay his tuition, but the family money always came with strings; he had no reason to believe tuition costs would be exempt from that rule, and the possibility would decrease even more if he got in a fight with Jimmy fucking Hopkins in the middle of the grocery store.

“What do you want, Jimmy? Or do you just think it's cool to shout at people in public?”

Jimmy smirked, as though he'd wanted Chance to say exactly that, though he also seemed disappointed. Time was, Chance would have yelled back at the mention of cock-sucking, though, so maybe disappointment was understandable.

“I think it's way *un-cool* for you to be walking around town like you own it. Nobody wants you here, *Peckerbinge*.”

Christ, he wanted to wrap his fingers around the shithead's neck and squeeze. His fisted hand clenched harder, and Chance shifted onto his good leg before offering up a smirk of his own. "My parents do," he answered, still smirking. "You remember my parents, right? Brian and Mindy Breckinridge? Oh, wait. That's the name of the town, too. Huh. So maybe I get to walk around *Breckinridge* like I own it because... I kind of do, don't I? I guess you forgot, but that's okay. Too much information for you to hold in that tiny little thing you call a brain, right? I mean, did you even get into the community college over in Bensonville?"

Jimmy hadn't, which Chance knew from the previous summer. His kid brother Jasper had mentioned it like it was divine retribution, but Chance thought that was because Jasper was stuck being the brother of *Peckerbinge*. That was the worst part of things... or not the worst-worst, but it was right up there. Chance's kid brother still caught shit because of Chance's so-called *choice*, no matter how he and his parents had tried to spin things. Some people—like Jimmy, and most of the other kids at Chance's high school—didn't want to believe the lie.

Who the fuck would *choose* to be gay when it only got them laughed at, spit on, and sometimes beaten or killed? Who would ever want to be bullied so badly that they considered killing themselves, or even worse, went through with it? That was the part Chance still didn't get, and probably never would.

"Fuck you, *Peckerbinge*. I didn't want to go to college anyway. Too many fags and queers and cocksuckers there. I bet that's why you're using that stupid cane. You fucked your knee up sucking every Miami cock you could find, right?" There was something so petty and snide in the way Jimmy said it that, when combined with the glare-and-pout the guy was giving him, it somehow defused the anger Chance had been holding down.

He couldn't say whether he or Jimmy was more surprised by the loud laugh that left Chance's mouth. He felt just as startled as Jimmy looked. Jimmy's shocked surprise turned to fury a few seconds later, after Chance stopped laughing and shook his head, saying, "You know, Jimmy, you seem to be really fucking interested in how much cock I suck. Jealous?"

He didn't actually suck cock all that often, but fuck it. If the shithead wanted to think Chance's time at school was a giant orgy of sucking, let him. Chance fucked more than he sucked, but as much as he was so suddenly enjoying pissing Jimmy off, he didn't feel any need to share that bit of info.

"You wish!"

As comebacks went, that one was crap, and even Jimmy knew it.

"I'm pretty sure you're the one who wishes." Chance grinned, tightening his grip on the silver handle of his cane. "You know I was passed-out drunk when that picture was snapped, but I'm not the one who decided to stand in the middle of Miller's Grocery and yell about sucking cock. I bet you think about it all the time, don't you? Hoping I wasn't just trashed and might do it for you, right? Or is there some other reason you wanted to talk to me, closet-queen?"

It was a term he'd heard a few times over the last couple years, but Chance hadn't used it before. It felt dirty, in a way, but good, too, because Jimmy turned a brighter red than Chance had thought possible.

"I! That's! Fuck you!" Jimmy glared, actually shaking before he turned and stalked away so quickly, it looked more like a sprint.

"And let that be a lesson to you," Chance muttered. "Don't get into a battle of wits when you're so totally unarmed."

He ignored the hard looks from the other customers as he grabbed a hand basket from the stack near the door. He'd only planned to pick up a few avocados and possibly some pistachios, but fuck it. If the people in Breckinridge were so set on thinking the worst of him, then Chance would help them along and have a good laugh while he was at it.

Ten minutes later, he limped up to the register and unloaded his basket of avocados, pistachio nuts, cucumbers, condoms and Crisco, and when the guy ringing up the sale started to look ill, Chance laughed. He didn't know what the guy was thinking, but that look was priceless. He needed to remember to tell his surfer buddies about it, too. They'd laugh their asses off.

"How is Rebecca? And her family?" His mother's smile didn't reach her eyes, but that wasn't anything new. Ever since the photograph, she hadn't given him a real smile; not even once.

Chance shrugged, cutting a large chunk from his steak. "She's fine. Her dad's company did pretty well last quarter." That was what Mom really wanted to know. "They decided to take a family trip to Scotland for the summer, so she won't be able to come by this time. I'm sure she'll send a card."

Rebecca would, especially since she had as much reason to promote their farce of a relationship as he did. "Her mother's looking forward to buying some of those Scottish wool sweaters," he added.

“You’re still seeing her.” His father made it a statement rather than a question, but Chance nodded. “Good. We’ve done our best to make sure that mistake of yours doesn’t hurt your reputation, but it’s just the sorta thing that could destroy your future. Phillip Gallow isn’t the kind of man who’d accept a... well, you know... for a son-in-law.”

Chance sighed and shook his head when Jasper made a sound that might have been a laugh or a cough.

“Um.” Chance looked down at his plate and cut another piece of meat before spearing the first with his fork. “Rebecca already knows, Dad.” His father started to respond, but Chance cut him off. “I had to tell her. She understands what happened and she gets it.”

Boy, did she ever. She was the perfect girlfriend for him. Smart, funny, pretty, loaded, and didn’t want to have sex with him any more than he wanted to do that with her. And his parents were right. He would probably marry her someday.

“I still think we should have had that boy arrested.” His mother always said that, on the rare occasion that the picture thing came up. “Getting you drunk and taking advantage that way. It’s criminal.”

Dad frowned and shook his head. “He was a minor, Mindy. We’d have looked like fools, trying to send a child to jail. Even for something like that.”

“And all you had was Chance’s word,” Jasper piped in, sounding just as emotionless as their parents. “A halfway decent defense attorney, even a public defender, would have been able to throw all kinds of reasonable doubt at the judge. It would have been a spectacle, and we all know how much you like avoiding those.”

Fuck, Chance thought as he shoved the forkful of steak into his mouth. Jasper had grown even smarter since the last time Chance had seen him. Then again, that wasn’t exactly a surprise. Jasper might only be sixteen, but he’d already started taking classes for college credit. Football stereotypes aside, Chance was no meathead. Jasper still made him seem like a drooling idiot without even trying.

“Yes. Well. I suppose it’s just as well that you were honest with Rebecca, Chance,” Mom said as she picked at the grilled asparagus on her plate. “That whole distasteful situation will be less likely to...”

“Bite you on the ass later,” Dad finished when Mom trailed off, and if Chance hadn’t had a mouth full of meat, he would have laughed. As it was,

Jasper laughed for both of them, even while their mother tried to chastise Dad for using that sort of language at the dinner table.

“She’s your beard, right?”

Chance did his best not to jump at both the fact that Jasper had entered his room without Chance noticing, and what Jasper had said.

“What?” Okay, he sounded squeaky. “What are you talking about? Do I need to shave?” Better, but Jasper didn’t look like he was buying it. “Why are you in my room, anyway? Knock, you derp!”

Jasper snorted and closed the door behind him, then moved to sit on the end of the bed, cross legged. “Rebecca,” he said, like Chance was stupid. “She’s your beard. I mean, I figure she has to be, because you’re not enough of a douchebag to pretend you like a girl when you really don’t. I mean *like-like*, not just like.”

Chance rolled his eyes. “You’re a smart kid, Jas, but I always forget how young you are until you say shit like ‘like-like.’ Makes you sound like you’re about twelve.” He grinned. “Rebecca’s cool. I *like* her. Seriously, man, do I need to shave?”

Shit. The last thing he needed was to have his kid brother figure things out. Jasper was smart, yeah, but he’d tell their folks, and then Chance would be screwed.

“I’m not stupid.” Jasper seemed offended.

“Yeeeahhhh... Pretty sure I just said you’re smart. Or did I imagine that part?” Chance smirked a little, but not the way he’d done earlier at Jimmy Hopkins. This time he used his big-brother smirk.

“That guy didn’t get you drunk and use you while you were passed out. I’ve seen the picture. It’s still out there, you know.” Jasper made a face that was usually reserved for chili-from-a-can. “And I’m totally fine with never seeing proof that anyone wants to have sex with you ever again, but... That wasn’t slack-and-passed-out face. So the drunk thing is a lie, and that means you’re gay, and *that* means Rebecca is your beard. Um, that’s a girl who pretends to be your girlfriend so you can pretend you’re not gay.”

“I know what a beard is! Jesus! How do you?” Fuck! If Jasper had it all figured out, who else did? Everybody? Was that why Jimmy had been so...

Christ. He was screwed. He was also pissed off that Jasper had seen that fucking picture. Someone needed to beat the shit out of Shane Parks for that, and soon. Hell, Chance would be happy to do it himself, if he ever ran into the fucker again.

Jasper shrugged, looking uncomfortable for the first time Chance could remember since Jas had a stomach bug at six years old. "There's this thing called the Internet. Anyway, I just wanted to let you know it's okay with me. You might have to keep lying to Mom and Dad, but I know the truth. So maybe we can really talk about stuff, okay?"

Chance shook his head, trying to let go of the fury even thinking about Shane caused. "I'm not..." Shit, he didn't want to lie to Jasper. It was one thing to lie to the world and let Jasper believe it, but deliberately lying to his little brother? That felt wrong, somehow.

"Oh, man, you so totally are." Jasper grinned. "Need a hug? You look like you're about to cry. Is that something you gay guys do a lot?"

Chance groaned, but opened his arms wide. "Come here, kid." Jasper seemed torn. "You might be shooting for irritating-kid-brother-of-all-time right now, but yeah. I could use a hug."

"Just don't feel me up. That would be weird. And incestuous," Jasper joked, moving into the hug. "Besides, you're totally not my type."

He ignored the tightness in his knee and the intensifying spikes of pain. It was more important to hug his brother right then. Even with Jas being a smart-ass.

"I'm not gay," Chance said against Jasper's riotous curls, but even he didn't believe himself. Fuck, he really sounded like he was lying.

Jasper snorted. "Right. That's why you never slept with any of your old girlfriends. Not even Sheila Moss, and she's a total nympho. I hear it's not healthy to live that deep in the closet. At least, that's what the guys in the chat rooms say. They say a lot more, too, but I think they really think my 'asking for a friend' thing is me asking for myself. Either way, I don't really think fisting is my thing. That's what you do, right? Fists and... things?"

"Oh, gross!" Chance cringed and pulled back to see Jasper smirking. The little shit was teasing him! "Not that it's any of your business, but no. I have a girlfriend, remember?"

“A fake girlfriend. I’m not sure that counts.” Jasper pushed away. “I mean, I kind of get why you’re bothering, but wouldn’t it just be easier to... be yourself?”

Chance sighed. “I *am* myself. So what about you? You’re old enough to have a girl. So do you?”

“As if. I don’t have time for that. I love Mom and Dad, but the sooner I get out of here, the happier I’ll be. She cut my steak for me earlier, Chance. Seriously. I’m sixteen, and Mom thinks I need my food cut up for me. I’d rather spend my time on expediting my high school education than on dating. Especially in Breckinridge.” Jasper’s lips twitched up into a smile. “So if Rebecca’s not coming to visit, does that mean we can hang out more? I mean, I know it’s not cool to spend a lot of time with your ‘kid brother,’ but maybe sometimes?”

Chance grinned and reached out, ruffling Jasper’s hair. “Count on it, Jas.” It wasn’t like he had any friends in town anymore, anyway, and Jasper could be good company. When he wasn’t being a smart-ass pain, which wasn’t all that often, Chance finally remembered.

Damn.

September

Fall term was already difficult. It hurt to watch his former teammates striding around campus in their jerseys when Chance no longer had the right to wear his own.

He hadn’t even needed to hear the doctor’s speech. His knee hadn’t felt right by the time school started, even though he’d done everything he’d been told. It didn’t feel bad, exactly, but it for damned sure didn’t feel like it had before he’d decided to show off on a friend’s mountain bike and proved that his mouth was really good at writing checks his body couldn’t cash.

It was his own fault, too, which left Chance with no one to be mad at but himself.

He could only count himself fortunate that he’d never really considered football as a career. Yes, he loved the game, and he’d loved playing—the admiration from his peers had been even nicer than when he’d been on the high school team—but it wasn’t his only option. He didn’t need to make the decision to either give up his dreams or risk crippling himself for good.

The football scholarship had been an opportunity to learn what he wanted to, as opposed to what his father wanted him to study, but there were worse things than getting a business degree. Chance figured he could still read whatever he wanted, and write in his free time once he took over the ranch. His knee was good enough to ride with, as long as he stayed away from bulls and broncs.

As far as consequences went, he'd been lucky. Hell, he could even still surf—which was something he'd been dared into within a week of first arriving at MMSU—as long as he was careful.

His parents had committed to paying for the rest of his college as long as he studied business, but they hadn't said that he could *only* take courses within the business curriculum, which was exactly why Chance spent hours poring over the class catalogue for the spring semester once he got back to Miami after Christmas. He needed to have his plan in place early so he could get the classes he wanted as well as those his new major required.

It was three a.m. when his phone rang, and while Chance groaned, he forced himself to sit up enough to see the display. *HOME*.

He frowned, then slipped out of bed, avoiding the arm that tried to pull him back.

"Hello?" he mumbled, voice still hoarse with sleep. "What's wrong?"

"Talk to your brother." Mom sounded frustrated and distressed, which was never a good combination for her. "Tell him he needs to forget this ridiculous idea and just—"

"Tell *Mom* that I'm right!" Jasper seemed more high-strung than usual. "And she'd be stupid to stop me from—"

"Don't you dare call me stupid, young man! You got your brain from me, not your father!"

"Hey now, Mindy..."

"Shut up, Brian! You know it's true! He's not ready!"

"What the fuck is going on out there?" It was only after he heard his mother gasp that Chance realized he'd not only cussed the big-bad-cuss, but yelled it into the phone. "Um. Sorry, but it's three o'clock in the morning, here. What the hel... heck is going on?"

It took a while for Chance to figure out what was happening. Mostly because Mom, Dad and Jasper kept trying to talk over each other. Eventually, he thought he'd grasped the meaning, though.

“Okay!” He shouted it in an effort to be heard, and apparently succeeded because there was a sudden silence on the other end of the line. “I’m not sure I really know what’s happening, but *let me finish* before you all start talking again, okay?” Chance took the silence as a yes.

“Okay,” he said again. “What I think I heard is that Jas has enough credits to graduate early, and that he has universities that want him for the spring. Mom is worried that he’s too young and wants him to stick with high school through senior year, even though he’s tested out of his high school classes, and Dad...” Chance frowned and shook his head. “I’m not sure you have a position, Dad.”

“I want whatever will end this late-night argument,” his father said bluntly, and Chance laughed when he heard Mom sputter.

“I want to stop wasting my time in this tiny town where I know more than my teachers do, if that makes any difference,” Jasper announced, sounding irked enough that Chance could picture his expression. “Seriously, I keep having to correct them on things they’re supposed to be teaching *me!* I don’t see how having to put up with that until next June is going to do me any good!”

Chance smiled and opened the fridge in what’s-his-name’s kitchen. “I don’t either, Jas,” he said, pulling out a bottle of water and closing the appliance door. “Mom? I get that you’re worried about Jasper going out into the world, okay? You were kinda like that when I left for Miami, remember?”

God, she’d done her best to guilt him into staying in Breckinridge and working the ranch instead of taking the scholarship and getting a real education.

“You’re going to have to let him go sooner or later,” he went on. “Send him here. I’ll look after him.”

“You’ll watch over him while he’s in college?”

There was something in his mother’s tone that bothered him, but Chance was just so tired. He’d been woken from sleep after less than two hours, following a twenty-hour day. And his latest friend, who Chance had left in bed, chose that moment to move up behind him, strong but slender arms wrapping around his waist while a stubbled cheek pressed against his shoulder.

“I’ll watch over him like a guardian angel,” Chance promised, neck arching to give his friend better access. “I won’t let anything bad happen to him. And like I said, it’s late here.” He forced himself to swallow a groan as teeth scraped the crook of his neck. “Let me call you tomorrow.”

He barely heard his mother say good-bye.

He was too caught up in the way the guy—what the fuck was his name again?—kept touching him. Then he felt the hand on his stomach slide lower, while the one on his ribs moved to his back before sliding up into his hair, and Chance stopped caring about anything but the moment... and possibly the next few hours.

November

“No.” That was all he could say, even though it hadn’t gone over well the first twenty times. “No, Mom. I can’t!”

The dramatic sniffing from across the table was manipulative and insulting. Chance knew that. Advances in equality or not, tears had always been one of the main weapons in his mother’s arsenal. They’d worked well on him in the past, but not this time. No way, damn it.

“But you promised!” Mom hissed the reminder, but not so loudly that people at other tables would hear. The Peppermill Restaurant wasn’t all that busy at five o’clock on Tuesdays, but they didn’t have the place all to themselves, either. “You swore you’d watch over your brother if we let him leave home at such a young age, and now you’re telling us no! Chance, you can’t!”

Christ. Not this again. “Like I told you on the phone about a hundred times, I already registered for classes. Dad already paid. It’s not my fault you didn’t listen to me and send Jasper *here*, is it? I can’t just... pick up and change schools, Mom! It’s more complicated than that!”

“Well, you can just *unregister*.”

Chance frowned. Time to try a different approach. “What about Rebecca?” he finally asked. “You want me to... what? Just tell her I have to go wherever the hell Jasper’s going, and she can either come with me or wait for me? That we can see each other twice a year? Mom...”

“Mindy, the boy’s got a point.” Thank fuck Dad finally had something to say. “It’s not fair to him or Rebecca to spring this on them so last minute. Now, the waitress is headed this way. Do we all know what we’re having?”

Mom glared and sniffled some more, then pushed herself back from the table and stood. “You two can do that. I’ve lost my appetite. Brian, I’ll be in our room.”

Dad shook his head as Mom stalked away. "She'll be ordering room service inside half an hour. Now, let's order up some beef and figure out what to do about school and Rebecca and your brother while we eat."

January 2012

It came as no surprise to Chance that Jasper was settling in well enough in Nevada. Their parents weren't thrilled that their youngest was so close to Vegas, but even Mom hadn't been able to argue that with as young as Jasper looked, no fake ID on the planet would get him into a bar, much less a casino.

"I still can't believe she hired my roommate to be my friend." Jasper sounded just as disgusted as Chance would have been in the same circumstances. "I'm almost eighteen, but here I am with Nelson following me to all my classes. It's embarrassing!"

"At least he's not Mom." Chance felt it needed to be said. "Just imagine how much worse it would be if Mom followed you there, and be glad she let you go at all."

The long, deep sigh Jasper let out then almost challenged their mother for most-dramatic-exhalation-in-a-family-drama. "She wouldn't last more than a week. It's desert here. Too much dry heat for Mom. She'd look like a mummy in like a day."

"Or she'd have you chipped and track you on her phone from the comfort of a tub full of moisturizer," Chance suggested. It might be a little bit wrong to make fun of their mother, but she did have some strange habits and fears. "I think you're better off with your roommate. As Dad would say, he can keep you out of trouble. Even if I'm not sure how much trouble you can get into between math classes and whatever science stuff you're taking." Bleh. Chance didn't know how Jasper could stand it. It all seemed so *boring*. Then again, so were the business courses Chance would be starting, next semester.

Jasper groaned. "Never mention that whole tracking chip thing to Mom, okay? She'd probably do it. And Nelson's into sports. I don't think he'd be spending any time with me if Mom wasn't paying him. He's already failing his remedial math class, and we're only two weeks into the semester. Ugh. Why are you jocks so stupid?"

Chance burst out laughing at the obviously teasing tone. "Why can't you science kids lift more than a laptop? So what does your new best friend play?"

“Shut up. We’re not best friends. And I can so lift weights! Nelson’s making me do it after dinner every night, and it sucks!” Jasper didn’t really sound upset, though. “He’s on the fencing team. I guess it’s kind of a big deal since he’s only a freshman, but...”

The laughter Chance had managed to master mere moments earlier came back with a vengeance. “F-fencing team? You mean those skinny dudes in white suits swinging sticks at each other?” He chuckled even more. “I bet he would totally be hanging out with you without Mom’s money, man. Waving a stick around doesn’t make someone a jock. Pathetic, maybe, but not a jock.”

“Whatever,” Jasper grumbled. “I’m gonna go. Later, Chance.”

Chance frowned and stared at the phone, almost unable to believe Jasper had hung up on him. What the hell?

“Hey, everything okay with your little bro?” Jason—at least Chance thought that was his name—didn’t really seem interested, but Chance nodded anyway. “Cool. So did you want to get some pizza or something? Or we could catch a movie.”

Chance wrinkled his nose. “Nah. My girlfriend’s coming over to study.” The guy just stood there and stared at him, and Chance made a mental note that this particular surfer wasn’t the sharpest tool in the shed. “So you should probably get dressed and go do whatever it is you do on Friday nights. See you sometime.”

Jason or Jake or John, whatever, blinked slowly, like he was stoned or something. Then he turned away and went to Chance’s bedroom. He returned a couple minutes later in T-shirt, board shorts and flip flops, then stopped to watch Chance drinking an illicit beer.

“What?”

Jason shook his head. “You should have said you had a girlfriend, man. I don’t do closeted guys.”

Chance shook his head. “I’m not gay.”

The guy rolled pale green eyes. “Your dick in my ass pretty much says you are, but whatever, man.”

“You know the way out.”

Christ, he was getting sick of people calling him gay. Even though he was.

“He has a point, Chance,” Rebecca said close to an hour later. She sat on the couch sipping a glass of white wine, and Chance couldn’t help wishing he was attracted to her. He thought she was beautiful, sure, but she didn’t do anything for him, physically. “And you topped this time. That’s... unusual for you, isn’t it?” She grinned. “I’m so proud!”

“I don’t always bottom,” Chance grumbled, even while wondering—for about the fiftieth time—how it was possible to be so comfortable talking to his girlfriend about his... whatever they were. Fucks. “Okay,” he went on, smiling sheepishly at her disbelieving laugh. “Maybe I usually do. Sorry, but it feels good. But this guy, um... Jason? He just wanted it so bad, and... For real, Rebecca, he wasn’t a grower *or* a show-er. I’m pretty sure he’s a total bottom-boy just so he can avoid explaining that no, that’s not his finger, it’s actually his cock. I felt bad for him, y’know?”

Partly true. At least, he wasn’t lying about Jason’s cock. The poor guy had four inches at most, and Chance had seen fatter thumbs. The guy’s ass had been damned tight, though. Nice and...

Fingers snapping in front of his face pulled him from the memory.

“No perving on your latest hook up,” Rebecca ordered kindly. She was always kind, even when she was being a bitch to him for his own good. It was incredibly annoying, but he loved it almost as much as he loved her. He just wished that love could turn him straight. It couldn’t, but Christ, he wished. Not that it would matter, because Rebecca was just as same-sex oriented as he was. That was part of the reason she’d agreed to be Chance’s girlfriend in the first place. That and the way they really did just *get* each other.

“Fine.” Chance shrugged and went into the kitchen for a beer. “We should probably talk about next year, anyway. I told you what my dad said, so... what do you want to do, Becca?”

She shrugged and patted the sofa cushion beside her. “Not everything has to be figured out right now, you know.” Her sweet smile was entirely genuine. Chance could tell. “Sit down. We’ll finish our drinks, then we’ll take a look at your business plan for your fictional company, okay?”

Chance sat, sighing softly as her arm wrapped around his shoulders. “I’m just... I don’t want to do it, Becca. But Mom’s right. I promised.”

“And you’ll keep your word. You always do. It’ll be fine. And maybe you’ll be able to stop pretending you’re straight. New school, new people, new you.”

Chance wasn't so sure about that. He liked his life as a straight guy. Nobody messed with him, and he got plenty of action with guys by keeping things subtle and casual. He never wanted to go through the being outed process again. Straight was easier.

"Doubt it," he muttered, but he drank his beer and started to think on his business plan. At least Dad would be happy that he was taking his new major seriously.

Chapter Three

March 2012

“Shane! There you are!” Tyler seemed excited. “Oh, man! I’m glad I ran into you! I’ve been dying to tell someone and you’re the first one of us I’ve seen! You’ll never guess what happened!”

Shane blinked, but he smiled, too. “Slow down, Ty. I’m sure it’s amazing, whatever it is, but don’t give yourself a heart attack, okay?”

Tyler laughed and flung himself down in the chair across from him at the cafeteria table, setting his tray down so hard, the small bowl of cottage cheese almost went flying. “Sorry! I mean, sorry.” Tyler made an obvious effort to rein in his enthusiasm. “I just heard, though, and it’s a complete win for us.”

Shane laughed. “Okay, so Dave didn’t propose, because that wouldn’t have anything to do with me.”

“Please. If that happened, we’d be having a wake to both celebrate and mourn that relationship. It’s way too soon to even talk about marriage.” Tyler’s eyes were soft, though. Like he was seeing the world through a soft-focus lens, all of a sudden. It might be too soon for Ty and Dave to be talking about something that serious, but they’d been together for a good six months and seemed to be deep in that love thing.

Shane was glad, even though he couldn’t sleep—in the literal sense or any other—with Ty anymore. He sometimes missed the comfort of it, but after two years at UCSN he was a lot less needy. Thank God. His frat brothers had been very good to him. Even William, who still couldn’t believe Shane didn’t want to have sex with him. Then again, William thought *everyone* wanted to get naked and sweaty with him, and from the seemingly endless parade of walk-of-shamers Shane had seen since moving into the house, William wasn’t entirely deluded about that.

“Okay, so what’s this really good thing that has you doing the verbal equivalent of the pee-pee dance?”

Tyler jumped slightly, as though he’d been startled, then blushed. “Sorry. It’s just... remember Nellie?” Shane didn’t, which must have shown on his face because Tyler went on quickly. “The fencer whose coach said he couldn’t join even an unofficial frat until his sophomore year. Shorter than both of us, blond, brown eyes... Body by ‘fuck yes, please yes’?”

That actually sounded familiar. "I think so..."

"He has that really strange but cool accent, remember? Like... Southern and German with some Australian mixed in." Tyler was going for his Masters in Linguistics, which Shane figured was why he remembered the specifics of the guy's accent. Shane remembered it too, but as sexy, rather than by the various regions that may have spawned it.

"Right!" He nodded, trying not to show how much he enjoyed the reminder. Nellie had been insanely hot. Unfortunately, after declining to join their group when his fencing coach forbade it, Shane had only seen the guy across campus once or twice. He couldn't remember what Nellie was studying, or even if he'd declared a major yet, but he definitely remembered that fencing-does-a-body-good form. "What about him?"

