

WAITING FOR *CLARK*

ANNABETH ALBERT



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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

WAITING FOR CLARK

By Annabeth Albert

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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 is an Open Road*.

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.

Each year, a dedicated group of Volunteers from the M/M Romance Group work hard behind the scenes to bring these stories to you. Our Editors, Formatters, Proofreaders, and those working on Quality Assurance, spend many long hours over a course of several months so that each Event is a success. As

each and every author also gives freely of their time and talent, it was decided that all edits suggested may be accepted or rejected by the author at any given time. For this reason, some stories will appear to be more tightly edited than others, depending on the choice of the author.

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Photo Description

In a cartoon drawing, Batman and Superman are locked in an embrace, kissing. Superman is taller and clutching Batman to him. Batman has more muscles and has visible tattoos on his arms. Superman has broader shoulders and dark hair. Batman is stretching up to meet him and has one foot kicked behind him. Behind them is a graffiti-covered wall, and Superman's rainbow-lined cape swirls around them. The prompter specified that the picture is two men in cosplay costumes at a Comic Con convention.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

My friends and I love cosplay, and this year we're going all out for our city's con. Yup, we're going to go as members of the Justice League. I'm going as Batman, but I can't figure out who's going as a Superman. My friends are being a little cagey. What's going on? How did I go from not knowing who Superman is to making out with the guy?

Please no GFY or OFY. Both characters are out and proud (bisexual is cool too). Please make it at least HFN. No dubcon. Also both characters are close in age.

Sincerely,

Elci

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: geeks/nerds, friends to lovers, reunion, crush, college friends, cuddling, frottage, cosplay

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WAITING FOR CLARK

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Chapter One

Bryce

“Are you certain we’ve got everyone covered?” I spoke loudly so my phone’s speaker would pick up my voice. The big rental truck didn’t have integrated hands-free wireless. I probably shouldn’t have been talking at all while driving, but I was a little desperate. Nervous, under-caffeinated, running late, and trapped in a Batman costume with itchy tights was *not* a good combo.

“Relax, boss. I made a spreadsheet. Every shift is covered. Every Justice League character makes an appearance. Our friends all came through.” Tony only called me “boss” when he *really* wanted me to shut up and let him handle something. We’d been friends thirteen years, but I still had trouble delegating.

“And you’ve got a Superman?”

“Yes.” I could almost hear Tony roll his eyes.

“Is it Hank?” The traffic on First Avenue was giving me an eye twitch. Two blocks from the convention center and nothing was moving. Nothing.

“No, Hank’s Aquaman.”

“With a purple mohawk?”

“Hey now, don’t go being picky. It’ll be great.”

Thank fuck, traffic started creeping forward, the sign for the underground garage reminding me to get off the phone. “Okay. I’m pulling in now. Probably about to lose my signal.”

“On my way too. Stop stressing!” Tony’s voice crackled and the bars on my signal dropped to nil just as I’d predicted.

This was my third trip to the convention center in less than twenty-four hours. I’d been back and forth setting up our booth last night along with Tony and Charles. Tony and I had known Charles for almost ten years now, and the two of them were my best friends and business partners. We’d attended all the Portland-area comic cons and gamer conventions for years, but this was our first year as official exhibitors at PDX Comic Con. Our bar, Gotham Coin, was there to promote our business by selling T-shirts, bumper stickers, and other bling with our logo on it along with some gamer memorabilia that Tony’s girlfriend, Karen, had designed. We had pens and buttons to give away as well

as schedules of our upcoming special events, including cosplay nights. As added incentive to get traffic, we'd convinced our friends, most of whom would have been coming anyway, to staff our booth as superheroes, providing lots of photo opportunities for con attendees. Anything to drum up business.

After parking, I carefully locked and double-checked the truck—the swag that wouldn't fit in the booth was stashed in the truck, and the risk of theft made me a little twitchier than usual. I made the long trek to the exhibitor entrance. True to his word, Tony and his folder of spreadsheets met me at the line to get in. Tony was playing The Flash, and he had to hand me the folder so that he could adjust his tights as the line inched slowly toward the door.

“Geez. I'm never ordering a costume online again. Thin as these things are, you wouldn't think they'd be so sweaty.” Tony grimaced as he tugged on the legs of his red outfit. “But hey, pour one out for Charles who's got to wear that Captain Atom getup all weekend. At least I'm not stuck with gray face paint.”