"Remember how we extended him an invitation to join next year, since he'd already been through all the hazing? Well, he left me a voice mail while I was in class. So I just got off the phone with him, and he wants to be a brother. How cool is that? I mean, he's on the fencing team! He'll be LKNG's first official athlete at UCSN!"

Shane laughed at how excited Tyler still was. "So I guess we don't have to worry about making him feel welcome. If you're gonna be like this until pledge week, he'll know exactly how much you want him. I mean *we*. The guys. All of us. For the house. Not for... you know, anything else."

Tyler grinned. "Except William," he said at the same time Shane said that exact thing.

That led to more laughing, of course, but then Ty went on. "The only thing he asked is that we consider his roommate, too. Not take the kid, but just consider it."

Shane frowned and picked at the pizza crust on his plate. "Why? Are they a couple or something? Not that it would be a bad thing, but—"

"No! I mean, it sounds like they're just good friends, but Nellie says the kid needs some friends and doesn't give a shit that Nellie's gay. He's also really young. He only turned sixteen a few months ago, according to Nellie. But smart. I mean, he'd have to be to be accepted mid-year, right?"

"I guess." Actually, Shane knew. It was rare enough to border on mythical that someone was allowed to start their first year between semesters. "What's his major? The kid, I mean."

Tyler shrugged. "I didn't ask. Why bother? We know the kid's a kid, and either smart as all hell or from a family with enough money to 'donate' a new gym or library or whatever. I'm going with smart, since I haven't heard anything about new construction."

Shane rolled his eyes. "Fine. If you can get the guys to go along with it, I won't block Nellie's roommate. Is the kid even gay? Because it sounds like you don't know. Do we take straight guys?"

"We haven't yet, but that doesn't mean we can't. As long as they're not assholes about us being gay, why not let them in?" Tyler's teeth indented his bottom lip for a moment before he went on. "The world is changing, but it's still a good thing to have allies. If this kid is as smart as Nellie says and really doesn't get his panties in a wad over guys who dig guys, then what could it hurt? The more people there are who know that gay doesn't automatically equal predatory and scary, the better."

Shane laughed softly and leaned across the table. "Better keep this kid away from William, then. If he's cute, anyway. William could have made me question my own sexuality when I was sixteen. If I hadn't known way before, anyway."

Tyler stared at him, eyes wide, for a good five seconds. Then Shane smirked, and they both broke out laughing. What were the odds that some mid-year admission whose family hadn't bought his way in would be attractive?

No, the kid was probably some reedy, pimple-faced little guy who loved... astronomy or chemistry or something like that, but Shane didn't care. As long as he turned out to be as GLBT-friendly as Tyler thought, the kid could be the Elephant Man for all it mattered.

August

Shane hadn't gone home for the summer. Not really. Oh, he'd flown from Vegas to Cheyenne, but he'd known he'd only be in Carter for a few days. Mom and Rob were finally taking a real vacation, after a good ten years of only weekend getaways—mid-week three-day trips, really.

Weekends were prime time in the car business, from what Rob had always said, but the assistant manager was capable enough, after three years, that Rob felt comfortable taking a month off to spend with Mom in the sun and fun of Nassau.

Rob had rented a house for them, and while Shane wished they'd been able to go while he had classes instead, he wasn't upset that he'd be spending the majority of the summer at the LKNG house by himself.

He'd told Mom exactly that every single time she started to get anxious during the five days he was back home.

"It's fine," he'd said, meaning it. "You'll have a great time, and there are about a million things I can do in Nevada. If you really want to, I'll let you make it up to me at Christmas."

Then Rob came home from the dealership with a car for him, two days before Shane was supposed to fly back to Vegas.

"It's not new," Rob said of the 2006 Mazda, "but it's mechanically sound, and the mileage is low. My guys in the shop checked it out, and if you're good about standard maintenance, it should last you a good ten years. You'll probably want to sell it before then, so check the glove box. The title's in there. You might want to put it in your wallet, for now. There's a dash-mounted GPS. I programmed it for the best routes back to school, but you can change that if you want to wander a bit. And your mother left the number to the house we're renting, too. It'd be nice if we heard from you once or twice, even without an emergency. Think you can manage that, son?"

Yeah... Rob might not be his real father, but the man for damned sure acted like Shane was his kid. Which was fair, because Shane definitely felt like Rob really was his dad, blood aside. He hadn't always felt that way, but lately—especially since going away to school, oddly—Shane had figured that out.

He'd driven Mom and Rob to the airport in Cheyenne to catch their first flight, and when he hugged and kissed his mother, he'd turned and hugged Rob right after. "Thanks," he'd murmured, "she handles like a dream."

After that, it was easy to get back to school. He stopped a lot, checking out things that sounded interesting. The fourteen-hour drive ended up taking three days, but Shane wasn't in any hurry.

Tyler and Dave were at the LKNG house when he got back, and while he was surprised, Shane didn't mind. He was honestly more concerned that they might feel uncomfortable with him there. He'd thought they were planning to go away, but apparently their plans had changed.

Judging by how loud they were at night, they didn't feel at all self-conscious with Shane in the house. If anything, Shane was the one who was

embarrassed. Mostly because of the natural physical reaction he had to their sounds... and the fact that he took care of himself while they moaned and sighed. Not that he ever said so, but he was pretty sure Tyler, at least, knew.

By the time the rest of the guys started trickling in from wherever they'd gone for the summer, Shane was almost as immune to Tyler and Dave's noises as he'd become to William and *everyone's* sounds.

When pledge season finally started, Shane was more than ready for it. He'd enjoyed being on the other side of things at the start of his sophomore year. He figured he'd like it even more as a junior.

September

Nellie'd made it in with flying colors. Of course he had. He'd even apologized to Shane and the other guys for his roommate bowing out of consideration. The kid, Jazz, apparently had a brother with an off-campus apartment who Jazz was going to be living with instead of trying for LKNG.

"It's probably a good thing," Tyler said later that night, after Nellie had gone for the evening. "Jazz is still pretty young for some of the stuff he'd see in the house. Maybe next year."

Shane shrugged. "Whatever. I need to get going, man. I have a date, sort of."

Tyler rolled his eyes. "Yeah, okay. So you'll be back in what, two hours? Seriously, man, it's good that you're actually dating, but maybe you should try going out with someone you really like. Man does not live by masturbation alone. I respect your determination to die a virgin, but—"

"I haven't been a virgin since last year. I just didn't see any need to make an announcement. And I like Tom." Shane smiled. Unlike the question of his virginity, liking Tom was true. "He's hot. I just get pissed off when guys think that just because we're going to a movie, it means I'm willing to fuck. Then they get all pissy when I say no. I mean, I'm cool with kissing, or even some heavy groping, but fucking after spending a couple hours sitting in the dark and not even talking? It's just a movie. It doesn't even count as a real date."

Of course, the one time he'd truly dated and had a real boyfriend, it hadn't gone well. It also hadn't been as true or real as Shane had thought. Fucking Chance. Asshole.

“Well, try to have fun.” Tyler grinned. “Maybe forget the movie and hit a club or something. A few drinks might loosen you up. God knows you’re wound way too tight, most of the time.”

“Whatever. I’m not gonna slut it up just to make you happy.”

Tyler laughed. “Trust me, I know that really, really well. No matter how much I used to hope you would. And that’s exactly why I don’t believe you about last year. Now, go get changed. I’m thinking Dave might be up for watching a movie, now that I’m thinking about it. Groping in the dark sounds like fun.”

“Jackass,” Shane said affectionately, but he hugged Ty and headed off to change into something a little nicer than jeans and a T-shirt. With any luck, Tom would prove to be worth the effort.

Sadly, Shane told himself later—because Tyler really was all wrapped up with Dave and thus unavailable for comment—Tom *wasn’t*.

November

It was at an off-campus kegger that Shane finally met Nellie’s friend Jazz. Shane wasn’t entirely sure of why or how a seventeen year old had been invited, but that wasn’t his problem.

Jazz wasn’t quite what Shane had pictured, though he was just as smart as Shane had assumed. He wasn’t very tall, but he still had growing to do, and while Jazz wasn’t bulky or anything, he had the start of some nice shoulders. Then Shane remembered that Nellie spent time at the gym with the kid, and maybe that explained it. Jazz was good-looking, though Shane didn’t look too closely. The kid wasn’t legal and probably wasn’t even gay. Hair the color between brown and blond, just long enough to brush his shoulders, and hazel eyes. There was something about the kid that seemed familiar, sort of, but Shane was sure he’d remember if they’d ever met. He’d probably just seen him around campus.

“I’m not sure,” Jazz said when asked about his major, though he didn’t sound really hyped. “I know I need to declare soon, since I’m going for a double, but I don’t know if I want to go with mechanical engineering and chemistry, or math and architecture. My folks will be happy with either, but I might want to be a veterinarian, too.” He shrugged. “I’ll get it figured out soon. Nelson said you’re pre-med?”

“Yeah. It’s kind of a bear.” And he still wasn’t sure about becoming a doctor, though he hadn’t gotten around to telling his mom and Rob. “So where did Nellie disappear to? I thought he’d be... you know.”

“Babysitting?” Jazz grimaced. “Between him and my brother, I might as well be wrapped in bubble wrap. The kind with the big, *puffy* bubbles. I’m young, but I’m not some *kid*.”

Shane shrugged. “Okay. I was gonna say I thought he’d be right back, but whatever, man. I’m gonna go find a drink. Maybe I’ll see you later.”

Jazz grinned. “Cool. Later.”

It was two hours later that Shane saw Jazz again, and it wasn’t because he’d just run into the guy at random.

No, it was because there was shouting coming from the front entry area of the house in which the party was being held, and one of the voices he heard was William’s. William was absolutely the poster child for casual sex, but he didn’t get into shouting matches. He was a lover, not a fighter. Shane had witnessed William being insulted so viciously by a few former acquaintances, meaning fucks, that *Shane* had wanted to hit them, but William had only ever looked sad, shrugged, and walked away. If William was yelling, there was something seriously wrong.

Shane handed off his beer—it would be his last before his twenty-first birthday in five days—to a sorority girl passing by, then pushed his way through the other guests to find William holding up a seemingly drunk-off-his-ass Jazz, while some other guy yelled loudly, trying to pull Jazz away.

“...hands off my fucking brother! I don’t know what you did to him, but he’s not *gay*!”

“I know that!” William, shouting even louder than moments before, looked both serious and angry. “I’m just trying to get him outside!”

“Why? So you can take him somewhere private and fuck him? Put him the fuck *down*!”

“Jesus! I don’t fuck kids! Not since I was one, anyway! Fucking homophobes, always thinking the gay guy’s looking to rape a kid! He’s Nellie’s friend! I’m just trying to look out for him!” Yeah, sincere and furious.

Jazz started flailing a little then, like he was trying to get away from William, except that wasn’t it. Well, it was, but only because he was apparently

trying not to puke on William or the other guy, the one Shane had still only seen the back of. In other circumstances, it might have been kind of funny—the underage kid, trying to be cool, drank too much and humiliated himself by puking at a party—but the color and sheer volume of vomit took it from possibly amusing to entirely shocking.

“Get him outside,” Shane ordered, pushing past the angry guy. The brother. He thought the guy had shouted something like that, anyway. “Now, William. Get him outside, where there’s room. Someone call 911. Tell them we have a minor with symptoms of possible poisoning. Move, William! *Now!*”

“You don’t get to—” The fucking brother again. God.

“Shut the fuck up,” Shane ordered, forcing a path through the assholes who were just standing around and staring. “Let us out, you shits! Fuck, someone remind me never to drink enough that I can’t understand English! *Move!*”

“Oh, fuck this.” The words, snarled from somewhere behind him and William, who still held the puking Jazz up, were followed by the loud-ass guy pushing past them and shoving people aside until they reached the open door of the house. “What’s wrong with him? Did you just say poisoned? What the fuck?”

Shane ignored the guy and helped William maneuver Jazz down the front steps and onto the walkway that led to the street. He looked around quickly and breathed a sigh of relief. “Over there, William. The bench that goes around that tree. Sit him down, but hold him up enough that he can’t aspirate on his own vomit. I need to find a flashlight or something. If I can check his eyes, maybe I can at least figure out what this *isn’t*.”

“What the fuck are you doing to my—”

William made a sound that was some odd mix of growl and hiss. Then he spoke loudly, but at least he wasn’t shouting anymore. “He’s a pre-med student, you asshole. He’s the best we’ve got until the EMTs get here. If you want to help Jazz, go find a light or something. I promise I won’t run off with your underage, puke-monster of a straight brother while you’re gone.”

“And a bottle of water. Unopened,” Shane added, still trying to get a good look at Jazz. “See if you can find Nellie while you’re in there, too. He might know what happened. Seriously, man, *go!*” God, the guy was a moron. “Okay. Okay, Jazz,” he said, once William and the kid were settled on the curved bench, “I’m not gonna make you move around anymore right now, and I know

you feel like crap, but—” Jazz let loose another volley of bile. “Okay, that’s nasty, but I know you don’t usually hurl all over the place. Nellie wouldn’t hang out with you if you did, right? Can you tell me what you drank inside? Did you take anything? Smoke something you shouldn’t have?”

“I’m pretty sure he can’t talk right now, man.” William sounded completely freaked, even though he looked calm. “I don’t think he was drinking, though. I would have smelled it when he first started falling down. The puking is recent. Comparatively. You know.”

Shane nodded. “Yeah, I know what you mean. And I know he can’t answer me, but those are all questions the EMTs are gonna ask him. At least he can be thinking about it, even while he’s sick.” Shane frowned and shook his head. “Plus, it really sucks when people talk about you like you’re not even there.”

“Oh my God, what the hell happened?” The question started from the porch of the house, but by the time it finished, Nellie was there by the tree. He dropped to his knees in front of William and Jazz, and Shane winced at the wet sound he heard. Nellie, to his credit, didn’t seem to care that he’d just knelt in puke, though Shane did see his nose wrinkle in the dim light coming from the windows of the house and the half-full moon.

“That’s what I was gonna ask you.” Shane held up his hands when Nellie glared. “No! I don’t mean you did anything to him, okay? Jeez! But you’re his friend. I was hoping you’d know if he took something, or if someone maybe *gave* him something without him knowing it. I only saw him for about five minutes, and that was right after I met him. I thought you might have seen him more recently.”

“He started wobbling and staggering like ten, maybe fifteen minutes ago. It wasn’t too bad at first, but then he couldn’t walk.” William still sounded freaked.

Shane nodded to Nellie’s questioning stare, though he had only been present for the last little while. “William was trying to get him outside for some air when some asshole who says he’s Jazz’s brother started accusing him of wanting to rape Jazz, or... something like that. Then Jazz started to—” Another gush of foul-smelling bile hit the grass. “He started to do *that*. I... think he may have been drugged with something, but I’ve never seen this sort of reaction to a recreational substance. Unless he’s allergic to whatever it is, or to some part of it. Do you know what...”

Nellie was shaking his head before Shane even finished. “Well, damn.”

“Uh, guys?”

Shane frowned. “Maybe that brother of his will know—”

“Guys!” William was shouting again, and that couldn't be good. “Shane! Help me! He's not... I don't think he's breathing!”

“Oh, fuck...” Shane discovered real quickly that he didn't care about puke on his own pants, either, because William was right. Jazz either wasn't breathing or was doing it so shallowly, Shane couldn't tell. “Okay, get him down on the bench. On his back.”

“But you said—”

“I *know* what I said, but if he's not breathing, he won't be choking on his own puke, will he? Do it, William! Nellie, do you know CPR at all?”

Thank fuck Nellie did, though he admitted to never needing to use it.

“Okay, you do the compressions, and I'll take care of the breathing. Just straddle him and lean forward. That'll be your best angle.” Shane took up a similar position, but well above Jazz's head, where he could lean down and breathe for the kid at the appropriate times. It was awkward, due to the way the bench curved, but faster and better than trying to move Jazz onto the ground, where he'd be lying in his own sick.

They were just getting started when the homophobic brother came back, waving a flashlight and bottle of water.

“What the fuck! Get your faggot hands off my—”

Shane didn't see it. He was too busy counting with Nellie. Even so, he was fairly sure the loud sounds of flesh on flesh and surprised grunt were the result of the usually peace-loving William punching the dick. “They're doing CPR, Einstein, not staging some public sex-show with your jailbait brother. Stay back, unless you really *want* Jazz to die. No? Good, asshole! Shane, how's it going?”

“He still has a heartbeat,” Shane answered after the first round of breathing for Jazz. “Where the fuck is the ambulance? Did they even call? Shit!” He stopped and bent over again, lips sealing over Jazz's.

“I called while I was getting the light,” the brother said, but this time he sounded less fiercely angry and suspicious. Less so, but still pissed off as he added, “That bunch of drunks were partying like nothing even happened,

except someone threw towels and a couple sweatshirts over the puke. If they couldn't remember Jasper getting sick, I figured they couldn't be bothered to call the fucking cops. I hope they all get arrested or something. Fuckers." And that explained the pissed off.

By the time flashing lights turned onto the street, Jazz was breathing on his own again. They'd shifted him onto his side on the bench to let the frequent but less copious drizzles of bile fall to the ground, and Shane was carefully coaxing the boy into taking small sips of water, though they might be part of why Jazz was still puking a little.

"Why are you—" The fucking brother again. God, the jerk needed to keep his mouth shut and let Shane work.

"Because dehydration's an issue," he snapped, watching Jazz carefully. "It can lead to all sorts of things you don't want Jazz to go through. If it lasts long enough, it can even cause brain damage, and with as smart as he is, that'd be a tragedy."

It was only when the EMTs were shifting Jazz from the bench to a gurney that Shane realized the brother had called Jazz *Jasper*. It was only when he heard that same brother reciting Jazz's information and telling the EMTs that he'd drive himself to the hospital with Jazz's insurance information that Shane realized he'd never heard Jazz's last name before.

His entire body, which had just relaxed from being able to hand Jazz off to the professionals, tightened again, and he swore he could feel his blood pulsing in his head as he finally—much too late, damn it—looked away from the boy on the gurney and realized that he hadn't gone crazy. Jazz really was Jasper Breckinridge... and the homophobic brother was... No way. Shit. "Chance, you fucker. What the hell are you doing here?"

Shane *saw* some sort of nasty response trying to fight its way out, but he also saw Chance force it back. He didn't know what he expected Chance to say, but it definitely wasn't "I guess I should thank you." He rallied quickly, though.

"And yet, you didn't. Shocker." Shane smirked. "But if you really want to show me some appreciation, you know what I'd like most?"

"Fuck you, Parks. I wouldn't blow you again if you paid me." Chance was obviously furious again, and that was good. The asshole deserved to be angry all the fucking time.

“Oh, good. Because I’d only pay you *not* to touch me.” He meant it, too. “Tell you what,” Shane said bluntly. “If you really want to thank me, how about you stay the hell away from me and we’ll call it even. If I never have to see you again, in this lifetime or any other, it’ll be too damn soon.”

“Fine,” Chance snarled, glaring as though he wanted Shane to burst into flame. “Nelson? You coming?”

Nellie’s eyes were wide as his gaze flicked back and forth between Shane and Chance. After a few seconds, during which Shane wondered if there was some sort of invisible, high-stakes tennis match going on, Nellie licked his lips, looking nervous. “Um, no. I think I’ll go back to the house. I’m not family, anyway, so the chance...” He coughed and blushed before going on. “The *chances* of being able to see Jazz before sometime tomorrow are pretty much nonexistent. So, I’ll... you know. See you.”

Oh, shit. Really? Well, yeah, it looked like it, Shane realized, doing his own version of Nellie’s back and forth-ing, but between Nellie and Chance. It was Chance’s disgusted-sounding “Whatever,” that convinced him, though.

God. Chance was an even bigger asshole than Shane had thought.

By the time they made it back to the LKNG house, Shane was just as pissed off at Nellie as Chance had seemed. The problem was that Shane didn’t know why. He should be feeling sorry for his friend and house-brother, yet he wanted to... something. How could Nellie be foolish enough to get involved with someone like Chance Breckinridge? The minute someone even seemed like they might think Chance was gay for spending time with Nellie, Chance would betray him.

No matter how good the blow jobs and hand jobs and frottage might be, it wasn’t worth what would happen later. Except Nellie wasn’t sixteen, and he for damned sure wasn’t any kind of virgin, so maybe the actual sex *was* worth it, except... *no*. Nothing was worth that. Not that Chance would have told Nellie that he’d back off like Nellie had a raging case of facial herpes if anyone found out about them, so... Yeah. Anger wasn’t the right response. Pity, on the other hand? Deserved.

“Hey, Nellie?” he asked quietly, before going up to his own second-floor bedroom, “if you ever want to talk about... anything... I’m here, okay?”

God knew he’d already been through the heart-broken-by-Chance-Breckinridge thing, complete with the given-an-intestinal-bacteria-by-Chance-

Breckinridge bonus. Even if Nellie was fine with whatever was going on between him and Chance, Shane was willing to listen. Because Nellie was family, in a way... and there was no possibility that Chance wasn't just fucking with Nellie. Probably literally.

"Let's have lunch tomorrow," Nellie suggested. "We can go into town, if you don't mind driving. It'll be a nice change. And it's Saturday, so we won't need to hurry back."

"Cool," Shane said with a nod. "I'll meet you down here around eleven, I guess. Um, are we going someplace with a dress code?" Because Nellie just had that vibe, what with the accent and the fencing, and the way he never seemed to worry about money. Shane didn't mind it—he wasn't exactly strapped for cash himself, because he had partial scholarships, loans, and grants out the wazoo, plus Mom and Rob were helping out—but he'd rather know ahead if he needed to dress better than usual.

Nellie laughed. "Nice jeans, a polo shirt, and bring a jacket. Oh, and no flip flops. That's not a dress code. I just don't like ratty things with holes in them, or naked feet at a meal. The jacket is just in case the air conditioning is set too cold. See you at eleven."

Chance fucking Breckinridge. God. Shane had been sure Chance was in Miami, or at least had gone there for college. What the hell was he doing at UCSN, and how long had he been so close? God, he wished Chance would just go back to Florida and get the hell out of the way.

That didn't seem likely, no matter how much Shane wanted it, though... And there was no way in hell that he was listening to the tiny voice at the back of his mind that was trying to say Chance being there—in Nevada instead of Florida—meant something. It didn't. Unless it meant Chance wasn't finished fucking Shane over, which was always possible, damn it.

It took him forever to fall asleep, and when he did he was plagued with memories of what had been, and even worse, what *could* have been.

Chapter Four

December 2012

As far as their parents knew, Jasper's trip to the ER was for a previously unknown allergy to a combination of over-the-counter medications. Chance and Jas had agreed that it was for the best. Neither of them particularly wanted Mom yanking Jas out of school just because he'd been careless enough to accept non-alcoholic drinks from people he didn't know. Fuck knew they weren't planning on mentioning that it had been Shane Parks—the bane of Chance's existence, who Mom still wanted in jail—who'd been instrumental in Chance still having a brother.

Jasper really was allergic to something in whatever half-assed drug he'd been dosed with, though even the doctors at the hospital weren't sure what that drug had been. One of them had theorized that it might be something whipped up on the sly by an overly ambitious and possibly broke chemistry student. It seemed like a reasonable idea, borne out by the fact that after Jasper's attempt at the puke-monster-of-all-time crown, there was one other, much less severe case... then nothing.

Either whoever it was had stopped making the shit or they'd changed the recipe so they *didn't* almost kill anyone else. If Chance ever found out who it was, he thought he might kill *them*.

Jasper was fully recovered, though, and that was the important thing. He hadn't sworn off parties, but he planned to bring his own drinks or make sure nothing he drank had been previously opened. No red or blue plastic cups for him, ever again.

Chance figured that was good enough, especially since he had no intention of letting Jas, or Jazz as he was calling himself, out of his sight until at least Jazz's eighteenth birthday. Even then he would worry, but at some point he had to trust his brother to look after himself.

Mom wouldn't agree, of course, and that was exactly why she could never know about what had happened. Even if Shane hadn't been a part of things, they could never tell her.

Fucking Shane. The guy who'd outed Chance and was directly responsible for his last year in high school being hell on Earth. Slutty fucking Shane who'd

frozen him out even before posting that damned picture. Like Shane was too good for him or something.

“All because of a fucking swirly. Fucker.” Except Shane had probably saved Jasper’s life, or at least his mind. That’s what the same doctor with the chemistry-student-making-drugs theory had... not said, but implied really well. That Jasper might not have recovered so well or so fully without the CPR Shane and Nellie had performed.

That was another thing. Nellie. Chance had been enjoying some fairly regular nights with the fencer, right up until Shane realized who Jazz was. Chance had no idea what Shane had said to Nellie, but that little arrangement had officially ended two days later.

“Fuck, this sucks!” Chance glared at the basketball that had just rebounded with attitude from the backboard.

Dad chuckled from behind him, and Chance jumped a little. “You were always a little better at football. That’s why I didn’t bother trying to change your mind when you decided to give up the hoops in... what was it? Eighth grade?” He arched his brows and scooped up the ball, then dribbled it twice and lobbed a picture-perfect arc that swished the net. “Besides, your grades were slipping between basketball and football. If you hadn’t decided to quit one of them, your mother and I would have had to make you choose. Come on, boyo. Take your shot.”

Chance rolled his eyes, but he collected the ball and ran a loop around his father, dribbling. “Breckinridge coming in for the winning basket. The crowd is so quiet, it’s like being in church. Look at that deceptively simple dribble, folks! And here he comes, here he comes... he shoots! He—” Chance set up the shot on the fly and released, watching the pale brick-orange ball crest and drop toward the basket, only to hit the rim and shoot off toward the side. “He shoots, and... *he tanks it*, ladies and gentlemen! Breckinridge loses the State Championship, single-handedly!”

“And the crowd goes wild?” Dad chuckled again, then jogged over to retrieve the ball. “I remember when you could make that shot with your eyes closed, boyo. You still could, last time you were home, so that begs the question—What’s wrong?”

“It’s cold, and this coat makes me clumsy,” Chance said, gesturing to the down-filled parka he wore.

Dad shook his head and lofted another perfect shot before replying with, “Nice try, but you’re better at basketball than I ever was. Something’s on your mind, and you know how I hate to see either of my boys struggling. So you can either tell me now or wait until it’s so big and ugly, it breaks free all on its own. Up to you.”

Shit. He couldn’t tell his father, and yet he wanted to. Wanted Dad to tell him what to do about how fucking conflicted he felt. If he did, though, he’d have to explain about Shane and where that damnable picture really came from—or rather how it had really come about—and Chance wasn’t ready for that. He never would be. Not ever. Fuck, Dad would be so disappointed if he found out. Disgusted. Disturbed. A whole lot of dis-es, some of which Chance couldn’t even think of yet.

“C’mon, boyo,” Dad said, and it sounded more like an order than a request. “Grab the ball, and we’ll hide out in the guest house. Start a fire, have a couple beers, and you can tell me what really happened this past semester. You and your brother have both been acting strange, and at least *one* of your parents should know why.”

Fuck. Why couldn’t he have one of those fathers who didn’t give a shit as long as their kids brought home good grades? It just wasn’t fair. Then again, Mom was the one who was relatively hands-off with Chance, while she doted like hell on Jasper. They just seemed to get each other way better than Chance and his mom ever had. It didn’t much matter, he’d decided around ten years old or so. As long as he and Jas each had a parent who understood them and paid attention, it was all good.

At the moment, Chance wasn’t so sure, but most of the time? Yeah.

Chance lit the fire already laid in the fireplace of the guest house’s living room, then shucked off his coat and hung it over the back of a chair while Dad talked on the phone with Mom in the attached, open kitchen. He wasn’t really eavesdropping, but Dad wasn’t trying to talk quietly.

“So you’ll see what Gillian and Nancy are doing, baby. It’s just been a while since all us men have been home at the same time without plans. Chance and I decided it’d be a good time for a boys’ night.”

Dad chuckled, probably at something Mom said. Then Chance knew it, because Dad went on, saying, “I’d love that, babe, but then it wouldn’t be a

boys' night, would it? Last time I checked, you didn't have the parts that'd make you a boy."

Another pause, then, "Well, yeah. Of course he is. So, yeah." Followed by, "Uh-huh," and "That'd be great, darlin', long as she don't mind..."

Damn. Mom must be dragging out the neglected-wife voice, because Dad only got all country like that when she did, dropping his Gs and saying don't instead of doesn't.

Dad's smile was wicked as he opened the fridge and handed a beer across the top of the counter between the two areas, then he opened one of his own. "Of course not," he said a few seconds later. "I would never ply our kids with beer. That'd be wrong."

Fuck knew what Mom said after that, but Dad got a look on his face that no one his age should ever wear, as far as Chance was concerned. Then Dad said, "I'm gonna hold you to that, Mindy. You just keep that in mind for later, babe." Chance shuddered at the words, expression, and tone. Ew.

"Your brother'll be coming soon, just so's you know," Dad said after ending the call. He took a big sip of beer and swallowed slowly. "Ahhhh... See, there's nothing like a cold beer on a cold night, when you're inside with a fire, boyo. You'll see what I mean if you ever open that bottle. Damn, what the hell have they been teaching you at those schools if you're just standing there with a perfectly good beer goin' to waste?"

Chance had always known his father was pretty cool, but he'd never seen him quite so... not father-like. More like a friend who'd known Chance his whole life. Maybe it was an age thing, as Chance was almost twenty-two, or something to do with Chance having been away for so long.

Whatever it was, Chance wasn't sure he liked it.

That didn't stop him from opening his beer, though, and when he took a large swig, he discovered that Dad was right. It felt really good to be having a beer with his father in the warmth of the guest house while it was so damned cold outside.

Jazz tipsy was funny, but only because he wasn't acting anything like the way he'd been at that fucking party. He'd only had two beers so far, but Chance was fairly sure that his brother was either a total lightweight or had never truly

had anything alcoholic before. He didn't know which would be better, when he thought about it.

Getting deeply buzzed from just two beers was kind of pitiful. By the time Chance had turned seventeen, he'd been to numerous parties where many kinds of drinks had been available. Then again, as the little brother of *Peckerbinge*, Jazz might not have been invited to many parties, if any. Of course, even if he had been, he probably wouldn't have gone, considering how... jazzed... Jazz had been to get away from home. Or from Mom's smothering. Same thing, really.

"But see, that's the thing," Jazz was saying, voice too loud and gestures broader than usual. "It was *him!* I mean, I knew Nelson had a frat brother named Shane, but who the heck would think the Shane in flipping Vegas was the same Shane from Carter, who had pictures of Chance sucking his cock, right? But it was. *Is!* And he's pre-med, and he saved my brain!" Jazz hiccupped, and Dad looked like he was trying not to laugh while Chance groaned.

"So, you're going to school with your old boyfriend, and he saved your brother's life," Dad said a few moments later, like it was nothing. No big deal. "That's gotta be awkward."

Chance literally spit beer across the living room. He was blushing hotly before he managed to say anything more than, "I'm not..." Dad's level stare derailed him, though he managed to finish with a mumbled, shameful, "gay." Followed immediately by a much stronger, "*I'm not!*"

Jazz laughed. "Liar-liar, pants on fire. Our walls are thin and Nellie screams like a choir. Hey, I rhymed! M'be I'll switch to writing an' be the next Dr. Sooze. Seuss. Go, me!"

Chance groaned. "Can I die now? Please? And I'm really not. I have a girlfriend! You've met her, and Mom loves her! So I can't be gay. See?"

Dad smiled a weird sort of smile and got up from the couch. When he came back from the kitchen he had three more beers in his hands, and Chance finished off the one he'd been sipping.

"I know what I am, boyo," Dad said after a moment or two. "I'm mostly country. I vote conservative. I'm not the sharpest tool in the shed, either. Your mother's right when she says you boys got your smarts from her. Sure, I manage to keep the ranch going and in the black, but she's the smart one. But I

did go to college. I would have finished, too, if my folks hadn't had that accident. I only had one more year to go, but their foreman was in the truck with them and there was no one else I trusted to take care of things, so I never got to do that last year or get a degree."

Chance cocked his head. "Okay..."

Dad laughed. "The point is, boyo, I spent three years at San Diego State. It was a hell of a shock to my system, but I got over that. I knew me some gay fellas out there, and there wasn't anything wrong with most of 'em. Can't say I get the whole 'attracted to guys' thing, but far as I can tell, it's no different than being into women for other men. And most of them—the gays, I mean—were good folk. Never saw anything evil or wrong about the majority of them, anyway, no matter what our preacher says. So when you're sitting there saying you're not gay, and your brother's pretty much saying you are, I have to tell you what I feel about that."

Oh, fuck. This couldn't be good. Unless it was. Chance couldn't be sure. It sounded like Dad had known some gay guys who *were* evil and wrong, in addition to those who weren't. "Uh. Okay."

"I think you're a jackass if you're stringin' that girl along," Dad said bluntly. "Nobody deserves to be lied to that way. If she knows about you, then I'm guessin' y'all have some kind of agreement, and if so, that's fine. But you're a grown man. It's up to you to decide what kind of life you want to live. I can't speak for your mother in this case, but for me?"

Dad shifted closer on the couch and wrapped his arm around Chance's shoulders, and it felt nice. Good. Like he could really believe his father wouldn't hate him if he came out. "Y-yeah?" he stuttered, so softly it was almost a whisper.

Dad shrugged. "I want you to be happy, boyo. If that means you come home one day with some fella, then so be it. Hell, Raul and Bradley are gay together, and it hasn't stopped me or your mom from welcoming them into our home for the holidays. If we can do that for them that work for us, why wouldn't we be able to do it for you when we love you. When we *made* you."

Jazz made a sound Chance couldn't identify. Then again, Jazz was halfway into a third beer. It was amazing he could even sit upright, considering the way he was starting to slur. "M'be Chance's bi like me," he somehow managed to mumble loudly. "Was gon' try for Nellie, but Chance beat me to 't. Stupid hot brother..."

Chance blinked rapidly, as though that would change what he'd heard, but sadly it didn't work. "What the fuck?"

Dad didn't seem fazed, though. He just sipped his beer again, then shrugged once more. "Maybe he is, Jasper. Sorry. Jazz. That's what you're going by now, right?"

Jazz grunted, and Dad went on, saying, "Maybe so. If he is... *if you are*, boyo, that's fine, too. I can't say I wouldn't like you to have kids someday. This ranch has been in the family for over a hundred years, and I'd like to keep it that way, but that's no reason to pick one side of the fence over the other. They got all kinds of ways for people to have kids now, and I knew a few kids with two dads or two moms, back in the day."

His mind was spinning enough that Chance wondered whether he'd been drugged the way Jasper had been at that party, but that didn't stop him from making a noise even *he* couldn't identify. It was part snort, part laughter, part groan and part gasp, really, but it just sounded like some weird attempt to cough up a hairball made of steel wool and carpet tacks.

What the fuck was his dad even saying? And Jasper claiming to be bisexual was just... "Jas can't be bi!"

Dad surprised him yet again by laughing. "I don't see why not. Your mother's mother, Granny Rose, was a lesbian in the end. She didn't bother saying so until after your Grandpa Phil died, but still. And your Great Uncle Emmett, my mother's brother, was a card-carrying friend of Dorothy, as they used to say. If Jazz is bisexual, then he is. You kids always think you invented sex and sexuality, but you didn't. You might want to remember that."

"I also might want to scrub my brain with bleach," Chance muttered.

"Good luck with that," Dad said, chuckling yet again. There should be a law against a father being so accepting of his kids when even one of those kids wasn't expecting it. "So Shane Parks goes to school with you." Fuck, he'd hoped his father had forgotten that part. "And he saved Jazz's life." That part, too. "I hope you thanked him."

Chance groaned, even as Jas—Jazz—announced in a loose, boozy voice, "Of course not. Cuz they're enemies. They've always been enemies. Always will be. Nothing can change that. Nothing! Right, Chance?"

"We weren't *always* enemies," Chance said before he could stop himself. "But yeah. We are now." At least Shane thought so, judging by the way he'd

suggested Chance thank him for saving Jazz by staying the fuck away. Chance wasn't so sure, himself.

He didn't have any particular urge to seek Shane out, but he kind of thought that maybe he could stop hating the slutty fucking dick if given the chance. Maybe.

It was later, after Dad headed back to the house to wait for Mom—and Chance still had icky-wrong feelings about what he thought they were planning—that he and Jasper talked more.

Jazz said a few things that convinced Chance his brother really might be bisexual, which Chance didn't know how to feel about, and Jazz somehow teased the truth about Chance's senior year of high school from him. Including the rumors about Shane's too-fucked diarrhea. Chance blushed through that entire portion of their buzzed slumber party in front of the dying fire.

He blushed even more when Jazz spoke, his voice still loose and easy from the beer.

“Oh, man. That's so stupid. Who would even say that? I mean, we went to the same high school, so I know you took biology. Not AP, but still. So you know—” Jazz belched loud and long. “Sorry. You know it doesn't work that way, right? I mean, even if you ignore science, fifty guys dumping cum into someone wouldn't cause explosive diarrhea. That sounds more like some kind of parasite, or a disease from some weird bacteria.”

Jazz frowned deeply, probably because he was drunk. “Unless he was rimming a bunch of guys. That might explain it. Did he rim you a lot when you guys were... you know? I mean, if he didn't with you, he probably wouldn't with strangers, right? Or... fuck. I don't know. It just seems weird, especially 'cause Nellie, I mean *Nelson*, said... Never mind.”

It took another beer and the promise of pizza three times a week on Chance's dime before Jazz would elaborate. Even then, it wasn't anything Chance could believe.

There was no way Shane was still a virgin. Not even possible. Shane was much too hot and much too comfortable with himself for that.

Even so, Shane had never rimmed him. Not even close. They'd sucked each other off and done a whole lot of stroking. They'd even rubbed against each

other, naked, until they'd painted each other's skin with hot, milky seed. Shane had spilled hard between Chance's thighs more than a few times, too, but they'd never put mouths to anything behind each other's balls. Chance had found the idea kind of gross, back then, and Shane had thought... Oh, fuck. Shane had thought it was too intimate when they weren't really ready to go all the way, as juvenile as that had sounded even then. They'd touched each other there a few times, but more from curiosity than anything else. Even then Shane had seemed experienced. More than Chance, anyway. But there had never been any rimming, damn it.

"He must have loved it, even if he never did it with me," Chance said insistently. "How else could someone get whatever kind of thing you're talking about? If it's something that comes from someone's ass, then he must have had his mouth on... someone's ass, right?"

Jazz shrugged and finished off his beer. "Dunno. Maybe if he drank contaminated well water or something. Water that hadn't been filtered or treated could have—" Another belch. "Sorry. Dirty water coulda done it, but I don't know when or how he woulda drank dirty water. It would prolly take a week for whatever it was to hit, anyway, so never mind. Hey, can we watch *Lost Girl*? It's still early and I think I DVR-ed the first season. I'm usually too busy for TV, but we're on break, and Nellie says it's pretty cool."

Of course Nellie did. Chance had been the one to introduce the Southern-German-Australian-sounding guy to *Lost Girl*. It was one of the few shows with gay content that Chance could admit watching—mostly because so much of the sexual action was either girl-on-guy or girl-on-girl. He'd had straight friends in Miami who'd become addicted to the show because of the female same-sex scenes.

"Sure," Chance agreed, even while his mind was going a mile a minute. "You want a Coke before we get started?"

Jazz grinned a sloppy sort of grin. "I want another beer."

Chance laughed. "Not if you want to remember watching the show, you don't. You can have Coke, water, or ginger ale. Unless you really want to spend another night puking."

"Ginger ale," Jazz said, still slurring a little, and Chance smirked as he got up and headed into the kitchen. It was always cool when he could outwit his younger, smarter brother.

It was only when he was at the fridge, grabbing himself another beer and the ginger ale for Jazz that Chance truly realized what Jazz had said.

Shane had somehow been exposed to untreated water.

Chance had helped put Shane's head into a none-too-clean toilet.

A week or so later—Chance didn't remember exactly, but it had been something like that, just like Jazz had said—Shane had been in the hospital, after numerous episodes of explosive diarrhea at school. He'd been kept there for weeks, and when he'd been discharged...

"I called him and... Oh fuck." Chance felt sick, all of a sudden, but it passed quickly. Whatever the true cause of Shane's illness, it didn't matter. He didn't really want to be responsible, but maybe he was.

That still didn't excuse Shane for outing him, though, and Chance couldn't forgive that. Ever.

He felt better once he'd decided that much, and by the time he sat down on the couch in the guest house again and handed his brother a can of ginger ale, then opened his own beer, Chance felt... Normal.

Not happy. Not sad. Not good or bad, but just... normal. And that was good enough. For the moment, it was good enough, right up until Chance fell asleep and couldn't manage to wake up while diarrhea burst from his ass like water from a fire hydrant shooting through a truck's hose.

All his one-time friends were there, watching and laughing, and when he tried to say it was because he was sick, they laughed and made up their own stories.

When he did wake, he found himself drenched in a cold sweat that had nothing at all to do with the sub-zero temperatures outside, but he didn't care about that. He didn't even care that his cock was hard and he was thinking about Shane.

Maybe he'd been stupid, back in the day, for believing the rumors about Shane's physical... issue. But that didn't change the fact that Shane had shared a photo with the world—a photo Chance hadn't even known about—and tried to destroy any possibility of a normal life that Chance might have had.

Still, Chance sort of thought he might owe Shane an apology.

Not for the swirly, but for buying into what the results of it had possibly caused.

Yeah. He would apologize to Shane for assuming Shane was a slutty, whorish fag. Maybe Shane hadn't deserved that. But he wouldn't pretend to be sorry for the swirly. It wasn't his fault that the diner didn't sanitize things for their patrons' protection.

He deliberately ignored the reality that the diner's manager probably never considered that someone would have their head shoved into the toilet, much less that any head shoved in the bowl would be flushed.

It didn't matter. Shane Parks's illness wasn't his fault. It was the fault of the diner for not cleaning well enough.

If they'd been going to court, Chance figured he'd have a good chance of convincing a jury. As it was, though, he couldn't even manage to convince himself.

January 2013

"You're being an asshole."

Jazz seemed sincere enough, though Chance didn't know what he was talking about.

"I didn't get it until Nellie told me some stuff, but you're being an asshole. Did you really shove Shane's head in a toilet because some other Varsity jerks said he was gay? I mean, he was from *Carter*! How would they even know he was anything but a friend from the next town over?"

Chance hadn't even wondered at the time, but looking back, he couldn't remember Shane showing any overt signs. Chance had known, obviously, because they'd been messing around together, but why would anyone else have suspected?

He'd been in the diner, waiting in a booth for Shane to get there, but Shane was running late. Then the guys had shown up and they'd said what they'd said when Shane strolled in a few minutes later. One of them, though Chance couldn't remember which, suddenly insisted that Shane was gay and that Chance had to be too if he was hanging out with Shane, and...

"I was stupid." That was something Jazz should understand. Most people were stupid compared to Jazz. "I was more worried about how my so-called friends saw me than I was about how I saw myself." He grinned at the stunned look on his brother's face.

“You remember that my girlfriend’s a Psychology major, right?” Chance asked, being deliberately annoying. “Becca’s a big fan of ‘it’s not your fault unless you caused it,’ and I guess I did cause it.”

“Well, good.” Jazz nodded. “Maybe that’s something you should tell Shane. Because I’m really tired of seeing him at the LKNG house and not knowing what to say when he saved my brain and all. Other than ‘hi,’ because that’s just polite. And he’s kind of mad at Nellie, too, but not a lot. I don’t know why, unless it’s because you guys used to fuck. You and Nellie; not you and Shane. Unless you did, but I don’t think Tyler—he’s the Lord High Poobah of LKNG—would be so sure Shane’s a virgin if you guys ever did that.”

It wasn’t the first time Chance heard about Shane’s questionable virginity. It was a dubious claim, considering how many times Shane had stroked fingers against Chance’s hole, his mouth and body making promises that had never been kept.

“By the way,” Jas—Jazz—added, “unless Rebecca’s a total moron and doesn’t know you’re a big queer, you might want to tell her before she finds out on her own, bro-mo.”

It was either sweet or messed up that Jazz was calling him bro-mo; Chance couldn’t decide. He hadn’t even known Jazz knew the term.

“I’ll let you in on a secret,” Chance said softly. “Rebecca’s just as same-sex oriented as I am. So you were right when you said she was my beard, but the truth is, I’m just as much *her* beard. Or whatever it’s called when it’s a dude doing a friend a solid.”

Jazz grinned and shook his head. “Thanks for the history lesson, but it doesn’t have anything to do with right now. I like Shane, and I like Nellie and the LKNG guys. I think I’m going to try to pledge their house next year, if it’s even called pledging when they’re not in the Greek system, but whatever. It’d be good if you could stop being a dick to them.”

It didn’t escape Chance’s notice that Shane was included in the *them*. “I’ll try,” he said after a few seconds. “Seriously, Jazz. I’ll at least apologize to the fucker and thank him for keeping you from becoming any more of a drooling idiot than you were before.”

That would have to do, because there was no way Chance was ever going to forgive Shane Parks. Not even if Shane begged him to.

Chapter Five

February 2013

"I think William likes you," Shane said softly, one hand stroking slowly up and down Nellie's side in the darkness of the bedroom. "And I'm not trying to end this... whatever it is we've been doing, but..."

"But you're not in any danger of falling for me?" Nellie's lips curved against Shane's neck, and Shane smiled, too, though the sparse bit of moonlight coming through the blinds probably wasn't enough for Nellie to see by. "I know that, thanks. I don't expect this to last forever. I do like you, but that's all it is. I'm honored to have been your first, of course, but that was months ago. At this point, we're... convenient to each other, and that will pass, sooner or later. Though I'll admit I like your bed far better than my own."

God, Nellie might be younger, but he was definitely more experienced. Then again, pretty much every guy over the age of fifteen was more experienced than Shane had been with actual, fully-penetrative sex. He was making up for lost time with Nellie, though he couldn't quite figure out why he hadn't felt comfortable doing so with Tyler, back before Ty-and-Dave.

"So you don't want to see someone else?" He was truly curious. He enjoyed the time he spent with Nellie, but he didn't want the guy to feel like he in any way owed Shane.

Nellie chuckled softly, the air tickling Shane's skin. "You mean William? No, thanks. I prefer guys who actually want more than a night or two, and we both know that's not him. Besides, I have my eye on someone already. Not for anytime soon, but eventually."

Shane had his suspicions about who the mystery-man—or boy, if he was right—might be, but it was none of his business. If he was right, then Nellie was obviously waiting for something; possibly a birthday. *If* he was right, and he was sure he was, Shane had a feeling that Nellie wouldn't be disappointed, either. He'd seen the way Jazz watched Nellie when the kid thought no one was looking, and vice versa.

"I'll just wish you luck, then," Shane murmured. "And it's getting late. We should probably go to sleep. Don't you have a match tomorrow?"

Nellie laughed and rolled onto Shane, his eyes wide enough to sparkle even in the dim light. "I have a different kind of swordplay in mind right now."

Shane chuckled and pulled Nellie's lips closer. "So I guess we're gonna duel. I'm up for that."

Nellie's lips brushed his, even as Shane reached for the box beside his bed. "Yes. Yes, you are."

"I'm sorry."

Not only was Chance Breckinridge the very last person Shane ever expected would show up in his bedroom, but to be there saying *that*? So unlikely that Shane pinched himself, frowning at the small pain. Or maybe at Chance.

"What the hell are you doing in my room? Get out!"

Chance shook his head, looking just as unhappy to be there as Shane was to have him. "I'd love to, you fucker, but my brother wants to be part of your little homo-hut next year. I figure he has a better chance of not being black-balled if I make nice. So I'm sorry, okay? I shouldn't have called you a whore."

Shane knew he was standing in his own room with his mouth hanging open, but he couldn't seem to move. Or speak. Or do much of anything other than stare at Chance for close to a minute.

"Wow. That's the most offensive apology I've ever heard." It was. "And wait. *That's* what you're sorry for? Calling me a slutty whore?"

Chance shrugged. "What else?" God, he looked so smug and disinterested. It was infuriating.

"How about shoving my head in that toilet, you asshole? Giving me some kind of intestinal bacteria? Or what about going along with calling me gay when your friends started in on me? I may not have been as deep in the closet as you apparently still are, but I wasn't exactly out, either. Not until you and your stupid jock friends made an example of me, then told everyone!" God, it felt good to let go. Shane only wished he could hit Chance with more than words, but that would have consequences he wasn't willing to face.

"What about harassing me non-stop with your stupid calls, and telling people I got you drunk and forced you to suck me off? How about ruining my last year and a half of high school? Do you have any idea..." Shane laughed, a loud, bitter bark. "You know I spent that whole time bullied, knocked down, finding chocolate sauce all over the inside of my locker when it wasn't squirted on the back of my pants in the halls? My clever-as-hell classmates decided to call me *Come-Farts* instead of Shane Parks! They almost got it put into the

yearbook, you shit, and all you think you have to be *sorry* about is calling me a whore? Fuck you!”

“No, fuck *you!*” At least the asshole didn’t seem so cool and above-it-all anymore. That was a plus. “My whole life went to hell! You fucking outed me! Jesus Christ! Do you have any idea how hard it was to convince even my *parents* that I wasn’t gay? I still get called *Peckerbinge* every time I go home!”

Shane stared for a moment, wide-eyed. “Oh, hell no. You do *not* get to play the victim, here.” He wasn’t shouting anymore, but he wasn’t far from it, either. In fact, Shane felt oddly calm but still furious, somehow. He suspected that Nellie, at least, might be in the hall listening, but he didn’t care.

“You had to survive a whole eight months of whatever bullshit went on for you,” he continued, stalking closer in the large-ish bedroom, eyes locked hard on Chance’s. “I had to live through that and a whole other *year* of being called names! Having kids warn their friends not to invite me anywhere because I’d drug and *rape* them... Having even my *teachers* look at me with disgust and suspicion because of your damned lies! Hell, my stepdad’s business took a hit too, because people didn’t want to buy a car from someone who’d support a *raping faggot!* The last thing you are is the God damned *victim!*”

Chance glared but didn’t back down. “You should have just said you weren’t gay! But no! Shane fucking Parks is too good to lie! *All of it*—even that damned swirly—*is your own damned fault*, and I don’t give a shit if you hate me! I just don’t want you taking it out on my brother!”

“I guess you’ll have to wait ’til the fall to find out, asshole.” Shane would never vote against Jazz—he was a good kid, no matter who his brother was—but he liked the idea of Chance sweating it out for months. “And I don’t hate you. Hate is like ten miles behind me. I’ve moved on to whatever comes after hate, just in the two minutes since you walked into my bedroom like I invited you. Now get the fuck *out!*”

God, his heart was racing. His palms were sweating, too, and he couldn’t seem to get enough air, no matter how he tried. Then Chance’s eyes narrowed, the hazel almost invisible, and Chance laughed.

“*I say when I leave, and since you’re past hating me, I bet you’ll ten-miles-past-hate this even more, you fucker.*”

What the hell was that supposed to mean? It didn’t even make any sense.

It made even less sense when Chance licked his lips—Shane hadn’t realized he’d looked away from Chance’s eyes, but he for damned sure saw that slick

tongue slip out—and when Chance suddenly closed the foot or so between them, Shane couldn't move fast enough. Hell, he was so stunned by what was happening, it had already started by the time he realized he *should* move. Slug Chance, or knee him in the junk, or... something.

By then, though, it was too late, and Shane fell into the angry mash of mouth on mouth, lips hard and punishing even while tongues stroked and stabbed and fought in a way that wasn't really a battle at all.

Shane lost track of exactly what was going on; mostly because his body and mind were sending extremely conflicting messages. One was screaming for him to stop and think about what he was doing, while the other seemed intent upon strangling that thinking part and drowning in the odd mix of pleasure and anger coursing through him.

His skin felt too hot, too tight, throbbing with excitement every time the teeth and tongue assaulting him went harder, deeper, and yet it was no more an assault than his own insistent possession of that mouth.

Hands gripped roughly at his skin and Shane returned the favor, though he didn't know when their shirts had been removed, and he wasn't at all reluctant when nimble fingers fumbled at his jeans. Hell, he already had his hands down the back of similar, open pants, fingers digging hard into muscled globes of flesh.

The world spun for a moment, and Shane found himself on his bed, fabric bunched around his knees, and he wanted to say something—he didn't know what—but that mouth was still on his own, hot and wet, and taking but also giving, until somehow his jeans were gone.

He bucked against the equally naked body pressing down on him; felt the denim clinging to those legs, and it was the work of moments to maneuver the heavy material past ankles with one foot. Then... oh, then it was on.

They fought for dominance, all the while grunting, groaning into each other's mouths, and when they wound up with Shane on top, body firmly wedged between strong, nearly hairless thighs, he tried to stop. Hell, he tried to slow down, to remember why what he was doing was a bad idea, but his body overrode his mind yet again.

God, he was so hard. So fucking hard, leaking pre-come all over soft, smooth skin. He wanted... fuck, he knew what he wanted, and there was nothing in the way the body under him was moving that said *stop* or *no*.