“Word.” I liked dressing up, but my favorite characters to cosplay were the ones who didn't wear tights. Last year I went to Comic Con as Wolverine simply because it meant I could wear jeans. However, our bar wasn't called Gotham Coin for nothing, so Batman and miles of spandex it was. And good luck finding a Batman costume without the fake nipples and enlarged codpiece.

“Charles says some of the gang's already here,” Tony said as we got our exhibitor badges out for the guy working the door.

“Don't remind me how late we are. Traffic was nuts, but I still should have planned better.”

“Bryce. Man. I know you think you're all powerful, but even you can't control Portland traffic.”

Bryce. Ugh. Much as I loved Tony, I hated how he said my name. Actually, I hated how ninety-eight percent of the population said my name. For some reason, it always sounded so patronizing. Probably because I'd never thought I looked like a Bryce. Bryce was a slight guy with light hair and pale eyes and a subtle, cheery demeanor.

I was none of those things. I was six feet of hard-earned muscle, and my dark, almost black hair and hazel eyes were decidedly un-Bryce-like. I'd tried over the years to use different nicknames, but none had stuck, which left me cursing my name every time someone like Tony used it to try to calm me down.

Tony and I strode through the vast conference center. I wasn't really one for small talk, but Tony gamely pointed out other exhibitors and remarked on costumes. Traffic was still relatively light—exhibitors finalizing their booths and the first wave of attendees slowly filtering in. We passed two other Batmen and three Supermen, but none were our friends. Finally, I couldn't hold it in any longer. "Why won't any of you tell me who Superman is?"

"What would be the fun in that?" Tony grinned up at me. He was half a foot shorter than me with the sort of personality that took up twice as much space as his body.

"Is it Gary? He's a bit... much for the role." I struggled for a politically correct way to say that Gary in spandex was not a sight I wanted to see.

"Nope." Tony waved hello to a couple of anime characters accompanied by a Spock.

"Todd?"

"Green Arrow. Just trust me."

We rounded the corner to the row with our booth and all my trust flew out the air conditioning vents. "What the hell?"

There at *my* booth, in all his spandex-and-tights glory was none other than Clark freaking Kenmore. From the top of his slicked-back brown hair to the bottom of his red boots and the swish of his long cape, Clark was *born* to play the part.

But not at *my* booth.

It had been five years since I'd seen him last. Five very deliberate years of avoidance made easier by him being halfway across the globe. Five years might have done nothing to diminish his all-American good looks, but five years had also done nothing to stop the way my heart tripped up when seeing him.

"What's he doing here?" I tugged Tony to the side of a booth packed with Hello Kitty merchandise.

"He can see us, you know," Tony said mildly. "He's back in town for a visit. We thought it would be a kick to get the old gang back together."

Kick in the stomach more like. But I didn't say that, and instead I only made a noncommittal noise.

"Come on, Bryce. You were so close in college. Roommates even. Did one kiss really change everything so much?"

“No,” I lied, voice all gruff, to try to shut him down. Of course Tony knew my history with Clark. I’d gotten horrifically drunk after the incident in question and spilled my guts.

Determined to prove Tony wrong, I marched over to our booth, glad for the first time all day I had the costume and mask to retreat behind. *Think cold, people-hating thoughts. Dark, remote emotions. None of this pesky pining.*

“Tony!” Clark turned to greet us, giving Tony a hug and a backslap. As he moved, his cape swished, and I noticed the cape was lined with rainbow fabric. Great. Ours would be the only booth with the gay-pride Superman, and I couldn’t even enjoy it because it was *Clark*. And no, I wasn’t jealous that he’d had the idea, and I was stuck with rubber nipples and cheap nylon.

“And Bryce.” He stopped short in front of me, arms moving uncertainly, like he wasn’t sure whether to hug or shake hands or run the other direction. Or maybe that last bit was just me.

“Stranger.” I saved him from the dilemma and clapped him on the shoulder, feeling his warmth even through my black gloves. I was more muscular, but his shoulders were nothing short of superhero fantasies—battleship-wide, built chest and back tapering to a narrow waist and hips. Olympic swimmers had nothing on Clark. My hand lingered even though it shouldn’t have, memories of all the other, much less awkward hugs and greetings we’d shared assaulting me. Strange how a body could remember another’s precise temperature after so many years—I could tell he was nervous because he was sweating, moisture beading up along his carefully styled hairline. Clark usually ran cold, liking big cozy sweaters and sweatshirts and favoring thick *Doctor Who* scarves as soon as the weather turned cool.

Clark locked his gaze on my face, eyes narrowing like he was reading a complex math equation. *Me*. I was the complex equation. He was trying to see behind the mask, see if I’d changed. I resisted the urge to look away, instead meeting him stare for stare.

Is this going to be awkward? he questioned with his eyes. God, there was so much *hope* in the silvery depths of his eyes. It was as if every year of our friendship, including the last, terrible weeks were laid out, memories threatening to overwhelm me.

No, I lied, shutting down this nonsense by looking down at my boots. If we were playing emotional chicken, I was the first to fold, and I could own that because it wasn’t just hope I’d seen in his eyes. There was heat too, just like

there had always been. My throat squeezed tight around all the words I could never say.

“Hey, Clark, tell me all about your research!” Luckily, Tony saved me needing to make conversation, asking Clark all about Oxford and MIT and pumping him for information on his parents, who had a ranch outside of Bend. Charles lumbered up to the booth, his movements hindered by the Captain Atom getup, and got Clark to talk about running the Boston marathon. Meanwhile, I busied myself arranging our already neatly laid-out swag and trying to not act like I was hanging on Clark’s every word. Trying to pretend that the heat and attraction arcing between us was no big deal.

In other words, trying for business as usual as far as Clark was concerned. Even after a five-year hiatus, the game felt depressingly similar. I’d been attracted to him from the moment we’d met as roommates freshman year at Reed, but he was such a goody-goody, following all the rules and so darn earnest. I’d instinctively known that getting busy with a guy who couldn’t do casual and whom I had to live with the remainder of the year was a terrible idea. So I’d resisted. But somewhere along the way, he became integral to our friendship circle. And my life. But then sophomore year, when we weren’t roommates and I might have acted on the attraction, he had Derek. Then junior year I had a mistake named Joe. And finally, senior year we’d both been single... and roommates. Again. And just when it seemed like everything might be coming together for us, it all fell apart.

Five years ago

“Oh my God. I can’t believe we did that.” Clark flopped down next to me on my bed. The weary late November afternoon light filtered in through the large window between our beds. His was still littered with papers and both our laptops from the mad dash to finish the project the night before. I knew the mess was making him twitchy, but we were both too tired to care. Two weeks straight of working on our math modeling project had finally paid off when we’d presented our results to the class.

“That may be my sweetest A,” I said, groaning. “Can’t believe she didn’t have more questions for us after the presentation of our project.”

“You know you could have a lot more As like this, if you applied yourself—”

“Now you sound like Professor Hanh. If I applied myself like this to every project, I’d be dead. We can’t all be four-point-oh mutants like you.” I shoved his shoulder.

“It worked. It really worked,” Clark said for like the hundredth time that day. I wasn’t sick of it yet or the goofy way he grinned when he said it. He was so darned happy at our success that it was hard not to bask in it with him.

“I could sleep for a week,” I said, rolling onto my side so I could see his smile better. “But first, pizza. Did we eat breakfast?”

“I did.” Clark laughed. “Pretty sure you drank two pots of coffee and called it good.”

“That I did. Remind me again why I signed up for a morning seminar?”

“Because I told you it would be fun.” Clark shoved at my chest, but I didn’t budge. “And I was right.”

“You weren’t wrong,” I countered. “If torture by spreadsheet is your idea of fun.”

“It totally is.” Clark sighed happily.

“Dork.” Our faces were too close together. I knew better, I really did. Time to roll away, order the pizza, clean his bed of papers so he could nap on his own side of the room. But I didn’t move away. Instead, some rogue impulse took hold of me, and I brushed his hair out of his face. It was that point in the fall term where everyone needed a haircut and hygiene took a backseat to deadlines. We’d both done a fast shower and shave before the presentation, and I could see the spots he’d missed with the razor along his jawline.

“Freak. You’d rather take the laptop apart than use it to its fullest potential.” Clark’s voice wavered a bit as he teased back.

“Guilty,” I whispered. My love of taking things apart wasn’t what I was apologizing for, and we both knew it, but he didn’t roll away, didn’t put that desperately needed distance between us.