More dribbles of fluid left him, slicking the tender, lightly haired sac and the skin beyond, and Shane didn't stop, couldn't have even if he'd wanted to, and he didn't want to. He wanted exactly what he was going to have, and there was no more than token resistance as he rested on one elbow and took himself in hand, then placed his seeping tip right where it wanted to be.

Oh, God. God, so tight! Not *too* tight, but just right.

His heart seemed to skip a beat, though that wasn't likely, and Shane shoved all the way in with one rough snap of his hips.

He swallowed the loud, moaned cry that fed into his mouth, answering it with his own equally muffled roar, territorial as all hell and loving it, and... God, there was so much to love about the wild, wickedly soft-but-hard grip around his cock and the flexing of the hands his own had tangled with once he was fully seated. And still their mouths remained sealed together, though tongues no longer slid. It seemed like only one part of him could thrust at a time, somehow, and that was fine. That was good. It was enough that he could breathe while pistoning in and out in long, hard strokes, planting himself fully each time he shored up against that stretched hole, tight balls resting atop his thrusting cock while his own sac drew up, firmed almost to the point of becoming painful... but it was a good pain, a wanted pain. The kind of pain that felt so very, very good because it would feel even better when it passed into bliss.

He tried to hold on for as long as he could, but he was obviously doing something right because that hole was tightening rhythmically, flexing around his intruding cock, bearing down on him just right. The body beneath him rocked; rolled wildly. The fingers tangled with his own squeezed hard. Another shout fed between his lips as the hard cock between them spurted, the scent of come intensifying even as the pulsing around Shane's cock became harder, going tighter, holding longer...

"Oh, fuck," Shane groaned, dragging his lips from the ones that had tormented him so well, so perfectly, and spilling himself deep inside... Chance.

"Oh, fuck," he said again, finally able to hear his mind, now that the intense physical need had passed. "Jesus fucking God. What the hell did we just... Oh, fuck, I'm gonna be sick!"

Chance was gone by the time Shane finished puking in the hallway bathroom. Thank God for that. Shane didn't have a single clue about what he could have said to the guy.

“Sorry, but I hate you so much I just had to fuck you” probably wouldn’t have gone over well. Nor would “Yeah, sure you’re not gay” or “Nice ass.” He was pretty sure “I can’t stand you, but I want to fuck you again” would be even worse. None of which changed the fact that he wanted to say all of them... and do the last. Repeatedly.

Oh, God, Shane realized, looking at his room, which didn’t appear any different than usual, even with the rumpled bed... Oh, God. He’d just fucked Chance Breckinridge. Without a condom or even lube, for God’s sake, and how had that even happened?

The few times Nellie’d pushed into *him*, only with a couple fingers... Didn’t matter. Chance was obviously not as untried as Shane still was, and that just pissed him off. Then it scared him. God, if Chance got fucked enough that Shane could fuck him without anything but the lubricant provided by the fluids Shane had been leaking so copiously, who knew what Chance might have been exposed to? What Shane might have exposed *himself* to by dint of the small head speaking louder than the big one?

He couldn’t even blame Chance, damn it. That was the part that sucked. Sure, Chance hadn’t stopped him—and with two inches in height and probably close to twenty pounds more of muscle, Chance could have—but Shane was the one who’d gone there.

Maybe Chance had started it, but Shane had for damned sure finished it. Bare. In Chance’s ass. And it had felt better than any orgasm Shane had ever experienced in his life.

It had to be because he’d gotten some of his own back after Chance had stolen the last of his teen years. That had to be it... Didn’t it?

Tyler and Dave were still going strong, which made talking to Ty out of the question. It wasn’t that Shane didn’t like Dave—he did—but it was a given that anything Ty knew, Dave would know within hours, if not sooner, and Shane for damned sure didn’t want his stupidity to become common knowledge. Meaning he didn’t want more than three people to know about it. One was Shane himself, the second was Chance, and the third... well, that would be whoever Shane ended up using as a sounding board.

He considered Nellie for about a split second, but that just seemed wrong. How could he tell the guy he’d been sleeping with that he’d not only slept with someone else—someone Nellie had slept with, too—but that he’d done so bare?

That was like... rule one of being gay. Never fuck bareback unless you were willing to deal with the consequences. Shane had known that even when he and Chance had been messing around back in high school, and yet somehow he'd done exactly the wrong thing. Hell, having any kind of sex at all with Chance was pretty much the *definition* of the wrong thing.

It didn't even matter that Shane hadn't planned on doing it, or that it'd been a heat-of-the-moment mistake. What mattered was that he'd done it, and it freaked him out. God knew Nellie would probably freak, too.

Unfortunately, whether he was going to tell Nellie or not was out of his hands, as Shane found out the morning after fucking Chance... and sleeping so poorly, he might as well not have bothered trying.

"The walls aren't all that thick," Nellie said quietly as he sat down next to Shane at the kitchen table, a bagel in one hand and a glass of orange juice in the other. "They seem thicker when you close the bedroom doors, though."

Oh, God. Could things get any worse?

"I wasn't trying to spy on you," Nellie went on, not looking at him, which was a little upsetting, "but I'm right down the hall, and I had to use the bathroom, so..." He coughed, then sipped his juice. "All right. I have to say, that was unexpected. But I closed the door. I thought you might not want to have to explain why you were fucking your archenemy. To everyone else, I mean, because you already know you need to explain it to *me*."

Yeah... apparently things *could* get worse. Exponentially.

"It was an accident!" Okay, that sounded just as lame as the skeptical gaze Nellie gave him implied. "I mean... I don't know what happened, okay? One minute we were yelling at each other, and the next, he was kissing me, and..." Shane shrugged helplessly.

"And the next thing you knew, you were balls-deep in what I happen to know is a stellar ass? Is that what you're saying?"

God, if he blushed any hotter, Shane figured he'd have permanent burn scars on his cheeks. Even so, he had to go on. He owed it to Nellie, considering. "Pretty much," he said with a sigh. "But it gets worse. I. It was so. I mean, I didn't expect to ever. Not with *Chance*! And it was so in-the-moment, and... Hell!"

That hadn't made any sense at all. Shane knew it. But he couldn't quite manage to say it again. He had a feeling the words would be just as garbled, anyway.

“Ah,” Nellie said, after staying silent long enough to eat half the bagel, finish the juice, and oh, yeah, have Shane convinced that his friend-slash-lover-of-sorts never planned to speak to him again. “So you’re worried about... things. Little, tiny things. Like viruses and organisms. Those sorts of things.”

Shane swallowed roughly, though he hadn’t even touched his cereal. “I. Yeah. And I’m sorry, Nellie. I didn’t plan to... you know. Anything. We’ve been good with each other, and I seriously don’t know what the hell happened. It was just so messed up, and I couldn’t *think!*”

Nellie cocked his head, and Shane tried to steel himself to whatever rant his probably former-friend might let loose with. Then he saw something, a glint in Nellie’s eyes that surprised him almost as much as Nellie’s words.

“Chance doesn’t have any infections you need to worry about. At least, he didn’t last October.” Nellie looked sheepish. “Even when you use condoms, they can break. So we went to the campus health center and we were both fine. I can’t say what he may have been up to since Jazz’s near-death experience,” a visible shudder went through Nellie then, “but before that, he was always safe, as far as I know.”

It was strange to see Nellie so pale, but the when and why of it only reinforced what Shane had already thought. As such, he pushed aside his own worries and leaned closer to his friend until their shoulders were pressed together, then asked what he’d been wanting to know for well over a week. “If you love him so much, what the hell are you doing with *me?*”

Nellie frowned but didn’t lean away. “I don’t love Chance. Why would you even think that?”

Shane rolled his eyes. “Chance isn’t the Breckinridge I’m talking about. At the risk of sounding like Alicia Silverstone in *Clueless*, ‘Oh, my God, you’re, like, totally butt-crazy in love with Jazz!’ And yeah, I know I paraphrased, but that’s not the point. Why aren’t you with *him?*”

“I’m not. I mean, Jazz is... It doesn’t matter. He’s bisexual, not gay. And he’s seventeen. Why are *you* pretending to hate Chance?”

Shane snorted. “I’m not pretending. He’s a shit. He didn’t even really apologize for anything, and...” He went on, telling Nellie what he could recall of the argument that had led to the fucking. The argument Nellie had apparently not been listening to, after all.

“Maybe I had some kind of feelings for him back then, before everything got all fucked up, but I can’t stand him now. He’s an asshole, and that’s the last

thing I need.” Shane shrugged and changed the subject. “So why does it matter if Jazz is bi instead of gay? Or are you one of those gays who thinks bisexual guys are just pretending until they meet the right girl?” Shane arched his brows, silently demanding an answer.

Nellie groaned. Softly, but Shane heard him. “I think he’s *seventeen*,” Nellie finally said. “I knew I was gay by the time I was ten. I told my parents when I was twelve. I’m never going to have a wife, and that’s fine. My older sister will continue the family line soon enough. But I can’t see myself with someone who isn’t fully committed to me, and how can he be when he has such an easy, more acceptable option? It’s one thing to ‘experiment’ in college, but what happens when the real world refuses to accept that? When Society makes it clear that the other route is not only expected but preferable?”

“I swear I want to smack you right now,” Shane muttered sincerely. “What’s to stop a guy who’s full-on *Mary*-gay from ditching you because people might say mean shit? Nothing! It doesn’t matter if he’s gay or bi, Nellie! It only matters whether he loves you! And from the way he watches you whenever you two are in the same room, Jazz does. So wait until he’s eighteen—it would be wrong not to, I’ll agree with that—but don’t pass on what could be the best thing in your life just because you’re scared. If you do, you’ll regret it forever.”

Nellie frowned and set down the remaining knob of bagel, shaking his head. “Please don’t take this the wrong way, Shane,” he said, and there was something in his gaze and voice that had Shane’s stomach twisting around itself, “but you should probably figure out your own twisted psyche before giving relationship advice to anyone else. And now I’m going. I have things to do, and since my ears are no longer ringing from hearing you and your archenemy *fucking*, I’m fairly sure I can manage.”

Damn. He’d really pissed Nellie off, and that couldn’t be a good thing. Especially not if Shane wanted to spend more nights in bed with the guy, and he did.

The whole thing with Chance was just an aberration. It was. He didn’t feel any urge to get naked and sweaty with the asshole again. Not ever. He didn’t.

I don’t!

Chapter Six

March 2013

Chance still got angry every time he thought about what had happened with Shane. He didn't even know how it had happened, except... he did. What he didn't know was *why*.

What was there about Shane-fucking-Parks that had led to Chance spreading himself for the guy? Letting Shane do him *bare*?

It wasn't that Shane was even better looking at twenty-one than he'd been at sixteen, though Chance couldn't deny that was true. It wasn't even that Chance had always wondered—since even before he'd had real sex—what it would be like to be naked and fully intimate with Shane.

Back then he'd imagined that he'd be the one doing the doing, rather than the one being done, but it had only taken a long weekend with that first Miami surfer-boy to show Chance where his true interest lay, and it wasn't exclusively in doing the do. He loved his prostate, and his prostate loved cock. More specifically, after the night two and a half weeks earlier, Chance's prostate loved *Shane's* cock.

He was still pissed off about the whole no-condom thing, but he wasn't as worried as he could have been. Nellie had gone out of his way to let Chance know that Shane was negative for everything that might be a concern, and Chance had gotten himself checked out, yet again, at the health center. He wasn't sure he believed that Shane had been a virgin, because he for fuck's sake hadn't fucked like one, but maybe *virgin* only meant he hadn't been fucked yet, as opposed to doing the fucking. Whatever.

The truly horrible part of things was that nobody Chance had taken to bed since that night had been able to give him anything like the mind-shattering, blindness-inducing, spine-bending orgasm he'd experienced with Shane's cock stabbing hard into his ass, and Chance had tried. Fuck, he'd tried!

Jazz kept suggesting he install a revolving door on his bedroom, and after close to three weeks, Chance was ready to agree with him. The volume of one-night, no-arrangement guys who'd wandered through the apartment was staggering even to Chance, and yet none of them managed to turn his crank the way Shane had.

A few had come close, but ultimately fell short.

It didn't help that he kept running into Shane at various events—parties and other gatherings that Chance attended to keep an eye on Jazz, at which he couldn't help noticing Shane. That Shane seemed to find him mostly invisible was more disturbing than Chance wanted to admit, even to himself.

But fuck, Shane looked fine. *Fine*. Hot and cool. Special and unattainable. Like a fine wine or a beautifully configured piece of art. Except Shane wasn't a *thing*. He was a man.

A man Chance hated. A man who'd done his best to ruin Chance's life.

Unfortunately, that didn't make any difference to his cock, which was exactly why most of the times he saw Shane and Shane studiously ignored him, they eventually ended up in a bathroom or a bedroom, or one time in a closet, the irony of which still made Chance laugh when he wasn't shuddering and shooting from his own hand. His own touch.

Still, they got each other off, but then it was right back to hating. The only problem was, Chance couldn't quite swear that he still felt as bitter and angry as he'd been before. If anything, he felt... He didn't know what.

The anger was still there, because Shane really had outed him, at least amongst Chance's fellow students who'd never really believed the drunk story. But after everything—after his father saying all the stuff he'd said about Granny Rose and Uncle Emmett and not seeming disgusted that Chance might be gay—he wasn't sure that he had any reason to still hate Shane. Hell, who knew? Maybe if he'd just said it was true back then, that he was gay, he'd be more comfortable with people knowing about him. Maybe if he hadn't been so resistant, he and Shane could have figured their shit out and wouldn't be playing this stupid fucking game.

It really was stupid. Chance knew that much, after the interlude he and Shane had both indulged in earlier that night. He could still smell Shane's enjoyment of their encounter all over his own skin, and he liked it, for fuck's sake.

He heard his phone ringing out in the living room of the apartment, where he'd left it to charge, but he didn't care enough to go out there to answer it. Jazz clearly had different priorities, because he banged on Chance's locked bedroom door a few minutes later.

“What?” Jazz might be his brother but Chance didn't feel any particular need to open the door at one in the morning.

“Nellie wants you to know they got home okay.” Jazz sounded far too happy about it for Chance’s liking. Sure, he’d slept with Nellie for a few months and the guy was pretty cool, but he didn’t like hearing that tone in Jazz’s voice, especially when he was pretty sure Nellie was fucking Shane, which pissed him off for some reason.

The whole thing was borderline incestuous, for fuck’s sake, with Chance having slept with Nellie, Nellie sleeping with Shane, and Shane and Chance having their... whatever the fuck it was. Jazz getting involved with Nellie would just be too much. Chance didn’t have any idea how he’d explain it to anyone, much less their parents. Yeah, that was why it bugged him.

He wished he could believe that, because it sounded so logical, but he didn’t. Believe it. At all. Fuck, he was screwed.

“Good for them,” Chance answered. “Go to bed, Jazz. You have a whole bunch of stuff to study in the morning for... classes.” Fuck if he could remember what Jazz had chosen, if anything. He had a vague recollection of talking about it a week or so earlier, but he’d been slightly buzzed from liquor, and completely drunk on having had his hand around not only his own cock, but Shane’s, too, at the party they’d been to. Yet another party, yet another night. Fuck.

“Night, bro-mo,” Jazz said through the door, and Chance found himself smiling.

“Night, Jazz. Don’t forget to make coffee when you get up.”

Jazz snorted, so loud and long that Chance knew he was meant to hear it. “As if. Trying to talk to you in the morning without coffee is like banging my head against a brick wall. Night, again.”

Chance smiled and stripped out of his pajamas. Jazz was going to bed, so there was no reason to stay clothed. Besides, it would be easier to replay the most recent hand job with Shane if he were naked and in bed.

Then he was, and he did, and it was nowhere near as good as the actual event, but it still got the job done, thank fuck. Maybe he’d be able to sleep without dreams of ass-explosions and laughing kids who taunted him and called him *Come-Farts*, even though that hadn’t been his own life, but Shane’s.

Sadly, he wasn’t able to do that at all.

April

Chance arched hard, using the wall in front of him as leverage to shove his ass back; to take Shane's covered cock as deep as possible. This time they were using a condom, thanks to Chance's realization that there was no way around it.

When he and Shane were in the same place, they were going to have some kind of sex. That usually meant jerking each other off, or one time—Jesus fuck, that had been awesome—Chance sucking Shane so hard and good that he could still feel the memory of Shane's fingers digging into his scalp.

Sure, mouths and hands were their usual thing, but Chance had thought they both wanted more. At least *he* did, and that was exactly why he'd made sure to bring supplies and have them handy when he'd decided to attend the party at LKNG house.

Shane had been running around during the event, which wasn't all that unusual, and Chance had nearly given up on being able to get him alone. It was Nellie who'd intervened, sending Chance to Shane's bedroom. Listening to Nellie had been the best thing Chance had ever done.

"Oh, fuck." Chance could barely hear himself under Shane's labored breathing. "Harder. Please, ba... Shane. Harder!"

"Fuck you." Shane sounded smug but also uncertain, in some strange way Chance couldn't define. "You'll get what I give you and like it."

Yeah. Yeah, he would, because as much as he didn't want to admit it, Shane always managed to give him exactly what he needed. Even with the full-on fucking for the first time since their non-condom event, Chance couldn't say his stolen moments with Shane weren't perfect.

Perfectly fucked up, but still perfect.

They hadn't done anything on or in a bed since that first time, but Chance wanted to again. He wanted to feel Shane on him, thrusting hard... or under him, letting him bounce on the cock that was long and felt thicker in his ass than in his hand, but was somehow just right. Shane, however, seemed determined to deny him that by keeping him against the wall.

"I'm gonna come in your fucking ass," Shane gasped out against the side of his head. "Better touch yourself if you want to come, too."

The thrusts became harder, faster, each punctuated with a muffled grunt, and Chance did what Shane said. He repositioned one hand on the wall,

dropping the other to his straining cock. One stroke of his own flesh was almost enough to have him shooting against paint and plaster, but not quite. Then Shane gripped tighter at his hips, fingers digging in hard enough that Chance thought—*hoped*—he might be bruised later, and one more stroke, fingers tighter around his own shaft, had Chance shoving back as he spilled, painting the wall with wild splashes of seed, the force of which was echoed by the throbbing, pulsing sensation of Shane's cock unloading into the condom deep inside Chance's ass.

“Damn, Peckerbinge,” Shane mumbled, “you really do have a nice ass.”

The combination of orgasm and hearing that fucking name—from *Shane*, of all people—had Chance speechless until Shane finished pulling away. Even then, he couldn't quite manage to speak. He was too torn between cussing the guy out and basking in whatever afterglow might remain following their... what?

It was only when he'd managed to bend down and pull his jeans up that Chance found his voice.

“Fuck you,” he said quietly, suddenly too tired to be angry. “I like that nickname about as much as you like *Come-Farts*, and I bet you know it.” He fastened the denim, taking his time with metal button and zipper, not looking at Shane but at the floor, he suddenly felt so ashamed of thinking... whatever the fuck he'd been thinking. “This was a mistake. I get that now. I'll just stay away from you like you wanted me to, okay? Because I can't do this. I can't. Not if you're going to call me that.”

Shane snorted. He actually *snorted*, like he thought Chance was funny, for fuck's sake. “But it's true, isn't it? I mean, I'm kind of impressed by how many guys you've managed to bang in the last two months. If there's a dictionary definition of a *peckerbinge*, I'm pretty sure that's it. Besides, the more I insult you, the sooner you'll feel like you've done whatever fucked-up penance you're shooting for.”

“I'm... What?” That didn't even make sense. “Penance?” He didn't have anything to make up for, damn it, and even if he did, he wouldn't choose having sex with Shane Parks as a method of achieving whatever kind of redemption Shane thought he was after. “Are you crazy? Certifiably crazy? Because that's fucking insane, man!”

“Why else would you be here?” Shane seemed angry, but also curious, though Chance didn't know how he recognized the curiosity. The anger, on the

other hand, he was familiar with. "Why else would you keep finding me and dragging me into closets or bathrooms, or even into my own room to make me feel good if you didn't think you were atoning for something?" Shane glared, and it was only then that Chance realized he'd looked up from the floor to meet Shane's eyes. The glare.

"I—"

"Shut up!" Shane shouted it from less than a foot away, and Chance shut up, wondering what the hell else Shane was going to say to hurt him. To belittle whatever the fuck was going on between them. Then he found out, because Shane went on.

"You hate me, Chance! I know, okay? And I hate you, too, but even with the way you keep throwing yourself at me, it's like you don't get it. You don't understand *why*! And yeah, I thought 'so what? So what if he's completely clueless? I'm still getting some good orgasms from it while he works out whatever his issues are,' but it's bullshit. All of this is bullshit!"

"Shane," Chance started, more than confused by the words that had just vomited forth. They made no sense to him.

Shane's glare grew stronger, which Chance hadn't thought possible. He figured that piercing stare should have set him on fire or at the very least singed him.

"You really don't get it." Shane seemed surprised. Still furious enough to be hissing, but surprised. "I hate you. I hate that I keep waiting for you to haul me into anywhere private. I hate that I can't keep myself from wanting to touch you. I hate knowing how you sound when I first shove into you, and how your eyes roll back when I've got our cocks pressed together in my hand, and I *hate* knowing that the only reason you're even doing those things is because you feel like you owe me, because you *do*! You *do* owe me, Chance. Because I outed you, sure. But with the truth, and only after you destroyed me with a *lie*. A lie based on what happened after you shoved my head in that *toilet*. So this whole... 'lie in wait for Shane and give him orgasms' thing has to stop. *Now*. It's fun, but it's not helping. Maybe you feel like you're working off some sort of karmic debt, but I'm done. Giving me what you keep giving every other guy with a pulse doesn't do anything but make you even more of a slut than you already were."

Chance gasped. He couldn't help it. He also couldn't help falling back. He would have ended up on the floor, except the wall he'd been leaning against

earlier—while Shane fucked him so perfectly—was right there behind him, ready and willing to support him when his shoulders met it.

“I.” Fuck, that was all he had. He felt sick and confused and wrong, somehow. Lost in a way he couldn't explain even to himself, but he didn't have the words or desire to say so. Shane already had far too much power over him, though Chance didn't know when or how that had happened.

“The funny thing,” Shane said, sounding like he was just having a friendly conversation as he turned away, fastening his own pants, “is that I'm the one you called a whore, back in the day... and you're the one who's had sex with at least half of the gay male population of UCSN, while I've been with exactly two guys, and one of them—by which I mean you—doesn't count. I don't mean it's funny ha-ha. It's funny *strange*. Odd. Just like the idea that you and I could ever be anything more than...”

Shane stopped and shook his head. “Never mind. The point is... I'm done, and you should go.”

Fuck. He really should. Chance still wasn't sure why he'd been seeking Shane out, but the idea that he'd been trying to make amends with his own body was ridiculous. That Shane seemed to believe it, was... yeah, ridiculous. Ludicrous. A whole bunch of other ten-dollar words his mother would be thrilled he knew, too, though she'd likely be horrified if she ever found out the circumstances of their use.

“Fine.” It was more a shaped breath than a spoken word, but Chance didn't have it in him to force more volume. He just made himself push away from the wall and stand for a second, making sure his legs would hold him. Then he turned toward the door and opened it.

He almost wanted to say something then. *Have a nice life* or *fuck you*. Something. But he didn't. He just stepped through the doorway and turned again to close it behind him.

He deliberately chose to ignore the way Shane sat on the edge of the bed, elbows on his knees, fingers threaded through longish, slightly shaggy hair that Chance knew felt like fine silk. He'd touched it in the past, many times, and yeah. Silken. But he wasn't thinking about that. Couldn't.

He closed the door and walked away.

Chance was nervous when he finished telling Nellie about what had happened in Shane's bedroom. He hadn't gone into any great detail, but only said enough to get the point across, so that wasn't what had him feeling anxious. It was that Nellie and he hadn't been alone together since they'd stopped... keeping each other company, as his mother would say.

Jazz had always been there with them since the casual arrangement between Chance and Nellie had ended, and technically, Jazz *was* there. In the apartment. He was asleep in his room, but Jazz was *technically* there. He just wasn't conscious at the moment, and Chance wasn't sure how to feel about the whole unspoken Jazz-and-Nellie thing, anyway.

Nellie was cool. Chance couldn't deny that. Hell, Nellie was smart and funny and damned good-looking. He was also good in bed, as Chance had reason to know, and seemed to be willing to wait for Jazz to be ready, which in no way set Chance's mind at ease when they had a small bit of heated history between them, which meant...

He still didn't like the idea of Nellie being with his kid brother, but Jazz wasn't the average kid. If Jazz could deal with knowing Nellie and Chance had slept together, it wasn't Chance's job to interfere, but that had nothing to do with anything at the moment.

"Fuck you," Chance said, though there wasn't any heat in the words. "There's no way. Hate is hate, and Shane and I have lots of it."

Nellie arched one blond brow and took a sip of wine before shaking his head. "Hate is hate when it's between people who don't know or understand each other. Like the way certain religious types hate us for our very natures. What you and Shane have is more personal, and..." Nellie frowned slightly and sipped again.

"I can't remember how much I've told you about my family," he went on, "but my father didn't get to spend much time with my grandfather. Granddad was always working or deployed. One of the few things they did have together was watching old TV shows Granddad liked, and there was this one, from back in the seventies—*Kung Fu*—that Dad loved and made me watch when it came out on DVD."

"Um. Okay?" What did that have to do with anything?

Nellie smiled a knowing smile, as though he could hear what Chance had thought. "One of the episodes had this line in it. Something about love and hate

being horns on the same bull. Pretty much the same thing as love and hate being two sides of the same coin.”

Chance frowned hard. “So?”

“So... You can't hate someone personally unless you've also loved them, or at least thought you could.” Nellie smiled a quirked grin. “I'm not saying you and Shane are destined to be together. I'm not even saying that you would have lasted forever if things had gone differently, back when. But for you guys to still hate each other the way you do? That takes a whole lot of juvenile, adolescent love that might have burned out years ago if none of that shit ever happened.”

Chance laughed. “Shows what you know. I don't hate him like I used to, but I for damned sure don't love him!”

Nellie's smile grew. “And you just admitted that you don't hate him.”

Fuck, he really had. It felt strange, but he couldn't deny that he meant what he'd said. He didn't hate Shane, and while he'd sort of suspected as much, he hadn't been sure. Now, though, he was. Which had nothing to do with Shane still hating *him*.

“Sometimes you flip a coin and it lands on its edge,” Nellie said when Chance expressed his concerns. “Not often, granted, but it happens. And who can say what external influences can contribute to a coin landing on edge? Between me, Jazz, Tyler, William, and whoever else we rope in, I'm betting we can manipulate the odds for *your* coin. And by 'coin,' I mean you and Shane forgiving each other.”

Chance frowned. “I don't want to forgive him.”

Nellie rolled his eyes dramatically enough that Chance noticed, then shook his head. “Of course you do. You've worked your way past hating him, and now you don't know what to do. The first thing is to forgive him. Out loud, instead of just inside your head, but that's fairly obvious, isn't it?”