Instead, we shifted closer to each other. I wasn’t sure who moved first, but suddenly our faces were closer than they’d ever been. I’d avoided this moment for three and a half years, but now that it was here, I was powerless to run from it. He sighed, full pink lips parting, and that was it, game over, take all my tokens.

I slid my lips over his like we'd been doing this for ages. I'd wanted to know what he tasted like for years now, but in that instant I realized I'd known all along: he tasted like the memory of all my favorite things. Sunshine. Coffee. Laughter. Cinnamon. Clark. Mainly that. He tasted like Clark and that made him automatically my favorite flavor on earth. There was no hesitation, no awkward bumping of noses or clacking of teeth. Our bodies were far ahead of our brains, hands seeking, mouths knowing, lips and tongues moving in concert.

He moaned. Or maybe I did. It didn't matter. What mattered was that we were finally here—we'd finally tipped over from the weird land of "too close for friends but not a couple" we'd been in ever since the school year started. Our friendship had been building to this moment for three and a half years, and now that we'd finally kissed I was giddy. Felt like I could kiss him for hours, just acquainting my tongue with everything my eyes knew by heart. And I wanted to touch him too. I pulled his shirt loose from his belt—we were actually both wearing his shirts as I hadn't had one clean. I slid my hands under the crisp cotton, seeking to know all his contrasts—smooth and fuzzy, warm and cool, muscle and softness.

Still kissing him, my hands ventured to his belt. I needed to feel him—

"Wait. Wait." Clark pulled away from me abruptly, not only rolling away but also sitting up. He scrubbed at the soft hair I'd stroked only moments earlier. "We can't do this."

"Why?" *Please don't tell me you're back with Derek.* Anything but that. This was *our* time, damn it.

"I got a Rhodes Scholarship." Clark looked like he might puke; green and pasty skin, trembling hands. My own were none too steady, as I shook my head, not sure whether to trust my ears. "They called last week. I didn't want to disrupt our project by telling you yet—"

"Oh no, we couldn't risk our GPAs." My tone was biting and I didn't care. "What the hell, Clark? You win one of the most prestigious scholarships for students in the entire country and you don't tell me? And what the heck does that have to do with us kissing?"

Even as I asked, I knew it had *everything* to do with us kissing. And everything to do with how I'd grinned dopily at him two nights ago, thinking that maybe after this project was done, it would finally be time to... but no. It wasn't our time. Not at all.

“I’ll be going to Oxford for two years in the fall. Three if I get the renewal I’m hoping for. And I got the letter from MIT yesterday too. I’ve got a position at the lab starting in the spring, then deferred admission while I complete my degree from Oxford.”

“Fuck.” Unlike the rest of us mere mortals, Clark was on track to graduate in December. I’d known he was looking at research positions he could do while waiting for grad school to start in the fall, but it hadn’t hit me until this moment what that really meant. Clark was leaving. He’d be gone in a little more than a month. And of course, genius boy had already lined up not one, but two prestigious graduate programs in mathematics and computer modeling.

“So you see, we can’t start something now—”

“No one was trying to start ‘something.’ Just two friends getting off.” I lied so hard my molars ached.

“Well, maybe you can do casual, but I can’t. I can’t just mess around with you for a month and then leave. And I’ve got to go, Bryce.”

“I know you do,” I said roughly. I might be bound to another semester at this school, bound to this city thanks to my father’s health, but Clark had had the Rhodes dream ever since I met him. No one deserved success more than him.

“I could fall in love with you. So easily,” Clark whispered.

I was already there. But of course I didn’t say that. “So you don’t want to kiss me again because you might fall in love with me?” I said instead, trying to wrap my head around what was happening.

Clark nodded. “I don’t see any way this ends without both of us getting hurt. Do you?”

I shrugged, my chest aching like I’d smashed a fifty-pound dumbbell into my sternum. “Guess not.”

We’d both witnessed our friend Tony barely survive a two-year, long-distance relationship that was more akin to a drubbing with a club than a romance. We’d laughed in private even as we empathized with him, sworn we’d never, ever do the distance thing with someone.

“It’s better that we don’t start. That way we can stay friends.”

I nodded once, throat too full of razor-sharp emotions to speak.