How Nellie could know to say that wasn't something Chance figured he'd ever figure out, but it didn't matter. Nellie was wrong. He had to be. Even if Chance had imagined himself in love with Shane five years earlier, there was no way he could still be that deluded. He just didn't want to disappoint Nellie by saying so.

Chapter Seven

May 2013

The semester couldn't be over soon enough for Shane. Not because he didn't like his classes, because he did. Mostly, anyway. There were a few that he wasn't all that fond of, but that was because they bored him. Still, he was doing well enough that he was sure he'd not only pass, but do so near the top of his class.

It wasn't that he was anxious to go home, either. It would be nice to spend some time with Mom and Rob, but being back in Carter for the whole summer was going to be very different from the shorter visits over the holidays. Shane suspected he might have outgrown the small town, due to having Vegas so close by, and knowing people from all over the country... or even the world, in Nellie's case. Carter was still home, but home had grown smaller, somehow. Too small to really contain the man Shane hoped he was becoming.

Mom and Rob would only be at the house for the first few weeks, though. Their vacation the previous summer had been amazing, from what Mom said, and they'd decided to travel again, which meant Shane would be on his own, most of the time. He figured he'd just keep an eye on the house and possibly drive into Cheyenne when he felt the need for human companionship. Lord knew he wouldn't go looking for company of any sort in Carter, even just friendly company. Most people his own age were too afraid of being branded a fag if they spoke to him with anything but insults, or so it had seemed over Christmas.

So, no. He wasn't exactly looking forward to spending the summer in Carter. He just didn't have anywhere else to go, and even though the prior summer had been okay, he didn't really feel like wandering around the mostly empty LKNG house, trying to avoid unexpected glimpses of Ty and Dave going at it.

He was still telling himself that when finals were done and he was packing up the things he thought he'd need for a couple months back home. He still had clothes and stuff in his old bedroom, as Mom reminded him every time they talked, but most of it was at least a couple years old and his tastes had changed some, thanks to Nellie. Nellie for damned sure knew how to dress, but that made sense since his mother was some kind of international ambassador. Shane

figured he should have known that before finally asking Nellie about the accent, but he hadn't.

It was a good thing Nellie didn't get offended easily, because between Shane's classes and the incredibly irritating distraction that was Chance Breckinridge, Shane had been a crappy friend. That asshole Chance had made him a crappy friend.

"And I don't even believe that myself. Shit."

"Believe what?" The voice came from the open door of Shane's room, and he was already grinning as he turned.

"That my mom really trusts me not to throw a kegger while she and Rob are in Hawaii," Shane lied cheerfully. "I mean, that was never my thing, but some of her friends were... unpleasantly surprised when they got home from even a few days away. Their perfect little angels were more demonic than they'd thought."

Nellie laughed. "That's a shame. Now I'll have to find something else to do for fun this summer. I'm guessing the thriving metropolis that is Breckinridge, Wyoming, might be a bit short on fencing clubs and gay bars, though Jazz says there are plenty of horses, so I suppose that's something."

Shane groaned. "God, I *wish* there was a thriving metropolis closer than Cheyenne. Wait. You're coming to Wyoming for the summer? I thought you were meeting your folks in Vienna! What happened?" Nellie had been looking forward to it. Something about the philharmonic something or other.

"I changed my mind," Nellie said, looking just a tiny bit uncomfortable. "My sister got engaged two nights ago, and my parents are already wrapped up in that. As I'm not terribly interested in wedding plans, I've decided to impose upon my friends and visit your home state. It's all a bit last minute."

"And you're staying with Chan... Jazz's family? Really?" That sounded like a whole lot of *not*-fun, considering that Chance was definitely not out to his family, and Jazz probably wasn't, either. God only knew what Mr. and Mrs. Breckinridge were going to think of their sons' openly gay friend.

Nellie quirked a tiny smile and shook his head. "According to the Internet, there are two rather nice hotels nearby. I plan to book a suite for the duration, as I don't think I'm really the 'ranch' type. It sounds unpleasant, aside from the horses."

Shane laughed, grinning. "You obviously haven't asked too much about the house. Think 'country estate with livestock nearby' and you'll be closer to the

reality than what you've got in your head. But you could always come stay with me in Carter. That could be fun. Um, my house *isn't* any kind of estate and we don't have cows or horses, but it's comfortable, and I'll be all on my own once Mom and Rob take off." He shrugged, trying to seem less happy about the idea of Nellie visiting than he actually was. "You don't have to come, but I wouldn't mind the company. I'm not really used to being alone anymore, you know?"

"Do you mind if I think about it?" Nellie bit his lip, and Shane closed his eyes for a moment, trying to forget that Nellie always did that right before he came, too. "I appreciate the offer, but I might fall in love with the hotel's room service. Hot and cold running food is very important."

Shane laughed again, rolling his eyes. "Says the guy who's trained even the restaurants that don't deliver here to make an exception for him. Color me shocked. But yeah. Think on it. It's fine. Hey, maybe we can do something even if you don't want to leave the lap of questionable luxury for the middle-class pleasures of my no pool, no hot tub, no tennis courts house."

Nellie blinked once, blond brows rising. "Well, of course. That's a given. Actually, I was wondering if you'd let me ride with you. Chance offered, but the way he drives that Jeep of his scares me enough during a ten minute trip. I'll probably die of fright if I have to go all the way to Wyoming in it. Also, I don't really want to spend twelve hours listening to Chance bitch and moan about having to do one more year to finish his degree. It's his own fault, anyway. But mostly, it's the driving."

Nellie shuddered, and it was only by sheer force of will that Shane didn't laugh yet again. Instead, he stomped down the impulse and nodded.

"No problem. But I'm planning on heading out first thing in the morning. Can you be packed and ready to go by... let's say eight?"

"I can be ready by seven if it'll spare my life," Nellie said sincerely. "I'd rather not die of terror. My face might freeze like that, and there go all my hopes of an open casket service."

Shane shook his head. "Go pack or something, man. And stop acting like you're gonna die soon. Then again, considering the way Chance used to drive... Yeah. You should definitely ride with me."

He didn't really think Chance would be at all careless. Not with Jazz in the car, anyway. Whatever else Shane might think of Chance, the guy did love his brother. Chance would probably be extra careful driving home.

Shane was still happy to have Nellie ride with him, though. It would be way less boring, for one thing, and for another... maybe he could find out what Chance had been doing since the last time Shane had seen him. The night he'd told Chance to stop trying to make up for things.

He was just curious, really. He didn't miss seeing Chance at all, and he definitely didn't miss the sex. Shane could have all sorts of sex if he wanted to. He just didn't feel like it.

"It looked different on the website." Nellie seemed unhappy, though Shane couldn't tell why. The Breckinridge Arms looked just like it always had. A little old, sure, but nice enough. It was where people with money stayed when they wound up in Breckinridge for whatever reason.

"It's better than the Lakeside Inn," Shane said, shrugging. "Which isn't anywhere near a lake, by the way. I'd say you should stay at the Carter B and B, but it's nowhere near as nice as this. I'm not even sure if they have Wi-Fi at the B and B."

Nellie sighed. "Maybe I should just go to Los Angeles or New York."

Shane snorted. "Maybe you should stop pretending you're some elitist asshole. If you've managed to survive sharing a house with fifteen other guys, I'm pretty sure you can handle the Breckinridge Arms, man. I've heard it's better on the inside. Maybe you should check it out before you make me drive all the way back to Cheyenne so you can run off to the big city." He smirked playfully while Nellie acted offended.

"Seriously," Shane added, "if you don't like it once you go in, there's always my house. Mom and Rob aren't expecting you, but I don't think they'd care if you came now instead of after they leave. They're pretty cool for parental types."

Nellie nodded slowly. "That might be best. If you're sure they won't mind."

Shane cocked his head, suddenly concerned. "Are you okay? I mean, you know my house isn't anywhere close to being a nice hotel, so what's up?"

The small tinge of rose that colored Nellie's cheeks was unexpected, but so were his next words. "I just haven't stayed anywhere on my own since I was fourteen, and after the last year, I think I might be... lonely... without other people around. I can stay here if your parents aren't prepared to entertain, though. I'm just not used to solitude anymore."

“Well, we don’t have room service, but there’s a guest room,” Shane said quickly. “We also don’t have a maid to make up your bed every morning, so it’ll be pretty much like being at UCSN, but on a smaller scale. Let me call Mom real quick. Then if you’re sure you don’t want to check out the hotel, we can head over to Carter.”

Mom actually sounded happy that Nellie wanted to stay at the house right away, going so far as to tell Shane to take his time on the road so she could tidy up the guest room, which was Mom-code for changing the sheets and opening the window to air out the room. “I’ll let Rob know we’ll have company for dinner, too. Maybe he’ll stop at Ruby’s on his way home to pick up a pie for dessert. Does Nellie like pie?”

Shane laughed. “He’s a college student, Mom. If it’s on a plate and doesn’t fight back when he stabs it, he’ll eat it. But I’ll check. Nellie, you like pie, right?”

Nellie’s brow furrowed. “At the risk of sounding like an ‘elitist asshat,’ I like *good* pie. Not those horrible things they sell at the grocer’s.”

“Then you’ll love Ruby’s pies.” Shane was sure of it. “They’re the best. Did you hear that, Mom? We’re a go for pie.”

“Wait!” Mom sounded worried, suddenly. “Nellie isn’t your vegan friend, is he? It’s fine if he is, but I already put a roast in for dinner. If he needs something else, tell me now, while there’s still time to plan for something less... meaty.”

He almost mentioned just how much Nellie liked meat, but at the last possible moment remembered that it was his *mother* on the phone. God, that would have been awful. Not that Shane thought his mom was unaware of that kind of joke—he got his sense of humor from her, after all, so he knew she had one—but it might be kind of weird to say something borderline sexual about the gay guy he was bringing home to stay for the summer, even though there was no chance that he and Nellie would be hooking up. Again. And that wasn’t something Mom needed to know, either—that he and Nellie had been very-close-friends for a while.

“No,” Shane finally managed to say. “You’re thinking of Ty’s boyfriend, Dave. Nellie’s a total omnivore.”

“Oh, good.” Mom sounded relieved. “I’ll just go ahead and call Rob, then take care of Nellie’s room. Drive carefully and I’ll see you boys when you get

here. Oh, there's a speed trap on 108, so keep it below sixty. Love you, honey. Bye!"

Shane was grinning as he ended the call, but he couldn't help it. Mom sounded so excited to have someone other than him to take care of. It was pretty cool. Or maybe she was just looking forward to meeting one of his friends, now that he had some again.

"Your mother is lovely. She doesn't seem old enough to have a son your age."

Shane grinned as he put the third of Nellie's bags down in the guest room. "I know, right? But she was only a year older than I am now when she had me, so maybe that explains it. She's, like, forty-four. But don't tell her I told you."

Nellie rolled his eyes. "As if I would. A gentleman never mentions a lady's age, even if he has reason to know. It's impolite. All women are ageless, once they've passed the urge to seem older than they really are. Or so my father says. This room is nice."

Shane looked around the guest room, which Mom had apparently redecorated since Christmas, and shrugged. "Yeah, but it's smaller than your room at LKNG."

"True, but our brotherhood's house is enormous, for what it is. We have sixteen people living there and only four rooms with more than one person. Aside from Roger and Thomas, the shared rooms belong to couples, but even so. For a house that isn't part of the official Greek system, ours is truly huge. We're lucky to have it. But I don't mind this room being smaller. It's cozy."

Shane figured that was just a nice way of saying tiny, but if Nellie was cool with it, there was no need to keep harping on it. At least he didn't have to worry about Nellie being upset at sharing a bathroom. Aside from the two master suites at LKNG house, everyone shared bathrooms, and Nellie didn't have one of the masters. Ty and Dave did, of course, and William had the other. Seniority worked in their favor, though Shane had to admit, silently at least, that, considering William's ongoing attempt to break the world record for man-slutting, he wouldn't really *want* to share a bathroom with the guy.

"I'm glad you like it," Shane finally said. "Dinner's usually around seven, so I'm gonna go unpack. I'm right down the hall, second door to the left. The door in between is the bathroom. It's cool if you want to come hang out in my room when you're done getting settled, okay?"

Nellie smiled. "I will. I'd like to hang up a few things and I really should call Jazz and Chance to let them know about the change of plans, but I'll come look at the alleged shrine to your teen years soon."

Shane laughed. "It's not that bad. A few baseball trophies, and maybe some ribbons from elementary school. You'll see."

He waved and headed back downstairs to grab his own bags. He really did need to unpack, and maybe lie down for a bit. He loved driving, but damned if it wasn't exhausting. Having Nellie in the car had been fun, though. Shane couldn't remember what they'd talked about, but there had been lots of laughter, and that was always good.

June

During the drive to Cheyenne to drop Mom and Rob at the airport for their flight, Mom started talking about how great Nellie was. How smart and well-mannered. How good he and Shane looked together, and how much she and Rob liked him. Shane still thought it was kind of cute that she'd asked if he was *sure* he didn't want to date Nellie. She'd seemed disappointed when he'd expressed his absolute certainty, followed by the information that Nellie was already taken. Shane hadn't mentioned that the relationship Nellie was involved in wasn't exactly romantic as yet; mostly because he didn't want to get her hopes up.

He couldn't swear that Nellie and Jazz would be great together, but Nellie for damned sure seemed to think so, and Jazz had still been shooting those extremely interested and more than slightly intrigued glances at the guy before they'd all left school for the summer. Even so, Mom might consider that to be an opportunity, and while Shane loved Nellie, he didn't *love* Nellie. There was no point to encouraging his mother to hope for something that would never happen.

"Well, I really am something of a catch," Nellie said, once Shane got back and shared selected parts of the conversation with him. "I'm smart, athletic, reasonably good-looking, and I come from a good family." He grinned. "Also, I'm fluent in five languages, including English. You could do worse."

Shane chuckled. "*I have* done worse. Or do I need to remind you of your future boyfriend's asshole brother? Because he's pretty much the definition of worse." But not worst, damn it. Shane had heard some pretty horrific ex-

boyfriend stories from some of the guys at the LKNG house. All things considered, Chance was still the asshole who'd caused Shane's exposure to the intestinal bacteria in the diner's toilet, but that part of things hadn't been intentional. The goal had been to humiliate Shane by flushing his head. The bacteria had just been a super-fun bonus.

Chance hadn't raped him or beat him, or tried to pimp him out for drug money, so yeah. *Worse-but-not-worst* pretty much covered it.

"Yes, all right." Nellie rolled his eyes. "He buckled under fear and peer pressure and treated you badly. At least he didn't treat you the way Jeffrey's ex did him. And I'm sorry if I'm overstepping, Shane, but it was five years ago. That's a quarter of your life, give or take. Don't you think it may be time to let go of old hurts and move on?"

"Fuck you." Shane tried to glare, but he couldn't quite manage to work up enough anger to pull it off effectively. "He apologized. Did you know that? Of course you did. I told you about it. About how Chance-fucking-Breckinridge apologized to me. But only for calling me a whore. He didn't think he had anything else to be sorry about." He sighed. "Maybe if he'd said he regretted everything from the night of the swirly on, I could let it go. But he isn't sorry, so you're right. It's been over five years, and it's so damned exhausting to keep hating him, but if I stop, what does that make me?"

Nellie smiled the quirky little grin that meant he was only slightly amused. "If you decide to stop hating him and actually forgive him? That makes you the bigger man. The more *mature* man, who's willing to let it go. Also, I'm not entirely sure how you can claim to still hate him so much when you two were having sex for months, because that's not usually something a guy does with someone he hates."

Yeah, Shane already knew that, or he knew it intellectually. Emotionally knowing it—believing it—was another matter. Of course, the way Nellie had said that last part implied that he wasn't only talking about Shane, and that was wrong. So very, very wrong.

"The sex was Chance's way of trying to make amends," he said after a few seconds. "For calling me a slutty whore. Sure, it was fun getting off most of the time, but it just confused both of us. That's why we stopped. I think. Whatever. The whole sex thing was a bad idea, anyway." He wasn't really sure, though. Something about... something. God.

“Fine. It was a bad idea. So don’t do it again. But you’re my friend, and Jazz’s friend, too. And Chance is Jazz’s brother. We’re going to be thrown together more and more over the next year, and I’d appreciate it if you could make some effort to at least *get along* with Chance. I’m not saying you have to declare undying love, but it would be nice if you two stopped presenting sides and acting as though Jazz and I need to choose.”

God, Shane didn’t know if he could do that. Nellie had said it himself—Shane had spent a quarter of his life hating Chance. He didn’t think it would be all that easy to *stop* hating. Except... He’d been balls-deep in Chance, and while he couldn’t claim to have felt like the sun rose in Chance’s eyes on those two occasions, he also couldn’t say there was no emotional component to those moments. It hadn’t been love, of course, but Shane couldn’t remember *hating* Chance then. Not even after, or not really.

Yeah, he’d been mean to Chance, but now that he was thinking about it, Shane had to admit that every kiss, every hand job, every blow job, and both times they’d fucked, had left him hating Chance a little bit less. Like the furious anger was draining from him a little at a time, along with his seed.

It was weird. There was no way around that. “I’ve never heard of fucking your way to forgiveness. Is that even a thing?” Shane blinked. “I just said that out loud, didn’t I.”

It wasn’t a question, but Nellie’s lopsided little grin grew. “You did. And I can’t say I’ve heard of it either, but that doesn’t need to matter. The point is, you and Chance have more to think about than just each other. There’s me, and I love you both, though not the way I suspect I’m going to love Jazz... and there’s Jazz, who loves his brother but also loves the guy who saved his life at that awful party.” Nellie shuddered, like he was remembering how close they’d come to losing Jazz.

“As I said,” Nellie went on, softer than before, “maybe the sex was a bad idea. You guys decided to stop, anyway, so obviously neither of you want that anymore. But for my sake and Jazz’s, don’t keep this whole war going. Please.”

Shane thought he could agree to that. He really did. Except he wasn’t sure about the sex part, or rather the *lack of sex* part. He’d absolutely told Chance to go away, and Chance had gone, but Shane still remembered how right it felt when it was just the two of them in a closet or a bathroom, or against the wall in Shane’s room at UCSN. Their past had still been there, at the back of his mind, but it hadn’t mattered until they’d finished, each and every time.

Shane had never been the type to remember his dreams, but he'd woken more than a few times in the last two months with Chance's name on his lips and his own seed slicking his skin. He was reasonably sure he'd been replaying those encounters in his sleep and finding satisfaction in the memories, and if so... Was it so impossible that he might be able to not *forget*, but set the past aside in favor of a present in which he could at least look at Chance Breckinridge without cringing or sneering? Or getting hard, because just thinking about the ways he and Chance had touched each other had his cock firming, damn it.

"I guess I can try," Shane muttered grudgingly. "No promises."

"Oh, good!" Nellie sounded far too bright and pleased with himself. "And since you're willing to give it a shot, there's no time like the present. I told Jazz we'd meet him and Chance for dinner in an hour. Let's go see whether you two can be in the same place without fighting or fucking, shall we?"

"You're such a dick," Shane grumbled, but if Nellie was going to make him do it, it would be best to get it out of the way. Shane was willing to give it a good try, but he doubted Chance would. Hell, he kind of hoped Chance *wouldn't*, though Shane wasn't sure why. There was still something strangely appealing about letting the past be the past, though, so he would give it his all and see what happened. Yeah.

Chapter Eight

June 2013

Jesus Christ. Chance had agreed to have dinner with his brother, Nellie, and Shane, of all people, but he hadn't realized that Jazz wanted to go to the Golden Diner. He'd even tried to tell Jazz that they should go somewhere else, but he'd been too ashamed to say why. At the moment, sitting in a booth with his brother while waiting for Nellie and Shane to get there, he figured this attempted pseudo-friendly meal was going to go about as well as the last time he'd been there with Shane, which was to say not well at all.

Not. At. All.

Five years earlier, give or take a few months, the plan to have a late night snack together had ended with Shane's head in a toilet and Chance laughing while he made it happen. If *he* remembered it that clearly, the chances of Shane's memory being faulty were between nil and not a single possibility.

"We could still get a table at the Breckinridge Arms," Chance tried for about the fiftieth time. "I'm pretty sure that's more Nellie's speed."

Jazz rolled his eyes in that exaggerated way only teenagers could manage. Chance remembered doing that himself when he was seventeen-going-on-eighteen, thinking he was so cool.

"Nellie likes freezer-section corn dogs," Jazz said bluntly. "He likes prime rib, too, but he's not really a food snob. As long as whatever he's eating is good, he's happy, and the food here is awesome!"

Chance sighed silently and smiled in response to his brother's contagious grin. "Okay. Fine. You're right about Nellie. He's pretty down to earth for an international traveler. I guess I mean I don't think Shane will like it." Fuck, Shane wouldn't like it even a little bit.

"What's not to like?" Jazz looked baffled. "Everybody in a fifty mile radius likes Golden Diner! They have the best chili cheese fries in the whole state!"

That was true enough, or had been three years earlier when one of the dining guide companies had put out their Wyoming volume. The company had changed ownership the following year and started profiling higher-end venues, so that award hadn't been repeated, but based on taste and portion size, the

Golden Diner still deserved the accolade. One order of chili cheese fries could easily feed three people as an appetizer or a snack, and they were so fucking tasty.

“And now I know what I’m having for dinner.” He deliberately ignored the real question, and while Jazz didn’t press, Chance was sure his brother hadn’t missed that.

“I’m torn,” Jazz said, sounding just as much older than his years as usual. “I don’t know whether I want the meatloaf or the turkey club.”

Chance arched his brows. “You love meatloaf. Especially the meatloaf here.” It was the only thing Jazz ever ordered at the Golden Diner. Ever.

Jazz grinned and went back to looking over the menu. “Yeah, but... I hate to say this, and you can’t tell Goldie, but I think the meatloaf I had at the Luxor spoiled me. It was really, really good. Like, almost a religious experience.”

Oh, well that made no sense at all. Jazz had never been to the Luxor that Chance knew about, and if he didn’t know, then, “When were you at the Luxor? You’re not old enough to—”

“Gamble?” Jazz laughed. “I didn’t. I just sort of tagged along with Nellie, Shane, and William last month, right after finals. There was no gambling. Statistically, the numbers are way skewed to the house’s benefit, and I’m not into sucker bets. So we had lunch, caught an afternoon show, got dinner—that was when I had the most amazing meatloaf *ever*—and went to New York New York to ride the roller coaster a few times. Then William met some guy and decided to stay in town, but whatever. I was home by midnight. You were busy.”

Okay, that was more than one load off his mind. Jazz hadn’t been gambling, and Shane hadn’t been on a date with William. It was only when he felt relieved at realizing it that Chance knew it had been a concern. If anything, he was more relieved about that than he was at hearing Jazz hadn’t gambled, and that was fucked up.

“So you’re going to get the sandwich?” Better to pretend he didn’t care about Jazz’s trip to Vegas than examine why he gave a shit if Shane was dating someone. Besides, it was a reasonable mistake, considering Jazz and Nellie had been there. They were a couple, even if neither of them were admitting it or acting on what was plain as day.

Chance wasn’t sure whether it was admirable or pathetic that Nellie and Jazz were so obviously waiting for Jazz’s eighteenth birthday before actually

going out. Fuck knew that by seventeen, Chance would have been balls-deep in some guy—any guy—if he'd had the opportunity. Except he hadn't been, had he?

There had been other gay guys at his school. He was sure of it. He might even have gone for one of them if he'd been clear on who they were. Or not, because while he'd been a horny little shit, he hadn't seen anyone he'd wanted badly enough to find out. Right up until he'd seen the sixteen-year-old Shane Parks walking around Breckinridge with that girl. The one Shane hung out with back then. Mary? Sherry? Terry? Whatever. Something like that.

The point was, he'd seen Shane one day, and he hadn't known whether the guy was gay, straight, or bi. Hadn't cared. He'd just wanted him.

He'd followed Shane and... Carrie? Yeah, that sounded right. Carrie.

He'd followed Shane and *Carrie* around Breckinridge for hours, trying to get up the nerve to talk to the guy, and finally, when he'd been about to give up, the girl had come flouncing out of the organic baths shop and given him a look. The kind of look Chance still suspected she would have given to a confused child.

She hadn't said anything at first, but her expression spoke loudly enough, and the next thing Chance knew, he'd been inside the shop and starting up a conversation about eucalyptus versus lemon verbena bath scrub, of all things.

He'd never seen the girl again, but he'd for damned sure seen Shane. All of him, eventually, and they'd been headed toward something special, he'd thought. Right up until Bob, John, Charlie and Mike had wandered into the Golden Diner that night so long ago. The night Chance had given in to his own paranoid terror at being found out.

His palms were sweating as he dragged himself from the past, and he shook his head slightly, muttering, "Sorry. I was just thinking about how close I came to failing one of my classes," when Jazz looked concerned.

Jesus. How could he be so completely on edge just because Shane was coming to have dinner? How could he feel so suddenly guilty for what he'd done?

Because Shane was right.

Chance didn't like admitting it, even just to himself, but Shane was *right*. If Chance had been stronger, braver, less petrified that someone might find out

about him... He wouldn't have gone along with his teammates. He wouldn't have been such a dick to Shane. He wouldn't have let the guys goad him into giving Shane that fucking swirly...

And Shane never would have gotten sick. Never would have been *Come-Farts*. Never would have hated Chance at all if Chance had just been tough enough to stand up to the bullshit, or even to lie. It would have been so easy to flip the guys off and introduce Shane as a friend from Carter, yet he hadn't done that. Instead, he'd let himself be terrified. He'd buckled and given in to the fear that his friends would hate him, which they'd ended up doing anyway.

"He's right," Chance whispered, mostly to himself. "I really *am* an asshole."

"And now you remember I'm here. Yay." Jazz sounded annoyed, but he was smiling when Chance looked up from the scarred top of their booths table. "You're my brother and I love you, so don't take this the wrong way, but I've been talking for the last few minutes and you didn't even bother to grunt or throw me an 'uh-huh.' I don't know what's been going on in your head, but I'm going to agree with you. Yes. You're an asshole. There. Feel better?"

Chance laughed, Jazz's playfully sarcastic tone pulling him from his funk. "No. I think maybe I will once they get here. But they're late. Are you sure they're coming?"

Jazz's grin grew. "They'll be here. Nellie would have called if they weren't going to make it. Shane's probably letting him drive. That would explain the lateness. Nellie's not used to driving. His family has a service in Europe, so he knows how but never really had to. He wants to get a car next year, though, so he's trying to talk Shane into letting him drive as much as possible."

Well, that explained a lot. It also had Chance feeling a little intimidated. Sure, he'd known Nellie's family was involved with diplomacy and stuff, but he hadn't realized they were important enough to have drivers. Hearing that made him wonder why the hell Nellie had decided to go to UCSN in the first place. The guy could have gone to any number of Ivy League schools, what with the fencing and stellar grades. It wasn't any of Chance's business, of course, but he still wondered.

Jazz sat up straighter as headlights shone through the window, but a few seconds later he groaned and leaned back. "I hope you're ready for blast-from-the-past night, because some of your old football buddies are here. Can we pretend we don't know them? Please?"

“Only if you know how to turn us invisible,” Chance said, grimacing. The last thing he wanted to do was talk to any of those bastards. Especially... Christ, of all his old teammates, it just had to be Bob and Mike walking into the diner. They hadn't actually started everything that night back in high school—that had been John, if Chance remembered right—but they'd for damned sure been there and kept it going. And as an added bonus to Chance even seeing them at all, they had that little fucker Jimmy Hopkins with them.

Maybe they wouldn't see him and Jazz, or if they did, maybe they wouldn't be in the mood to start anything. Chance figured he would have left right then if he and Jazz hadn't been waiting for Shane and Nellie, but as it was, they were sort of stuck. Turning invisible was sounding better and better. Then that shithead Jimmy saw them. Chance saw his eyes light up as though he'd just been offered free beer and endless hot wings.

“Shit.”

Jazz cocked his head. “What?”

Chance was going to answer, but Jimmy beat him to it by striding down the aisle in the center of the dinner, calling out, “*Peckerbinge!* You come in for the sausage special?”

Oh, for fuck's sake. “You know, Jimmy,” Chance said, smiling slightly though he really wanted to slide out of the booth and hit Jimmy until the guy couldn't even think straight, much less talk. “I'm starting to think you have a crush on me, what with how happy you always are to see me. Or do you just like the abuse when you try to match wits?”

“Yeah, I'll crush you, all right. Fags can't fucking fight. Come outside and I'll kick your ass for free!”

Jazz made a sound that was as close to a giggle as Chance had ever heard from him. “So you usually charge?”

Jimmy looked confused. “Screw you, Peckerbinge Junior.”

“Wow.” Chance shook his head. “You really haven't gotten any smarter since the last time I saw you. Not that I care. Why don't you just go sit with your friends, Jimmy? I'm not in the mood for your bullshit.” He also didn't *want* to have to hit the guy. For one thing, Jimmy would probably try to have him arrested. For another, Goldie didn't put up with people fighting in his diner. Chance might not spend much time in Breckinridge anymore since he was usually away at school, but he liked being able to hit Goldie's for coffee or

pie or a plate of chili cheese fries when he was home. He didn't much want to be banned for the rest of the summer.

"Fuck you, Peckerbinge. I'd be in college too if my folks was rich enough to bribe my way in! Everyone knows you wouldn't have got in without your family's money and all that liberal bullshit about equal rights for fags!"

Jazz didn't giggle again. He full-out laughed. "Yeah. That's why Mid-Miami State U offered him a full ride for football. You're right that Chance wasn't the best student ever, but he still had a solid B average for high school." Jazz grinned. "I know he did because I used to track our grades for fun. Does that mean you're going to start calling me a geek now? And... Wait. You know what? Chance is right. Go eat with your friends, Jimmy. We're waiting for *our* friends and I'm not sure I want them to get here and think we hang out with people like you."

Chance chuckled. "And you don't want the 'liberal bullshit' to rub off on you. If you spend too much time around me, you might find yourself using hair products and moisturizing. Then everyone will be *sure* you're gay instead of just suspecting it, closet-queen."

Yeah, that phrase still felt dirty, and Chance wasn't really sure Jimmy deserved it. Every preacher Chance had ever seen, either in person or on TV, said to turn the other cheek and feel sorry for those less fortunate. Chance figured that applied to people who were intellectually less fortunate, too.

"Jimmy." That was Bob, coming down the aisle with Mike right behind him. Shit. Except Bob didn't sound like he was backing the little fucker up, especially when he said, "You need to chill out, man, or Goldie's gonna make us leave."

Jimmy glared at Chance, which wasn't at all frightening, then he turned, looking at Bob and Mike over his shoulder. "Goldie can't make us do anything! He's just some nig—"

The choke hold Mike put on Jimmy then apparently stopped him mid-word, and Chance thought that was a good thing. He knew his own eyes were wide at what he thought Jimmy had been about to say. So were Jazz's and Bob's.

Mike, on the other hand, just looked pissed off, even while Chance snapped out, "Hey!" Had Jimmy really been about to call Goldie a...? Christ, Chance couldn't even think it without cringing.

"You better not have been about to say what I think you were about to say," Mike said, the words coming out growly and sharp, like he was talking around

broken glass, “because Goldie will back me up if I kick the shit out of you and say you fell down, and I *will* if you don’t shut the fuck up and *stay* shut. We all know you’re a racist asshole, but we put up with you because your brother was our friend. That doesn’t mean you can come into a man’s business and use the n-word without consequences. Or the f-word, now that I think about it. So I’m gonna let you go and you’re gonna apologize to Chance for being a homophobic dickhead.”

“Fuck you!” Jimmy screamed it as soon as Mike let go, but he looked just as shocked as Chance felt. “I’m not sorry! Peckerbinger is a fucking faggot, and he’s trying to make everyone else just as gay as he is!”

Bob frowned and stepped into Jimmy’s space. Chance had to admit that... unlike Jimmy’s glare, Bob stepping up to him with that look on his face would have had him pissing himself just a little. If Jimmy wasn’t intimidated, he was even stupider than Chance thought.

“It’s none of your business unless he’s hitting on you,” Bob said, looking both serious and angry. “And I doubt Chance or any other halfway decent-looking dude would ever want to do that, once you opened your mouth. Now either apologize for being a dick or go the fuck home. Either way, Mike and I are staying for chili cheese fries.”

Chance honestly had no idea about what was going on. Bob and Mike, who had called him names and been instrumental in what Chance had done to Shane... were defending him? Sure, they’d been friends once, sort of, but that had ended after Shane outed him, yet now they were... How was that even possible?

His mind was spinning so much, Chance felt dizzy. He darted a glance at Jazz, and yeah. Even his much smarter kid brother seemed baffled. Then things got worse. Or better. Chance wasn’t sure.

“Tell me we’re not late for the party, Chance! I hate being late.” Nellie’s voice came from beyond the cluster made up of Bob, Mike, and Jimmy-the-shit. “Well, not entirely. I absolutely love to make an entrance, but I generally prefer to be noticed when I do.” Christ, Nellie sounded extra-flamey.

Chance slid out of the booth then, just as Jazz did. Once he was standing, he could see Nellie behind the other guys. The other guys who were only then turning to look at the new arrival, who was backed by Shane Parks, though Shane was being oddly silent.

“Who the fuck are you?” Jimmy couldn’t seem to keep his mouth shut.

Nellie arched one brow, even as Chance watched Bob and Mike shift to one side of the aisle, whether to let Nellie past or get a better look, Chance didn't know. What he did know was that even in low-slung black skinny jeans, pointy-toed black boots, and a sapphire blue T-shirt that skimmed close to his body, Nellie looked almost as classy as he really was.

"Nelson Mayhew Fontaine," Nellie said. "Of the Dallas Fontaines, though my branch of the family is a bit more international than the rest. And you?" Jesus, Nellie did upper-crusty well, especially with his unusual accent. Chance should have expected as much, but he'd never seen it before. Even so, he was pretty sure he was nowhere near as surprised as Jimmy.

"You sound like a fag."

Nellie laughed a soft, tinkling laugh. "Well, I do believe there should be truth in advertising. Is there a reason you're being so incredibly rude, or is that simply your natural state? Either way, I'd appreciate it if you would leave now. I'd like to enjoy a nice meal with my friends."

"Your *fag* friends, right?" Jimmy just didn't know when to walk away, apparently. Chance almost felt sorry for him, but he didn't. "I so want to kick your ass for coming out in public like you're real people. You're just a bunch of sick pervs."

Nellie arched that same blond brow again and Chance almost laughed, Nellie seemed so amused; so intrigued. "You want to fight? Really? With me?" Nellie grinned. "I've never been in a real fight before, though... I'm not sure there's enough room in here."

Jimmy glared. "Outside, faggot. Duh. We can't fight inside. If stuff gets broken, we can get arrested and shit."

"Nellie," Jazz said, sounding concerned as he stepped forward, but Nellie just smiled more and wrapped his arm around Jazz's shoulders. It was sweet, and Chance finally realized just how right his brother and Nellie looked together.

"It'll be fine," Nellie said softly before pressing a kiss to Jazz's hair.

"That's sick!"

Nellie looked thoughtful for about a second, then shrugged. "To each his own. So where would you like to fight... I'm sorry, but you still haven't introduced yourself."

“He’s Jimmy Hopkins,” Mike said. “I’m Mike Jackson, and my friend is Bob Andresen. We’re not really with him,” Mike added, sounding ashamed.

“Lovely to meet you all. Oh, my silent friend is Shane Parks, but perhaps you know him. He’s from Carter. Now, shall we find a place to have this altercation? I do believe I’m looking forward to it.”

“Christ,” Chance muttered as he and Jazz followed the others outside. “I hope he knows what he’s doing. Jimmy has two inches and at least thirty pounds on him.”

Jazz laughed quietly. “He’s *my* future boyfriend, and I’m not worried now, since he’s not. Unless that Hopkins dick pulls a gun, Nellie should be fine.”

Chance hoped Jazz was right, but Nellie wasn’t a fighter. He was a fencer, for fuck’s sake. The chances of Nellie *not* taking some serious damage were pretty damned slim. But Nellie was a grown man—over eighteen, anyway—so Chance couldn’t really interfere. He was just glad Shane was there. Hell, Shane had kept Jazz from dying; maybe he’d be able to at least slow the bleeding when Jimmy kicked the shit out of Nellie.

“I told you so.” Jazz was way too happy about Nellie winning the fight, though fight wasn’t the right word, as far as Chance was concerned. He wasn’t sure there even *was* a word for how swiftly the confrontation had started and ended.

They’d all headed out to the parking lot at the side of the diner. Jimmy had been glaring at Nellie. Nellie had simply stood there, looking relaxed and calm and so very condescending.

Jimmy reared back, telegraphing his first punch so clearly, Chance was surprised it hadn’t appeared as sky-writing, and then Jimmy let fly.

His fist shot out in a broad arc, Nellie sidestepped and spun around him, clocking Jimmy hard on the back of the head with an elbow... and Jimmy went down, moaning.

Bob and Mike had knelt, knees on the gravel-strewn pavement, while Jimmy continued to groan, curling in on himself like a potato bug.

Chance was almost sure he’d heard Jimmy sobbing while Nellie just stood over him, looking composed and unflappable. Then Nellie arched his brow again, asking, “Is it over? I thought there would be more to my first fight. I’m a little disappointed that I won’t even have bruised knuckles to show for it.”

Bob and Mike had laughed at that, even while trying to make sure Jimmy wasn't really hurt. Then Shane had stepped in, checking Jimmy over the way he'd done with Jazz at that party.

"He'll be fine," Shane said, sounding disgusted. "He's just stunned. He'll probably have the mother of all headaches for a while, but he isn't concussed and he's moving his neck just fine. Let him flop around on the ground for a while, then you guys can take him to the hospital if you want. I'm not sure he needs it, but it might be a good idea, anyway."

After that, Chance, Jazz, Nellie and Shane went back inside and sat down at the booth Chance and Jazz had abandoned for the fight that had lasted all of five seconds, start to finish, and Jazz... Well, yeah. Jazz had every right to sound smug as he said again, "I told you, bro-mo. Nellie can take care of himself."

"Because Nellie is short for Nelson, not a statement about my nature," Nellie replied without the overly dramatic tone he'd been using before. "Also, I know you football types like to think fencing is just... what was it? Oh, yes. Skinny blokes poking each other with sticks. But it's not. Someday, Chance, I'm going to get you to go through my daily workout, just once. Then we'll talk about what's a real sport and what isn't."

Shane smiled slightly, and Chance held in a sigh of relief. That small quirk of the lips was the first real expression he'd seen on Shane's face since they'd all reentered the diner.

"I don't know if his knee will hold up during one of your workouts," Shane said to Nellie. "You do way too many extended lunges and deep squats for it to be healthy for him. I mean, go ahead and break him if you want to. Just don't expect me to put him back together."

Chance wasn't sure what to make of that. It was kind of nice that Shane knew about his knee, but it was also a little depressing that the guy was divorcing himself from whatever outcome there might be. He didn't have to say anything, though, because Goldie was suddenly there at their table, setting down drinks they hadn't ordered.

"Margie gets scared when people get too loud," the truly enormous man said in his oddly soft voice. "She was headed your way when that little prick Jimmy started up with you, and she ducked down behind the counter, but she heard everything. I'm sorry he thought he could treat my customers like that,

but thanks for what you did. All of you. I wish I could have been out there for the shortest fight ever. Cokes all around. Diet. I know how you athletes like to watch your weight.”

Shane grinned up at the man, and Chance felt a small twinge of something that might be jealousy burning in his gut. “Thanks. And tell... Margie?” Shane waited and went on when Goldie nodded. “Tell Margie we don’t blame her. People like that jackass can be scary. But if she’ll come out here and be our waitress, we’ll be really nice. Swear.”

Goldie laughed. Unlike his so-soft speaking voice, his laugh was loud and rich and so happy, Chance couldn’t help grinning.

“I’ll tell her you said so,” Goldie agreed, then Nellie added, “Also, tell her we tip well.” And Goldie laughed again.

“What?” Nellie asked, once Goldie headed back to the kitchen. “We do. I’ve never had to wait tables for a living, but it can’t be an easy job. It’s only right to show our appreciation with cold, hard cash.”

They’d been glancing at the menu but getting distracted by other things for close to an hour, and while Chance didn’t mind that, he wished Shane would talk more. Not because he liked the sound of the guy’s voice or anything, but because he didn’t know how Shane actually felt about being there with him. With him, Jazz and Nellie, really, but Chance was fairly sure Shane didn’t have any issues with Nellie or Jazz. Issues with *him*? Yeah, and Chance couldn’t blame him.

After everything that had happened years earlier, and the stuff that had gone on in the last year and a bit, Shane had every reason to have problems with being around him. Chance knew that. Hell, if Chance hadn’t taken some time to think about things, with some pushing from Nellie, he’d probably have just as many issues himself. As it was, he’d made up his mind to forgive. To accept responsibility for the things he’d set in motion. To accept that Shane Parks had changed his life; maybe for the better, but maybe not. He couldn’t be sure yet.

Either way, Chance had been involved in pushing Shane to out him. He accepted that. If Shane had experienced a similar epiphany, it would be easier. Easier to find out whether Shane missed him the way he missed Shane, even though missing Shane seemed weird. Then again Shane, or rather Shane’s actions, had been a large part of what had shaped Chance’s life over the last

five years. Whether Shane felt Chance had been that important in the years since their initial... situation... remained to be seen. Or heard, because Chance was for damned sure going to ask.

It might not be cool, or proper gay-etiquette, but fuck it. He was just going to put it out there and see what Shane said. As soon as they ordered dinner, damn it.

Chance had almost decided on the fried artichoke hearts stuffed with spinach, mushrooms and buffalo mozzarella, when Bob and Mike returned. Without Jimmy, thank fuck. They sat down on two of the stools across the aisle from the booth and Chance steeled himself for whatever they were going to say.

When Mike started talking, he didn't say what Chance had expected, and he didn't say it to Chance. Instead, Mike spoke to Shane, and from the look on Shane's face, he hadn't anticipated Mike's words, either.

Chapter Nine

June 2013

“I’m an asshole. Bob, too.”

That was the last thing Shane had thought he’d hear. Hell, he hadn’t actually thought either of the guys who’d been with that shit Jimmy would come back. When they had, he’d figured they would pretend they’d never seen Shane before in their lives.

They’d changed some, sure. People did a lot of growing between eighteen and twenty-three. But he’d still recognized them the minute he’d seen them, earlier. Before the so-called fight, which was really Nellie *ending* the fight before it began. The guy hadn’t even worked up a sweat.

“Um. Okay.” He didn’t mean it. It wasn’t okay. Hell, okay was about fifty miles back, but he didn’t want to get into it. Not with Nellie and Jazz there, and especially not with Chance sitting right across from him.

“Bullshit, *it’s okay*.” Bob, this time. “Man, we were such dicks to you. You and Chance. I guess because we didn’t know any gay dudes, and you know how it is in high school. There’s all that pressure to fit in, and someone being gay... They don’t fit.”

“But it’s not just that.” Mike again, sounding way more serious than Shane expected. “It’s like... anyone who’s different is a target. Geeks, goths, stoners... they all have their groups, right? But when you can’t slap a label on someone or figure out why you’re not supposed to like them, ‘gay’ is kind of easy. It doesn’t even matter if they really *are* gay. It’s just something you say to give you an excuse to ignore them or bully them, and make sure no one else likes what you don’t.”

Bob nodded. “It sucks that we were such assholes to you and Chance, especially when Chance was supposed to be one of us. But John... Shit, it sounds so stupid now, but he was our team captain. We got really used to listening to him, and. *No*. That makes it sound like he brainwashed us or something, and he didn’t. We were just—”

“Young and stupid,” Mike said, cutting Bob off, and Shane wondered whether he’d ever be able to get a word in, edgewise. “And John was scared of everything gay. I mean, *terrified*. Like he thought gay dudes were gonna jump

out of nowhere and rape him or something, even though he never put it like that. So he was always testing people. Seeing what they would do. And his older sister used to date Jimmy's big brother, so when Jimmy said he saw Chance making out with some kid at the lake one night, John believed him, and he freaked."

"It was just bad luck that we were here the night you came to meet Chance." Bob again, and Shane wasn't sure he was still sane, they were switching off so fast. "John saw you come in, and I guess he figured you were the guy Jimmy saw with Chance before, and then... Yeah. We were assholes to you. Hell, we were even worse to Chance; especially if you two really were dating. I mean, I can't even imagine how I'd feel if a bunch of my girlfriend's friends all of a sudden pressured her into kicking me in the jewels, you know? I for damned sure wouldn't trust her again."

"Then that thing with your... digestive problems." Mike made a face. "We heard about that. Sorry. And there were all these rumors, but it sounded so fucking stupid to me that I asked our Science teacher, and he said we'd probably given you some kind of disease when we flushed your head. I didn't tell him we did that, but you know. A hypothetical. So I'm sorry. I was an asshole for listening to John."

"Me, too. Sorry, man."

What the hell? God, that was the longest and most detailed apology he'd ever heard. Shane kind of wished he'd thought to roll video on it, just so he'd be able to play it back later to see whether it had really been as lengthy as he thought.

At the same time, the apology made him sad. These two guys—Bob and Mike—were strangers to him, regardless of the fact that he remembered every single thing they'd said and done five years earlier, and their apology was so much better than the bullshit *sorry* Chance had so grudgingly given for calling him a whore.

It shouldn't bother him. There was nothing between him and Chance, no matter how much he'd wanted to see the guy while still wanting to stay away. But that wasn't relevant right then. What was, was that two of the guys who'd started the whole swirly incident were apologizing and making it sound like they'd been duped into it, and that didn't seem right. At all.

"So you never thought gays deserved to be bullied." It wasn't a question.

Bob and Mike exchanged a long look, then Mike sighed. "Sure, we did. It sucks to say it out loud, but yeah. It just seemed so wrong, you know? A guy liking other guys. I didn't get it."

"What changed?" Jazz asked, sounding like he was seriously interested, and that was fine. Shane was just as curious, if not more so.

Bob grimaced slightly. "A couple years ago I found out that my uncle's best friend, the guy who saved his life in Iraq, is gay. A gay Marine. It totally screwed with my head, because Tony isn't anything like what I always thought gay dudes were. He's the opposite of Nellie. No offense, man."

Nellie laughed. "That was largely an act, but none taken. Unless you want to be the next parking lot victim of a vicious but stylish elbowing."

"I'll pass." Bob chuckled. "Anyway, Tony's a good guy, and like I said, he saved Uncle Joey's life. It got me thinking, and... if not for this gay Marine, Joey would be dead instead of just missing a forearm. And Tony did two tours and got all kinds of commendations. I'd probably shit a whole house-load of bricks if I ever had to shoot at people, so how could I keep thinking gay meant weak or bad?"

"My cousin out in California is gay," Mike said, jumping in before Shane could respond. "One minute my folks were talking about how well Theresa was doing in school and with her dancing, and the next thing I knew, they'd cringe when I mentioned her name, then change the subject. I stopped even trying when I was twelve, thirteen?" He frowned.

"My folks went away last summer, so I was the only one home when the birth announcement came. She and her wife had just had a son and Theresa wanted to share the news. So I called her up, even though we hadn't talked in like ten years. Turns out she'd sent letters all that time, and even a wedding invitation, but I never heard about it. So I told my folks I was going back to school early and went to see them. Theresa, her wife, and their son. Turns out, the little boy is their second kid. I have a niece and a nephew—not really, since they're just cousins, but you know what I mean—and I never would have known. And they're good people. Theresa choreographs for some dance company out there, and her wife is a psychiatrist. If Stephanie was Stephen, my whole family would have gone to the wedding. So I guess what changed is me. Me and Bob. Both of us."

"No shit," Bob said, obviously agreeing. "So are we gonna order, or... we can go find another table. I guess you guys are on a double date or something, right? Me and Mike shouldn't be horning in."

The idea that he was dating Chance Breckinridge of all people shocked a real, true laugh from him. “As if! I mean, Jazz and Nellie might be thinking of this as a date, but Chance and I are just friends.” Then Shane realized what he’d said. “*Barely* friends. We wouldn’t even be *that* much if Jazz didn’t insist on dating my frat brother.”

Shane ignored the queasy sensation in his stomach when Chance gave him a hopeless look. Chance *should* look hopeless. Even if Shane was letting go of the past, that didn’t mean he would forget it. Hell, he *couldn’t* forget. He didn’t even want to.

July

It still felt a little strange to be hanging out with Chance. Shane thought Chance might feel weird about it, too. Then again, maybe that was to be expected, considering their past and just how recent and fragile their ceasefire—and cease-fucking—was.

He caught himself forgetting to be angry on a regular basis, and while he thought that might be good, it had him on edge every time he remembered that he was talking with the guy who’d ruined his life, except... it wasn’t all that ruined, when Shane thought about it.

Yeah, that last year and a half of high school had been a nightmare, but he’d survived, hadn’t he? Thrived, even, and grown a thicker skin. He’d been so fully *out* by the time he’d graduated that he’d never even considered trying to hide his own nature after, and that had worked for him. Being openly gay had led him to LKNG house and to becoming friends with Tyler, William, Nellie and the rest. With Jazz, too, who was a good kid, and Shane never would have known that if he’d been hiding.

Chance was... possibly not as bad as Shane had wanted to believe. Bob and Mike saying the things they had at the diner close to a month earlier had gotten Shane thinking, too, and they were right. Neither he nor Chance were the same anymore. Time, experiences, whatever... life had shaped them and made them both grow up, it seemed, and maybe that was part of the reason Shane kept forgetting to hate Chance.

“Hey, Shane! You coming in?” Jazz yelled from the diving board of the pool behind the Breckinridge house. Shane still wasn’t sure why anyone would want to have a pool in Wyoming when the climate only made it really usable

for about five months of the year, but he had to admit that it was nice in the summer. He also wasn't sure what Chance's parents thought of Shane and Nellie coming around to swim and—at least in Nellie's case—get cozy with their son. Their younger son. Shane also didn't know whether they had any idea who *he* was, but he doubted it. If they had, he was sure they'd have run him off with a torch and pitchfork or two.

“Maybe later,” Shane called back. “I'm working on my tan!”

Nellie laughed from his spot in the shallow end. “You're not going to get much color if you keep wearing that one hundred SPF, you know.”

Shane grinned. “I'm also not gonna get much skin cancer, so I'll just settle for being less pale than usual. Hey, don't forget to reapply in another...” he looked at his phone on the table beside him, “twenty minutes. Both of you.”

Jazz chose that moment to run down the diving board and hurtle through the air in a tight tuck. The resulting splash was epic enough that droplets of water hit Shane even twenty feet away from Jazz's crash site.

“Hey!” Shane yelped, laughing as Jazz shot up from below the surface. “Nice one!”

“Thanks.” Jazz grinned, looking happier than Shane had ever seen him, and that was saying a lot. “And that, Nellie,” he added, turning away, “is how you do a cannonball.”

“Jesus Christ. Is there some law that he has to say that every single time?” Chance sounded amused. He looked it, too, when he set down a fresh pitcher of lemonade on the table and sat down in the chair beside Shane's again. “Or does he think Nellie can't remember?”

Shane laughed, shaking his head. “I think he's running out of things to say that don't start with ‘oh, yeah, right there,’ and he probably doesn't want his big brother hearing what passes as sex-talk for a seventeen year old.”

“It better be...” Chance stopped and grimaced. “Never mind. I was about to say ‘it better be just talk,’ but we both know what I was up to at seventeen, and talking a lot wasn't really my thing.”

Shane wasn't sure whether to laugh or be offended by that, considering he'd been the one Chance had been not-talking with. Then again, it had been good, in a young-and-stupid-and-inexperienced kind of way. It had only turned bad later. Shane was tired of thinking about the later, damn it, so he chose to laugh again. Not loudly, but still.

“Well, there were words.” Shane poured some lemonade into his empty glass, pretending he didn’t notice the surprise on Chance’s face. They’d talked since their most recent diner adventure, but Shane had made a point of not mentioning the pre-bad past. Maybe it was time, though. “Mostly ‘oh, yeah, right there,’ and ‘damn, that feels good,’ though, so when I say Jazz might be embarrassed by young sex-speak, I know where he’s coming from.”

“Ugh. Can we *not* talk about my kid brother and sex? It was bad enough that I had to have the ‘gay sex talk’ with him. I really don’t want to think about it ever again.”

Shane laughed again, harder than before. “Oh, man. I can’t even imagine. How the hell did you get stuck doing that? Jazz knows how to work the Internet. Couldn’t he just look stuff up online?”

Chance sighed. “Dad insisted. He was worried that some of the information might be wrong, or that Jazz might end up on the wrong site or something. He said I should handle it since I’m the one who’s done it before. Seriously, I think Jazz knows more than I do, just from reading, but I guess it wasn’t a bad idea... except he had all these questions about how stuff feels, and that totally freaked me out.”

“I’ll bet,” Shane answered, his voice barely above a whisper. “Wait. Your *dad* wanted you to do it. Because you have experience with the... gay sex. How the hell would *your dad* know that? I mean, you’re not out, Chance! You have a girlfriend!” What the hell was going on? God, Shane couldn’t even wrap his mind around any of it. “You’re not *out!*”

“Maybe if you say it a few more times, it’ll be true.” Chance sounded irritated. “Dad’s known since last Christmas. I didn’t plan it, but Jazz can’t hold his beer. So, yeah. I’m kind of out.” His brow furrowed, but he still looked good, damn it. “I’m not sure if Mom knows,” Chance went on, “but she only asked about Rebecca once when Jazz and I first got here for the summer, so either Dad told her or she thinks we broke up.”

Shane took a deep draught of lemonade and tried to make sense of the conversation. He understood what the words meant, of course, but he couldn’t quite believe they’d come from Chance’s mouth. “Um.”

“We didn’t,” Chance said, fast and hard, like he needed to get it out. “Break up, I mean. Rebecca’s a great girl, but her parents are... strict isn’t a strong enough word. And we were never really *together*, you know? I mean, let’s just say that Rebecca and I have a whole lot in common, or we did until Jazz started spilling my secrets to Dad.”

It took him a minute to figure out what the hell that meant, but finally the light came on, and Shane blinked, then said, "Oh. Ohhhhh. So Rebecca's..."

"Yeah. So we were pretty much perfect for each other. It was a very roomy closet, but now it's all hers." Chance smiled sheepishly. "Fuck, it feels good to say that out loud. I didn't think it would, but it does."

"Okay. As long as you're happy." Shane rolled his eyes. "Does she know you're out now?" He wasn't sure why he asked, but he kind of wanted to know. He also kind of didn't, but he couldn't un-ask the question.

Chance looked away and Shane followed his gaze to the pool, where Jazz and Nellie were laughing and having a wicked splash-fight on the far side.

"She knows that my Dad knows," Chance finally said. "I had to tell her. She says she's looking for another guy who'll be acceptable to her parents and be comfortable with a similar arrangement, but it may take a while. Or she might decide not to bother and just finish her degree before we officially break up. I don't know. But if that's what she wants to do, I can't really tell her no. I gave her my word when we started out, you know?"

Shane shrugged. "Okay. Whatever." He wasn't sure why he felt hollow all of a sudden. Maybe he was disappointed for some reason. It felt like it, anyway. "I think I'm gonna go work on my diving."

"Shane—" Chance started, but Shane didn't want to hear whatever he might say. He just got up and moved purposefully to the diving board at the deep end.

He couldn't be upset that Chance still had one foot in the *very roomy closet* because that wouldn't make any sense. He might have given up on hating the guy, and maybe they were becoming friends, at least a little... but he didn't give a single crap whether Chance was really out or not.

Shane told himself that as he walked to the end of the board and tested the degree of spring, though it hadn't changed since the last time. He told himself again as he strolled back to the beginning of the diving board. And he told himself a third time as he took five fast, bouncing steps and hurled himself into the air, tucking tighter than Jazz had done earlier.

He was already laughing through the shock of the cool water as he came up for air; then he laughed even more when Chance yelled at him, saying, "You did that on purpose, you dick!"

Shane couldn't even argue. He really had cannonballed on purpose. He just hadn't realized that Chance had followed him partway down the poolside, or

that his leap-and-tuck would be powerful enough to drench Chance so thoroughly.

“So what if I did?” he called out, still laughing. “What are you gonna do about it? Pout at me?”

Chance snorted and peeled off the T-shirt he wore, which was a shame. It looked way better on him while wet, as far as Shane was concerned. Of course, shirtless was even better, though Shane wasn't going to say so. Ever.

“You're in so much trouble! Just wait 'til I catch you, jackass!”

Shane was already swimming away when Chance dove into the water, and it was touch and go for a couple minutes, but Chance caught him. Of course he did. The guy had a pool, for God's sake. He obviously swam more often than Shane had the chance to do.

“Fine,” Shane panted, treading water to stay afloat. “What do you think you're gonna do with me now? Tell me more about your girlfriend? I promise that's way more torture than I deserve.”

Chance grinned a smirky grin, though he was breathing just as hard. “I figured I'd drown you, shithead.”

Shane let loose one sharp, unexpectedly bitter bark of laughter. “At least it's not in a toilet this time,” he snapped, only realizing what he'd said when Chance's smile vanished as though it had never been. “Shit. Sorry. I didn't mean that.” He was only partly lying.

“I. Yeah, you did. Fuck.” Chance shook his head. “I should have known better. I'll just... You know, I think I'm done swimming. I'll go get some chips or something for later.”

“Shit, shit, shit. What the hell is wrong with me?” Shane swam after Chance, reaching the ladder at the side of the deep end just a few seconds after Chance had climbed out. “Chance, wait!” he called at the guy's retreating back, but Chance only moved faster. “Shit.”

Shane was even further behind when he made his way through the French doors to the kitchen, largely because he'd stopped to put on his flip flops and grab his towel. The last thing he needed was to piss off Mrs. Breckinridge if she happened to be around. He didn't see her, but that didn't mean she wasn't there.

“Hey, Shane!”

He turned and tried to smile for Jazz as the kid caught up. "Sorry. I need to talk to your brother, but I'll be back out in a minute."

Jazz rolled his eyes dramatically. "Please. It takes way longer than a minute to talk Chance out of a sulk. Top of the stairs, go left, then turn right at the first hallway. Last door on the right. Don't hurry back. I think Nellie and I can have fun without you."

Damn, the kid's smirk was funny. Like Jazz thought Shane couldn't possibly know what he meant. He wasn't *that* much older than Jazz. Then again, at seventeen, twenty-one had seemed both ancient and too far away, so whatever.

"Thanks. Try not to have *too* much fun. I hear it costs a lot to drain a pool and refill it when the water gets... sullied."

Shane smiled slightly and walked away, ignoring Jazz's blushing and sputtering. The kid might be smarter than average, but he was still a kid.

Up the stairs, then left, then right. God, Chance's house was huge. It looked big from the outside, but it seemed *huge* on the inside, somehow. Kind of like the TARDIS.

The last door on the right was closed, but when Shane gingerly checked the knob, it wasn't locked, and that was a good thing. He figured Chance wouldn't let him in if he knocked, so screw it. He pushed the door open and walked inside, already talking.

"Look, Chance, I really didn't mean that the way it soun... ded. Oh shit. You're changing. Damn." That was way better than saying Chance was naked and looked even better than Shane remembered. Then again, he hadn't seen Chance fully naked in months. Even then, most of their furtive encounters at college had been at least partly clothed, aside from that first, condom-free mistake. "Daaaamn," he said again, because Chance naked was about as *damn* as anyone could be. "Um. Sorry. I'll just... Could you put some clothes on?"

"Could you stop staring at me?" Yeah, Chance sounded like he was sulking, all right.

Shane frowned and shook his head. "No, I don't think I can." It was the truth, but Chance seemed to take it as a joke because he smiled a little. Only for about half a second, but still. Then he leaned toward the bed very quickly and grabbed some folded fabric that turned out to be a long pair of basketball shorts.

“What do you want?” Chance demanded, holding the shorts against his groin, and Shane honestly wasn't sure whether that was better or worse. He still looked really, really good. Good enough to eat, even.

“Now, that's a question. What do I want?” Shane chuckled softly, amused by his own inappropriate thoughts. “I guess I want to tell you... You're right. I did mean it. But I didn't mean to *say* it. I just... Can you put those on? You naked is really distracting. Like *really*, okay?” Especially because certain parts of him seemed to be convinced that naked Chance equaled orgasms soon. Thank God he'd brought his towel, otherwise Chance would know exactly why Shane wanted him to get dressed. Then again, it wasn't much of a mystery, was it? There weren't all that many ways to interpret *your nudity is distracting*.

“Better?” Chance asked a few seconds later, and Shane nodded. “Good. I wouldn't want to make you *uncomfortable*. Any more than I already have, anyway. So, was that it? You meant it but you didn't want to say it? Because if that's all, I have things to do.”

“Way to be an asshole, Chance. Good job.” Shane frowned and moved closer. “But since you asked, no. That's not all. We've been really good about pretending lately, but I'm tired, okay? I'm tired of pretending, and I'm so fucking sick of trying to figure you out!” He was getting louder, but to hell with it. Maybe he needed to be loud if he wanted Chance to really *hear* him. “One minute, we're friends and joking around, and like a second later, you're being a dick! I already said I was sorry! I shouldn't have said that about the toilet, but I did, and I'm sorry, okay? God, am I sorry!”

“But you shouldn't be!” Okay, Chance could be loud, too. “Don't you get it? I *like* you, damn it, but every time I look at you, I remember what I did! What happened to you *because of what I did!* And I hate feeling so fucking guilty all the time, because you were right! Calling you a whore was the least of my sins, and I wish I'd never done it. Any of it! Fuck, I don't think I could ever forgive you if you'd done it to me, so why the hell are you even talking to me? You should be itching to stab me in the eyes! *I would be!*”

“Well, I'm not you.” Shane felt calm, all of a sudden. Like they were finally getting somewhere. “And I'll never forget. I can't. That whole time, everything that happened, it changed me. I've only just realized that... it sucked, yeah, but I might just be a better person because of what I went through.” God, he sounded like an idiot. “I guess if... If you can get past the way I outed you with that picture, I can find a way to let go of what happened, and maybe we can be

the kind of friends who don't run away when one of us says something the other doesn't like."

He wasn't sure he was actually mature enough to do that, but while he was still angry sometimes, that wrath wasn't *always* there, as he'd realized earlier. "It's worth a try, right?"

Chance looked like he'd just been smacked in the head with a board, but he kind of nodded, just a little. "Uh, I guess so." He frowned, then shook his head, and Shane wondered whether he'd somehow broken the guy. "I mean, with what Mike said at the diner, about Jimmy seeing us at the lake and telling John, I figure I was already out, even though I didn't know it. I guess I don't know why you'd want to try, though. What I did was..."

"Way worse. Yeah," Shane said bluntly. "But it was a long time ago, and I don't want to spend the rest of my life being bitter and miserable. Plus, you sort of apologized just now, and..." Crap. Chance had been so damned honest over the last few minutes. Shane needed to be just as truthful or he'd feel like a wuss.

"The truth is, I kind of like you when you're not being an asshole. I always did." Man, that was way harder to say than Shane had expected. "So. We cool?"

"I. Yeah. Okay." But Chance was smiling some, and for whatever reason, that had Shane feeling good. Hopeful, even.

It was after another twenty minutes or so of hashing and rehashing the past, no holds barred, no feelings spared, that Chance stopped talking and turned to face Shane where they sat on the edge of Chance's bed. He looked nervous, Shane thought, which probably meant some other awful revelation was coming. Maybe Chance had posted some shit about him online that Shane didn't know about. He couldn't figure what else it would be.

"What?" he demanded, already steeling himself for whatever bit of nastiness Chance was going to tell him.

Chance seemed even more anxious for a moment, but then he seemed to gather himself together. "I just... This."

The kiss was a surprise. It took Shane a good five seconds of Chance's lips on his own to decide whether that surprise was good or bad, and he still wasn't sure when he let himself kiss back. Then again, the fact that he *let* himself rather than *forced* himself to return the careful melding of mouths was telling.

It didn't last long because Chance pulled back after only the smallest touch of tongues, but he was flushed and breathing faster than before, and the small, uncertain smile he wore was matched by the tentative look in his eyes. "So, uh, when I said I liked you... Can we maybe do something sometime, without Nellie and Jazz? You know, if you want to."

Shane cocked his head and stared at Chance long enough that the guy started to fidget.

"What, like a date? I don't think so," Shane said slowly. "Not now, anyway." Chance blushed again and started to turn away, but Shane stopped him with a hand on his arm. "I think we need to... No, I think *I* need to take the rest of the summer and see how we do with being friends. We can talk about it once we're back at school, if you still want to by then. I just want to be sure we're really done hurting each other on purpose, you know?" He also wanted to see whether they'd be able to trust each other, considering their past. That was the part he really wasn't sure about. He thought it would be hard to do, if it was even possible at all.

Chance looked down at Shane's hand, then back up, and there was something in his eyes that Shane liked. Something he liked a lot, though he couldn't define it. It stayed there even while Chance agreed, seeming reluctant about taking the time, but willing, all the same.

It definitely felt strange to even be considering getting involved with Chance again, but considering wasn't the same as promising, and who knew? Maybe they wouldn't even want to date once they got to know each other better. Shane doubted it, because this older, more grown-up Chance became more appealing every day, but it was possible.

Chapter Ten

September 2013

One more year of college for his undergrad, then Chance was hoping to be accepted into the MBA program. He hadn't wanted to study business at first, but once he'd started he'd discovered that it wasn't as dry and boring as he'd thought.

He couldn't say that he loved it, but he didn't hate it, either, and Dad was right about someone needing to take over the ranch someday. It wasn't going to be Jazz, so Chance figured it might as well be him. Besides, he loved the ranch. He could think of much worse futures than the one that would let him own and operate it effectively.

He'd tried to schedule his remaining business courses within one semester, but that hadn't been possible. The University College of the State of Nevada apparently frowned upon students taking an advanced class and its prerequisite course simultaneously, but he'd come to appreciate the time involved. It might take him the whole year to convince Shane to go out with him.

Chance laughed to himself, even as he strode up the walkway to the LKNG house. It might take a year, but Chance was hoping for much less. In fact, if everything went the way he'd planned, they'd be dating within the week. That was a big *if*, but he couldn't help feeling hopeful.

He stepped up onto the porch and rang the bell, already smiling when the door opened just a few seconds later. "Shane. Hey."

"Chance." Shane's gaze raked him from eyes to toes, then back again, and Chance swore he felt it like a touch. "You look nice. Where's Jazz?"

"Mom called right as we were leaving. He said he'd meet us there. Where's Nellie?"

Shane made a face. "He grew an inch and a half over the summer. Apparently that means he needed to be measured for a new... whatever they call that white suit fencers wear. So he's running late. He said we should go ahead and save him a seat."

Chance shrugged, though he was grinning on the inside. "Cool. So I guess we should go."

"Yeah, if we want our usual table. I'll drive this time," Shane said, stepping outside and closing the door behind him.

"Works for me. You drive, and I'll captain the sound system."

Shane groaned. "Don't tell me. All Scissor Sisters, all the time. Seriously, Chance, you don't have to embrace your inner gay quite so tightly."

Chance laughed and walked to the street beside Shane. "Don't blame me; they're your CDs." And Chance had never even heard of the band until the summer just past, when Shane had mentioned them and been horrified by Chance's ignorance. He'd loved them right away, though. So did Shane. Chance thought Shane just liked giving him a hard time. In more ways than one.

The guy refused to go on a date with him, but sometimes he gave Chance a look that was just... Yeah. Hard times. Very, very hard.

They got into Shane's car and were almost at the end of the block before Shane spoke again, saying, "I got into VUM."

Chance stopped flipping through the folder of CDs from the glove box. "That's Virginia, right? Or... Vermont?" Either one was too damned far away from UCSN. Fuck. He kept forgetting that Shane would be going off to medical school after the current school year ended. Maybe he didn't want to remember.

"Virginia University of Medicine." Shane didn't seem happy, which was weird. "It's a really good school. Some incredible doctors are alumni."

"You said that about the other three schools, too. So why aren't you excited?" It probably didn't have anything to do with him. Chance knew that. He still couldn't help hoping.

"I just... shit." Shane sighed. "Hold on." Chance arched his brows as Shane turned onto Winnemucca Boulevard, then pulled into the parking lot of a dry cleaner's. He turned the car off and shifted in his seat while Chance matched the move, turning to face Shane.

"Shane?" he tried, after a very long ten seconds of Shane looking pensive and being completely silent. Chance couldn't even hear him breathing, he was so quiet. "What's wrong?" God, let it be something simple. Except Shane wouldn't seem so on edge if it were simple. "Whatever it is, it'll be okay."

"I don't think I want to be a doctor!" The words burst from Shane like he'd been holding them in for years, and maybe he had. The guy was pre-med, for fuck's sake. How the hell could he not want to be a doctor?

Chance blinked. "Uh, you didn't think of that before? I mean, you're majoring in—"

"I know! Do you think I don't know that?" Shane looked frantic, all of a sudden. "I had the grades, and it sounded like something I'd enjoy, and when I could help Jazz like that, it felt really, really good, but... I don't know! I did some research last year, and a little bit already this year, and unless I go into private practice, I'll end up working in a hospital, but there aren't enough doctors and it's years more school, then a residency, and I don't think I can do it. Not like I'm not capable of it, but like I don't think I want to! I'm just... I hate the idea of it. I think I always have!"

Christ. If Shane had been carrying all that around with him the whole time, it was fucking amazing that he hadn't dropped out. Chance would have.

"Okay. So why are you still pre-med?" Chance held up his hands at the glare Shane gave him then. "I mean, how come you... No. I was right before. Why are you still doing it?"

Shane's glare faded quickly. "I don't want to disappoint Mom and Rob," he said, his voice so small and shaky, all of a sudden, Chance had to strain to hear it. "I got my scholarships and grants and loans and stuff, but they've been paying the rest, and it's a lot of money, Chance. A lot! So how can I just be like 'oh, sorry, changed my mind'? It wouldn't be fair to them."

Chance nodded and rested one hand on Shane's leg, letting the other drop to his side. "I totally get that. My big dream wasn't to get a business degree. Hell, I don't think I even *had* a big dream. But I think I'll be happy running the ranch one day, so I cope. It sounds like you don't like medicine at all, though, so I'm not sure where that leaves you." Fuck. He was no help at all.

"I don't hate medicine." Shane sounded sincere. He looked it, too. "I'm just not sure about being a doctor. I was kind of thinking of... but it's stupid."

"I doubt that," Chance said, smiling slightly as he moved his hand from Shane's knee to tangle his fingers with Shane's. "You're not a stupid guy. I mean, you're not as smart as Jazz, but who is, right?" Shane's lips twitched into a tiny grin. "So, what's this idea of yours?"

There were a lot of details that didn't make a whole lot of sense to Chance, but after ten minutes or so, he thought he had the general gist of things. He hoped so, anyway.

“If it matters at all, I think you’d be a great nurse. Especially if you’re right about being able to transfer your pre-med credits to nursing school. You were awesome with Jazz that time. I noticed, even if I was being a dick.”

Shane snorted. “If? There’s no ‘if’ involved.”

Chance chuckled. “Okay. That’s fair. But you’d be great in Emergency Services. That’s what it’s called, right? Whatever. And it wouldn’t be another ten years or however long it’d take to become a doctor.”

“And I could go for being a Nurse Practitioner, if I wanted to,” Shane added—or repeated, maybe, because the title sounded a little familiar. “NPs can... you know what? You can look it up online. I’ll just say that being a Nurse Practitioner is the next best thing to a doctor and leave it at that. But I’m worried about what Mom and Rob will say.”

“How about you make an appointment with your faculty advisor and see what they think before you go to your folks? That way you’ll be sure of what you need to tell them and how it’ll affect your schooling.” Chance squeezed Shane’s hand. “And since you can’t make an appointment until Monday morning, how do you feel about letting it go for now and just enjoying dinner and the movie tonight?”

Shane took a deep, slow breath and exhaled with apparent relief. “Yeah. Yeah, I can do that. Um, you know, if my advisor thinks this’ll work, maybe he’ll help me apply to the nursing school here. It’d be nice to not have to leave my friends. And I’d miss LKNG house.”

Chance’s heart beat a bit faster at the idea that maybe he wouldn’t be losing Shane in less than a year, after all. Not that he *had* Shane, but still. Having more time would give him more of a chance to wear Shane down. Assuming dinner didn’t do it.

“That’s something to consider, too,” Chance agreed as Shane started the car and left the parking lot, heading down Winnemucca toward the restaurant. “So, are you feeling more like *Night Work* or *Magic Hour*?”

“You and the Scissor Sisters,” Shane said, laughing. “I swear, if I ever hear about some hot young guy being arrested for stalking Jake Shears, I’ll know it’s you even before seeing the mug shot.”

Chance snorted. “I like their music, but Jake’s not my type.” Because he wasn’t Shane, but Chance couldn’t say that. Not yet. Or mention just how much more hopeful he was at hearing Shane call him hot.

Chance pretended not to be too interested when Shane's phone buzzed. He acted surprised when Shane looked at it and said, "It's Nellie."

He didn't pay close attention to Shane's side of the phone conversation, mostly because he already knew what Nellie was saying. He still let Shane tell him once the call ended.

"After Nellie's fencing suit fitting, he ran into Jazz. They decided to hang out at the house instead of Jazz driving over here. Um, sorry." Shane bit his lip, and Chance nearly groaned. He didn't want to bite it for Shane or anything, but it bothered him that Shane seemed so flustered about Jazz and Nellie not joining them.

Chance shrugged, though he really wanted to reach across the table and take Shane's hand. To comfort or console him, one or the other. Maybe both. "It's cool. Seriously, I don't know why Jazz doesn't just move in with him, already. He'll be eighteen in like a week and a half."

Shane smiled, setting that lip free. "Because Nellie won't let him. He catches enough shit for having a boyfriend who's technically jailbait. The last thing he needs is Jazz moving in before he's legal. If anyone found out and wanted to make trouble, it could hurt Nellie's family. His mom's an ambassador, remember? And his sister's marrying that Lord Whatever of Somewhere."

Well, that made sense. Chance didn't know why Jazz wouldn't have told him that himself, but at least he knew, finally. "But once he's eighteen, that's the plan?"

"As far as I know. And you're way more anxious to pimp out your brother than I thought you'd be after all your 'he's only seventeen, they'd better not be sexing it up' talk this summer." Shane's smile became a teasing grin.

"I'm not pimping him out," Chance grumbled dramatically. "I just want him to be happy, and with the amount of moping around and pouting Jazz has been doing since we got back from Wyoming, living with Nellie is what's going to make him happy. I can tell you that Mom isn't thrilled, which is probably why she called tonight. So are you cool with just the two of us having dinner and catching that movie?"

Shane's eyes widened slightly. "Yeah. Are you? I know we don't really do stuff alone, so if you'd rather not, it's okay." And there was that pensive look again, damn it.

Chance thought his own eyes might be wide, too. With disbelief, if nothing else. "Are you for real? I've only been trying to get you to go on a date with me since July. Trust me, I'm *very* good with it being just us. There's no place I'd rather be."

"I. Oh." Okay, stunned was a good look on Shane. "So you want this to be a date?"

"I do." Fuck, he hoped Shane wanted that, too. Nellie and Jazz said Shane was interested. That was the only reason they'd gone along with Chance's plan. Well, not the only reason. He was sure they were glad to be on their own, as well. "Uh, I guess it doesn't have to be if you don't want it to..." Shit, he sounded like a frightened kid. Time to man-up.

"I'd like to call this our first official date. There. I said it."

A slow smile grew on Shane's face, and those pretty eyes crinkled just a tiny bit at the corners. "Okay, then. We're on a date. Dinner and a movie. It's a classic."

Well, thank fuck! "I'll try to come up with something more original for future dates. So, do you want wine with dinner? I've heard they have a good house red, here."

Shane's nose wrinkled slightly. "No, thanks. I'm not that big of a drinker. Now, when you say 'future dates,' you mean you want us to do this again?"

"Not this exactly, but you know. Stuff. Together. Without Jazz and Nellie, or anyone else. Just us."

Shane looked thoughtful, then nodded. "Okay, we can do that. I think I'm going to have the fettuccini Alfredo and a Sprite."

Jesus Christ. If he'd known it would be that easy to convince Shane to date him now that they'd returned to UCSN, he would have asked the day they got back. Even so, it was nice to know Shane really was interested. And that they'd worked their way past their history, for the most part. That bit was best of all.

October

Four dates in the two weeks since their first, and Chance thought he and Shane were doing pretty well. Shane seemed more relaxed, anyway, though Chance figured at least part of that was due to clearing things up about his future. Shane's advisor had somehow worked things out, and the next fall,

Shane would be starting classes at UCSN's nursing college. According to Shane, his folks didn't really understand, but they were going along with things. Chance thought they really just wanted Shane to be happy but were probably afraid Shane would regret his decision later.

The other part of Shane seeming less anxious was, Chance hoped, because of him, or more precisely, because of the relationship they were building. Their dates had been good so far, if not always date-like. They'd just finished a night of bowling followed by slices of piping lukewarm pizza at the one campus cafeteria that stayed open late on Friday nights. A lot of people would think that wasn't much of a date, but they'd had a good time together, and that was what counted.

The drive back to Shane's was fairly quiet, which was fine. They were getting good at spending quiet time together. Rebecca said it was a good sign that they were comfortable enough with each other that they didn't need to fill every second with random chatter, and Chance liked that idea. Hoped it was true for Shane, because it was for him. He liked just being there with the guy; enjoying his presence.

The car slowed and Chance pulled himself away from thinking... and staring at Shane's profile from the corner of his eye. He turned and stared more openly while Shane pulled into a spot by the curb.

"Do you want to come in for a while?" Shane's smile was tiny and seemed both hopeful and tentative. Like he wanted Chance to come inside but was also a little unsure. Chance wasn't sure, either, but they couldn't just sit in Shane's car in front of the LKNG house all night.

Usually, at that point, they would get out of the car and Chance would spend a few minutes leaning against it, talking with Shane about the date they'd just finished. Then they'd kiss for a little while, and Chance would go to his Jeep and head home, where he would relieve the inevitable outcome of spending time with—making out with—Shane. Shane asking him if he wanted to go inside was new. Not bad, but... new.

"You don't have to," Shane added, and Chance startled slightly. "Maybe it's too soon. I mean—"

"No! No, I want to!" Fuck, did he ever want to. "I'm just... Okay, I don't want to sound like a dick, but I'm not sure I can hang out and watch TV or whatever and not try to get you naked. Not on the living room couch, but... Fuck, you know what I mean!" And this was what happened when he tried not

to lie to Shane. It would have been so much easier to just make something up. Like he had to get home, or go to the store. Something. Anything. Instead, he'd basically said he was too fucking horny to hang out. What the fuck!

"Oh." The tiny smile Shane had been wearing grew, suddenly. "So when I said 'maybe it's too soon,' you thought I meant too soon for TV. Really?" Shane laughed. "Okay. Let's try this again. 'Hey, Chance! I just bought a brand new box of condoms. Do you want to come inside and help me use them? And by the way, when I said come in *for a while*, I meant I'd like you to stay the night.' Does that clear things up for you?"

That smug fucking tone was annoying as hell. So was the arched brow that implied Chance was slow, as in riding-the-short-bus slow. Chance didn't know how a single brow could imply anything, but Shane's for damned sure did. As irritating as both tone and brow were, the words they accompanied were the complete opposite of annoying. Those words were... hot. Clean-hot, but still dirty enough to have Chance feeling even more horny than thinking about kissing Shane already had him.

"Clear as fucking crystal," he managed to say, even as he fumbled at his seatbelt. "Take that as a yes. Yes, I'm coming in. Or you are. I don't give a shit who does what, man. I just need... What the fuck is wrong with this belt!" He tugged at it hard, almost ready to growl, but who growled? He was a man, not a dog, for fuck's sake.

Shane laughed again and reached over. Less than two seconds later the seatbelt released, and while Chance felt a little bit embarrassed at needing Shane to set him free, he was fairly sure he'd only needed the help because the majority of his blood was involved in a mass exodus from brain to smaller head.

"Thanks," he muttered, getting out of the car as quickly as possible. "Come on! We should get inside."

Shane emerged from the Mazda much more slowly than Chance had done, and while he was still grinning, he didn't seem to be in any rush. "Slow down, okay?" he said, more of a demand than a suggestion. "I promise you I'm not gonna change my mind. Especially after what Jazz said the other day."

Chance frowned. Shane wanted to have sex with him because of Jazz? No. That didn't make any sense. It better be just as fucking stupid an idea as Chance thought, damn it. "What did he say?" That sounded way better than asking what the fuck Jazz had to do with anything.

“Just that we’ve really been dating for months, not weeks,” Shane answered, coming around the car and stepping up beside Chance. Chance reached automatically for Shane’s hand and held in a relieved sigh when Shane grasped his fingers without even a slight hesitation. “Your brother’s position is that all those times the four of us went places or hung out this summer was really us double dating with them.”

Chance blinked and squeezed Shane’s fingers a little tighter. “Uh, okay. I mean, I didn’t think we were... *that*, but uh...”

Shane nodded and started to move toward the house, slowly enough that Chance barely noticed moving along with him. “I know, right? But he had all these examples and stuff, and you know how he is. At some point, everything he says starts to make sort-of-sense and by the time he’s done, you’re confused but sure he’s right.”

Chance laughed. Yeah, that pretty much described it. Fuck knew how Nellie dealt with it when he couldn’t really smack Jazz in the head the way Chance generally did, but that wasn’t any of Chance’s business. At all. Brother was very different from boyfriend, and... Chance would have to hurt Nellie, friend or not, if the guy ever hit Jazz, which was also not relevant right then. “Uh-huh,” he muttered. “So?”

“So I decided Jazz was right, and that means we’ve been dating for months now, even if we didn’t know it. So it’s time.” Shane stopped and turned to look at him, and even in the less than optimal light coming from the bulb in the porch fixture, Chance could see that Shane’s face was red. “Well, that and I’m really, really horny. God, it’s been *months* since the last time we... And there’s only so much satisfaction I can get from my hand. I want *you*, Chance. Oh, God. Now I sound like a slut. Shit!”

Chance considered acting offended, but he just didn’t have it in him. Not when Shane was offering a perfectly good excuse for both of them to do exactly what they wanted to do.

“You’re kidding right?” he finally said, leaning in until just a scant quarter inch or so separated their mouths. “You haven’t had sex with anyone but yourself since April, and you think wanting to do it now makes you slutty? Christ, Shane. We really need to work on your comprehension skills. ‘Slut’ is what you call someone who had so many random guys wandering through his place that his kid brother wanted to install a revolving door and one of those number machines they use at deli counters.” Apparently it was Chance’s turn to blush, because his face was warm, all of a sudden.

“Uh, I haven’t done that since *before* April, by the way. In case you were wondering.” *He* would have been wondering if he’d been Shane. In fact, Chance was kind of disgusted with himself for being so easy, or more like so desperate to forget the way Shane felt when they’d been going through their weird hate-sex phase.

Shane didn’t reply, or not with words. Instead, he leaned in, and Chance moaned quietly when those soft lips met his own. He returned the small, simple kiss. Of course he did. Then he sighed with disappointment when Shane pulled back.

“We should get inside,” Shane murmured. “Before we start something out here that’ll get us arrested.”

Chance couldn’t argue with that, and didn’t bother trying. He just let Shane pull him, unresisting, to the porch, then inside the house and up the stairs. He waved vaguely with his free hand when they passed the living room because there were people there, though he couldn’t have said who, or even what they were doing. He didn’t care. The only thing that mattered was getting to Shane’s room and closing the door. Pulling Shane close and melding their mouths, tongues playing more and more seriously, hands stroking skin as clothing was shed.

Yeah, that was what mattered. All that mattered.

It was strange, being in bed with Shane. Naked. Not hurried or frantic, though Chance was definitely feeling impatient. That was likely because he hadn’t gone more than a week without some sort of sex since his first fumbling encounter in Miami, right up until that last time with Shane. Porn and the slender dildo Chance had at his apartment weren’t the same. Neither of them ever had him feeling such a near-scary amount of anticipation. They couldn’t touch him, taste his skin, or drive against him, hard cock slicking his thigh with fluids.

“Come on, come on, come on...”

“I kind of want to take my time,” Shane muttered against his neck, and that was when Chance knew he’d been the one begging for speed and action and heat, for fuck’s sake. “This means something. More than just fucking. Um, doesn’t it?”

Christ, the way Shane sounded so unsure actually hurt. It stabbed him in the fucking heart and had him bleeding on the inside, it felt like. “Fuck, yes,”

Chance groaned, rolling them on the queen-sized bed. A king would be better, but fuck if he was going to stop so they could go to his place. Screw that. Shane might change his mind, and Chance figured he might die if that happened.

"It's not just fucking," he said plainly, staring down into Shane's wide, worried eyes. "Sorry. I'm just having a hard time believing this is real. I keep thinking you're going to come to your senses and kick me out. Don't, okay?" He dove in, mouth attacking Shane's, not letting him answer until they came up for air.

"Huh?" Yeah, Shane sounded like himself again, sort of. A little dazed, but not at all hesitant when he went on, saying, "Why did you stop? Chance..." He bucked up, arching from the mattress, and Chance groaned.

"Oh, fuck. Let me just..." The box of condoms was right there beside the bed, unopened, beside a brand new pump dispenser of lube. Chance had almost laughed when he'd first seen it, wondering whether Shane really thought they needed porn film quantities, but he hadn't. Hell, with the way he felt right then, he thought they might go through at least half of the damned container.

It took only moments to tear open the box and yank out a strip of four rubbers. It took about the same to rip one off, open it, and apply it to Shane's rampant cock. Fuck, Shane's cock was thicker than Chance remembered. Then again, he hadn't really seen it since they were kids. He'd held it, jerked it, felt it spill hot seed over his fingers, and throb hard inside him, since, but he hadn't actually seen it. Not clearly. So, yeah. Thicker than he recalled, but not too much so. He could definitely handle it. Hell, he was looking forward to it.

Two pumps of the lube top, five seconds slicking himself up. Another squirt of slick, this time for Shane's covered cock, and Chance stared hard into Shane's shadowed eyes; Shane's already ecstatic face.

He slung one leg over Shane's body, hands on those broad but not bulky shoulders. "Hold yourself for me, okay? I need you to. Just 'til I get your tip in."

Shane caught his breath, and Chance liked that. Liked that Shane was maybe just as shaky as Chance felt, though Chance was doing his best not to let it show. Everything felt so big, so important, and that was beyond strange. Sex wasn't supposed to feel momentous, was it?

Fuck supposed to, he decided, even as he sat back, shifting his hips, his ass, until he felt Shane's cock in exactly the right spot. "Yessss," he hissed quietly.

“Right there. Let me just...” He shifted slightly, back and forth, not letting that slick tip escape, and finally he pressed down, a long, low groan leaving him as his body opened, taking Shane in.

“Fuck, oh fuck! Fuck, Chance, you feel... God!” Shane’s eyes were squeezed shut, but that was okay. It only meant Shane couldn’t see whatever was in Chance’s stare. Chance suspected it wasn’t anything he wanted Shane seeing just yet, anyway.

“Uh-huh.” That was all he could manage as he pressed back and down further, his body objecting to the intrusion, though only slightly. It had been a while, after all, and if Chance was being honest, it hurt a little. If he was being *really* honest, he liked that it hurt. He liked that this time—being with Shane, with most of their history dealt with, and a relationship still developing but going well—would leave a mark on him, in a way. Liked that the small pain reminded him that this moment had been years in the making. That it was actually happening, considering how unlikely he would have thought it to be, even a year earlier.

He shored up against Shane’s groin, skin on skin, fully impaled on Shane’s cock. It felt huge inside him, and so fucking hot. Then Shane’s hands found his hips, and Shane gasped when Chance started rocking a little, letting the motion loosen him a bit more.

“I want to ride you,” Chance murmured, still shifting back and forth, side to side. “Fuck, man, I want to bounce on your fucking cock like it’s a pogo stick.” Shit, that sounded classy. *Not*. “I mean, that makes it sound cheap, but—”

“God, shut up!” Shane’s eyes were open again. Open and hot. Open and laughing, somehow. Open and not at all upset. “I don’t care if you want to call my cock the king of your bouncy castle. Just do something, Chance!”

He would have laughed at realizing just how little romance Shane needed, but he was too busy following the direction of the hands on him. Too caught up in lifting himself up and dropping back down while Shane guided him, his own cock bouncing along with the rest of him as he took Shane in again and again, short, sharp cries leaving him each time Shane was balls-deep.

It might have been minutes or hours of rising and falling, Shane’s noises echoing his own. Time wasn’t running smoothly for him right then. A single upward thrust from Shane seemed to go on forever, then the next three or four went by in a flash. However long it was, it couldn’t go on forever. Chance knew that. It still came as a surprise when Shane surged up and slammed their mouths together, then pushed him over backwards.

Chance cried out again, louder, his head hanging off the end of the bed as Shane drove into him harder, faster than Chance could remember experiencing before, even when they'd been hate-fucking their way toward homicide.

"Fuck! Yes!" Christ, he sounded so damned needy. "Harder!" What the fuck? Harder? Was he insane? If Shane fucked him any harder, Chance figured he'd wind up on the floor after falling on his head.

Harder happened, but it didn't last long, which was just as well because the second *harder* thrust pegged Chance's prostate like a stronger, faster jackhammer, and that was all he could take. All his *body* could take.

He came with a long, shaky cry, seed spilling from his cock onto his own stomach, smaller spurts pulsing forth in time with Shane's thrusts, right up until Shane's stuttered cry intensified a good minute later. Shane stilled, buried deep, cock throbbing strongly enough that Chance felt each surge within him as Shane finally came, too.

"Jesus," Chance said on a happy but tired sigh, once Shane recovered enough to pull away and dispose of the latex. "This shit better work out, man, because I have to tell you. That was the best sex I've had in my life. Ever. *Fuck.*" It wasn't the sort of thing he would have admitted before, but somehow he could do it with Shane. He felt a little vulnerable at having said it, but he wasn't sorry. He was totally taking this thing between them seriously and that meant exposing himself in ways other than the physical, or so he'd heard. It felt... good.

Shane chuckled and settled on the bed again. "It was pretty great, yeah. Do you think you might want to stop hanging off the bed and maybe lie down with me? I think there's something decent on HBO. Or I could go grab something to drink. Or snacks. Snacks would be good, right?"

Chance laughed and shifted until he made his way up the bed. "We can get drinks and snacks later. Right now, let's check out HBO. And I should probably get cleaned up. Lube always feels weird when you're not using it for anything."

"See, that makes it sound like you think we're done. But it's cool if you want to wash up. I wouldn't mind doing that, too. It'll be that much more fun to get you all *dirtied* up again later."

Chance shook his head and pulled Shane closer. "And I was worried you'd regret this. Fuck, I love surprises."

Chapter Eleven

February 2014

“So what was this? Just some temporary fucking *game* to you? Mess with the guy who screwed you over, make him think you care, then tell him there’s a fucking *expiration date* on your relationship? Like this is all payback! It is, isn’t it? Some fucking long-term revenge!” Chance looked even more pissed off than he sounded as he jumped up from the couch in the apartment’s living room, and that was saying a lot. Even so, Shane wasn’t about to take that kind of shitty accusation from his boyfriend.

“Did you just air-quote *relationship* at me?” He wasn’t actually upset. He couldn’t be. “And did you really just say that the last six months—including the summer—have been a carefully plotted screw-you? Because seriously, Chance, I didn’t say anything like that. If you think about it, you know I didn’t.”

It had started out as a great Valentine’s Day, but it wasn’t turning out anything like as well as it began. With any luck, Chance would calm the hell down and listen. Shane wasn’t going to let his first Valentine’s Day with a special someone turn to shit. Especially not when that special person was Chance, damn it. Of course, Shane had been expecting Chance’s trust issues to come out eventually. They both still had them. He’d have preferred Chance’s to emerge on a different day, though.

“Bullshit.” Regardless of the word, Chance sounded less hurt. “You said you weren’t going back to Wyoming after nursing school. Since you know I *am* going back after I get my MBA, that means we’re breaking up. And you didn’t even talk to me about it! How is that not dumping me?”

Shane sighed. “See, this is what happens when you don’t let me finish. What I said was I’m not sure, okay? That I need to think about it. Fortunately, I have three years, give or take.” He still wasn’t sure how many of the classes he’d already taken would satisfy requirements for the nursing school—he might have to retake some, or possibly just take comprehensive exams each semester to see whether he could test out of some courses that were similar but not exactly the same as those he’d completed before—but he wasn’t concerned with that at the moment. He was more worried about Chance.

“But you might not go home.” Chance seemed to be stuck on that.

“I might not,” Shane agreed. “Carter wasn’t exactly good to me, and you know it. If it weren’t for my mom and Rob being there, I probably wouldn’t have *ever* gone back, even for holidays, once I escaped. But they do live there and they’re my family, so that matters. And you’re in Breckinridge, so that’s a factor, too. I’m not saying I’m gonna dump you, asshole, but I didn’t want to keep it all to myself, either.” He sighed again. “You’re a huge part of my life, Chance, and maybe we’ve only been together for what, four months, officially? You’re still important to me. Our *relationship*,” he air-quoted sarcastically, “is important to me. I’m not trying to give you notice. I just didn’t want you to be in the dark about what’s going on in my head.”

Chance frowned. “I guess I forgot how much you fucking hate it there. I mean, I had it pretty bad, too, but it was way worse for you. Fuck, why would you even be *thinking* about going back when it was such a fucking nightmare?” From sixty to zero in two-point-three seconds. God.

“And you’re saying ‘fuck’ a lot. Again.” Shane shook his head and pushed up from the couch, too, moving across the small living area to stand in front of Chance. “A lot of it is gonna come down to research, okay? Right now, there are lots of jobs for nurses in our part of the state. If I go for the nurse practitioner courses, those are graduate level, so it’d take a while longer. I might just get my RN, then see about taking those courses over a few years or something. But the point is, when I get closer to graduating from the nursing college, I’ll need to see what the job market is like back home *then*. That’s gonna be part of it.”

That and how people acted over the next few years when he went home to visit. He still didn’t have any great hope that Carter, Wyoming, would suddenly start flying a rainbow flag in front of Town Hall, but the few times he’d been out and about during vacations, there’d seemed to be less venom sent his way with both looks and comments. Maybe things were changing.

Chance’s old friends had for damned sure done a one-eighty since way back when, but that was Breckinridge. Breckinridge was way more cosmopolitan than Carter, though that wasn’t saying much.

Chance looked like he really wanted to still be upset and angry, but it seemed like Shane being reasonable had derailed that particular train, thank God. Chance didn’t lose his temper often, but when he did, it tended to be epic. This time, he’d calmed down a lot, and quickly. Enough to ask, “What’s the other part?”

“Huh?” Okay, way to sound like an idiot. Good going.

“The other part of deciding if you’re going home. You said the job thing is part of it, and I totally get that, but what’s the other part?”

Shane smiled and gave Chance what he hoped was a teasing but seductive look. “Oh, that. See, there’s this guy I’ve been seeing. He was a real douchebag when we were kids—”

“Hey!” Chance grumbled, but Shane saw his lips starting to twitch at the corners.

“So this *douchebag* turned out to be a pretty decent guy in the end, and it turns out that I really care about him a lot.” Shane grinned and rested his hands on Chance’s waist, moving just a bit closer. “*So...* if we’re still getting along by the time I finish school, I’ll definitely take that into consideration. He means a lot to me, even though he can be one hell of an asshole sometimes.”

Chance kept almost smiling, but was clearly doing his damndest not to. “You like my asshole,” he muttered, and Shane laughed. More than laughed, he cackled. God, he sounded like a witch from a bad TV movie.

“*Like* might not be a strong enough word,” Shane admitted once he was able to speak again. “I think I may love it almost as much as I love you.”

As sudden as it was, Shane didn’t mind having Chance’s lips on his within moments. He wasn’t sure what had brought on such a radical shift from reluctantly-amused-and-needing-validation to horny-as-hell-and-needing-Shane, but he wasn’t about to complain. Not even close.

Shane hadn’t been sure he was going to do it that night. Not until Chance reached for the condoms and lube. He watched Chance open one of the silvery packets and bit his own lip, then made his decision.

“Wait,” he said, one hand on Chance’s arm, stopping him from putting the latex on him. “I think... If you want to, you could wear that this time.” God, he felt like a dork. Could he be any more awkward?

“Uh, what do you—? I mean, you said you haven’t, and...”

“Oh, for fuck’s sake,” Shane said with a rueful laugh, stealing one of Chance’s phrases. “We sound like a couple of morons. What I meant to say is ‘if you want to, you can be in me this time.’ God. And you’re right. I haven’t done it before, but that doesn’t mean I haven’t thought about it. It’s just... I almost did, once, but I wanted it to be with someone I was gonna be with for a

while, and he wasn't that for me. You are. So if you want to, I'd like to." He frowned. "Okay, that didn't sound any less awkward and stupid, did it?"

Chance laughed, but it sounded breathless. "Not stupid," he said, and yeah. Breathless but smiling. That was probably good. No, it was definitely good. "We'll go slow," he added, and they did. They went so slow that Shane was almost ready to beg by the time Chance had two fingers inside him.

It felt strange, having Chance's fingers there. Good-strange, with a side of slightly painful burn because Chance's digits were thicker and rougher than Nellie's had ever been, but from everything Shane had heard and read, that was to be expected. He hadn't thought he'd like it so much—he hadn't with Nellie—but it was good that he did. He couldn't imagine having to tell Chance to stop when the guy was so obviously excited about what they were doing. Then again, any time there was nudity and a bed involved, Chance was into it, so whatever.

"Come on, Chance," Shane groaned, body starting to move, to beg silently for him. "I don't want to come without you in me, okay?" God, he hadn't even known he was that close. It was like saying the words made them true, damn it.

"I don't want to hurt you." That was sweet, though Shane would never say so. Chance didn't like to think of himself as sweet or cute or anything so fluffy-kitten-ish. That didn't change the fact that Shane found him to be those things. It just meant Shane never said them after the first few times.

"God damn it! You won't hurt me! Come on! Get your cock in me, asshole!"

Chance sniggered. "Really? What are you, a leprechaun? 'Get yer cock in me arsehole!' I swear I'm not after your lucky charms."

Shane glared, fighting a laugh at Chance's horrible Irish accent. "Fuck you. Just forget it. I *don't* want you to—Oh, hell!" The burn was hotter, all of a sudden, and Chance's fingers felt thicker, or maybe... God, he'd added one, and it was worse, but better, too. "Oh, God. Yeah, that's... Uh-huh." Crap, he was shivering, it felt so good and bad, all at once. Then Chance moved his fingers, and Shane felt the stretch. Less than a minute later, most of the bad had faded, and he shifted again, anxious for more.

"Chance," he moaned, hands clenched in the sheets as he tried to hold out. "Please."

Moments passed in a flash of motion, and Shane found himself staring into Chance's eyes, then joining his kiss. He wasn't sure when those fingers had

withdrawn, but he for damned sure noticed it when Chance was poised at his hole, rubber slick and hot with the cock inside it.

“Just breathe,” Chance murmured against his lips before pushing his tongue inside to meet Shane’s own, swallowing the hiss as Shane’s body tried to refuse Chance entry.

He needed to relax, but that was easier said than done. Still, Chance was being careful. Maybe Shane just wasn’t meant to bottom. It shouldn’t be that difficult, but it was. Then Chance pressed harder and it started to hurt. More than the fingers, more than... Shane didn’t know what. He sucked air through his nose, trying to take enough in to tell Chance *no*, that he’d changed his mind, that Chance had lied because he so clearly *did* want to hurt him.

Another degree of pressure and Shane couldn’t take it, couldn’t stand it. It felt wrong and painful and there was no way he was supposed to be doing this, but he couldn’t break away from Chance’s mouth to say so. All he could do was flex his ass, shoving up to try to dislodge Chance, and that was when it happened.

Something eased, then gave, letting Chance in, and Shane wanted to shout at the sharp, piercing burn, but still couldn’t. Then Chance sank further into him and the pain went away but the burn remained, hot and somehow exciting.

“Oh, fuck,” Chance groaned against his cheek, and it was only then that Shane realized the kiss had ended. “Jesus Christ, you feel good.” That was followed by what felt like another foot of hard cock sliding into him, and Shane gasped. “Oh, yeah. Almost halfway there, Shane. Fuck, you’re amazing.”

Almost halfway? Only almost *half*? Hell, it felt like Chance’s cock was in his stomach already! That much more and it might come out of his mouth! “Oh, God,” he groaned, then cried out, sharp and short, when Chance pressed on, only this time the intrusion slid hard against Shane’s prostate and he changed his mind. “More, damn it!”

Chance chuckled and pushed up onto his hands. “And that’s the spot.” Then they were kissing again, and Chance was sawing back and forth, in and out, tormenting the hell out of that place inside him, and they were only maybe a minute in before Shane felt the unmistakable sensation of building release that had mostly vanished during the penetration portion of the festivities.

“Oh! Oh, yeah. God, yeah,” he mumbled, moving again, body shifting to get more of Chance inside, to feel all of that incredible cock against his happy place, and just like that, Shane was coming. He lost track of the kiss, lost track

of trying to breathe. Everything narrowed down to that one point of connection and the sheer satisfaction that pulsed from him in spurts that splattered between them. His back arched like a bow against the mattress, and all the while, Chance kept moving, pushing him through his orgasm.

“Jesus,” Chance panted, still going strong. “Jesus fucking Christ. Coming, Shane. I’m fucking coming. Coming in you. Fuck!”

Shane did his best to move with Chance, to bring him off as completely as Chance had done him. He rocked his hips into and away from Chance’s thrusts, shuddering and shaking as each slide against his prostate created shivery echoes of orgasm, and when Chance finally pressed even deeper and stayed there, body trembling, Shane thought he might just come again, as physically impossible as that was.

Chance’s arms gave out slowly, and Shane’s were there to wrap around him as they lay together, hearts slowing, breath gently shifting from ragged gasps to something more smooth and even. The sweat Shane hadn’t even noticed on both of them cooled in the air, and still they remained where they were, just holding on.

It was funny to be feeling things from that end for a change. Shane couldn’t decide why it seemed different when it was still post-coital companionship. It shouldn’t make a difference which of them had topped, but somehow it did. He felt different, holding Chance after having Chance inside him. Not better or worse, just different.

“You okay?” Chance barely pulled his mouth from the crook of his neck, but even if he’d spoken directly against Shane’s skin, Shane suspected he would have heard him. “Tell me I didn’t hurt you.”

Shane smiled, tightening his arms around Chance just a bit more. “I’m fine. You?”

“Good,” Chance answered, though whether he meant good that he hadn’t hurt Shane or that *he* was good, Shane didn’t know. Maybe both. Chance didn’t generally talk much after sex. That seemed to hold true regardless of which side he was on. “You like it?”

It was a good question, but it took Shane a few seconds to figure out a good answer. “It was really, really good. I’m glad we did it. Um, I’m not sure I want to do that all the time, though.”

“Hmmpf.” Chance sighed and moved on him enough that Shane reluctantly let go. “Sorry,” Chance said, pulling away, “but I need to take care of the

condom. Doesn't make much sense to use it if I don't get rid of it before it can come off inside you."

"True." It wasn't something Shane had thought about with their switched positions. He was used to finishing, then getting up to handle business. He hadn't really thought about Chance needing to do the same. "You know, we should think about getting tested together," he said when Chance returned from the bathroom. "We're both negative, but it couldn't hurt to double check, right?"

"You sure? That's pretty serious. I mean, we're a serious thing, but that's, you know, a big deal."

Shane looked at Chance, trying to gauge his feelings on the subject, but Chance wasn't giving any signs, either way. "Yeah," Shane said, deciding it would be best to just go with it. "I'm sure. Aren't you?"

The smile that grew on Chance's face then answered better than any words ever could, and when Chance pulled him closer and kissed him slow and deep, Shane was truly happy for the first time in a long time. "I do, too," Chance said simply. "Love you. You know that, right?"

"I do now." Shane suspected that he was beaming, but that was fine. Then he wrinkled his nose. "I also know why you like to clean up after, now. Ugh, the leftover lube feels nasty. I think I'm gonna take a shower."

Chance laughed. "I'll change the sheets and be in in a minute. I guess it's a good thing I really like it when you do me, considering you said you liked it but don't want to do it all the time. I mean, I loved being inside you, don't get me wrong. But it doesn't feel like a regular thing. Just... I don't know. When we need it."

"Yeah," Shane agreed, feeling relieved. "I was afraid you'd be upset. And it really was good! I swear! I would totally do it again, sometime."

"Just not anytime soon." Chance laughed again. "Okay, go shower. Don't rush. I want to wash your back."

Funny how something that could have been a big thing really wasn't. Shane had been almost sure Chance would have an issue with him preferring to pitch. That Chance was fine with it only proved that Shane still had a lot to learn about his man. Good thing, too. If they ever knew everything about each other, they might get bored, and that was something to avoid at all costs. A little mystery could be intriguing, and Shane had every intention of being intrigued for a long time to come.

They still had their issues, of course, but they were figuring things out, and so far, so good. There were days when he was so on edge, he could barely think straight, and Chance had days like that, too. They dealt with it, though, and somehow managed to come out of those strangely unbalanced times stronger. Better.

If anyone had told him, back at the start of his freshman year at UCSN, that he would end up loving Chance Breckinridge, of all people, Shane would have been sure they were clinically insane, but the joke would have been on him. And on Chance, too.

Shane couldn't swear that they'd be together forever, but it *felt* like they would, and for the moment? That was good enough.

The End

Author Bio

Contrary to popular opinion, T.C. Blue was not raised by wolves. Nor did she spring, fully formed, from the forehead of a god, instead entering the world in the usual manner.

A true jack of all trades and master of none (otherwise known as flighty and unable to make a decision and stick with it), she currently resides near the east coast where she does her best to avoid politics and religions as a general rule.

T.C. can usually be found sitting in front of her computer, trying to wrangle rabid and numerous plot bunnies, though her muses insist that she not be too hard on the poor little fluffy things. (Poor little fluffy things with sharp teeth and claws, but whatever. Muses don't seem to care much about the possible bloodshed if the bunnies think T.C.'s not writing quickly enough.)

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