“You’re my best friend, Bryce. I don’t want to lose you.” Clark stuck out his hand like we were making a bargain, and fool that I was, I took it instead of kissing all this logic out of his brain.

Despite Clark’s intentions, things were beyond weird in the weeks that followed, the memory of what had happened—and more importantly what could have been—hanging over even harmless interactions like what toppings to order on the pizza. Then he was gone, and I was left with a half-empty dorm room and a closed-off heart.

Chapter Two

Clark, Present Day

Bryce Weyland was the most stubborn man ever, and I'd known coming back to Portland wasn't going to be easy. One look at Bryce in his Batman costume had confirmed I was going to have to work to get mere civility, let alone any glimmer of the friendship we'd once had. His chiseled—and decidedly scruffy—jaw had locked down at the first sight of me, and behind his ridiculous mask, his eyes had clouded over. I wanted to pull the mask off him, wanted to know whether he had laugh lines now, wanted to see more evidence that he'd changed than just an unshaven jaw.

I'd seen the murky eyes more times than I could count, especially in my final weeks at Reed. His muscles were even more built than I remembered, but some of that might have been the padding on his costume. Although I was talking to Tony about my projects, it was Bryce who had all my attention. His arms flexed as he straightened a stack of shirts and moved a sign three millimeters to the right. Nope, no padding in *those* biceps.

"Ohmigod!" A teen girl with huge glasses and a sailor-suit dress squealed, coming to a stop right in front of me. She was accompanied by friends dressed in a similar style—probably cosplaying an anime 'verse I wasn't familiar with. "I *love* your cape."

"Thanks. Did the lining myself." I gave her a spin to make her smile.

"You *sew*." She giggled some more and turned and fanned herself to her friends. She appeared to be all of eighteen and I was twenty-seven and very much gay, and she still made me squirm with her unabashed approval.

"Yep." I'd ordered the costume online, looking for the best quality I could find, and this worn-once, movie-quality suit seemed to fit the bill until it arrived with a fraying cape with a giant rip in the lining. Enter the also-used-once flag I had from last year's Boston Pride, left over from the boyfriend with even less mileage than the suit or the flag. I could sew, thanks to all the years my mom made me do 4-H—the same youth group that taught her all the necessary rural life skills—so I'd pulled out the old lining and put my flag in. I'd done way better with the sewing than raising the pygmy goats the 4-H leader gave me one year. No biggie, but the girl acted like I'd solved a complex equation using a Fourier transform.

“Can I get a pic?” She held up her shiny red phone.

“Sure.” That was why I was there—Tony had told me he and Bryce figured having a variety of characters available for photo ops would help booth traffic.

“You and Batman please.” She made a begging face. “And stand close together.”

She giggled again, and I had a feeling we were about to end up on her Instagram with a slash-riffic hashtag like #KissingSuperheroes or something equally twee. But the chance to cozy up to Bryce? I didn’t mind that one bit. I threw an arm around him, swishing my cape a bit and using our height difference to clamp him in place. He smelled different. Not the aggressive, mountain-scented soap he’d favored in college, but something more expensive—a subtle herb-laced scent that tickled my nose and made me want to nuzzle him all over to find its origin. Hair product? Bodywash? I was game for a full-body scan.

The girl clicked the picture. “Only thing better would be if you guys kissed.”

“Not happening.” Bryce pulled away abruptly, answering any questions I had about whether “The Kiss” was as vivid in his mind as in mine. The memory was right there in his eyes—no mask could hide the exact shade of gold his eyes had turned while we’d kissed, and his eyes flashed that same shade before he looked away. However, while forgive-and-forget was item one on my agenda, forgiveness didn’t seem to even be in the same room with Bryce. Not with the glare he was shooting me as he went to go fiddle with a display.

To anyone else he probably looked industrious, but I knew Bryce—relaxed and happy Bryce lounged around, while nervous and angry Bryce messed with things that didn’t need it. We’d had more than one argument with him deconstructing some piece of electronics while we bickered over who should clean or how to approach a project. And our dorm room was never as clean as it was the last two weeks before I’d left for MIT.

The girls moved on, replaced by a few other groups wanting pictures of me. Bryce very carefully worked the opposite end of the booth, taking money for T-shirts and pins. He kept Tony and Charles between us at all times.

I raised an eyebrow at him. *A bit obvious, aren’t you?*

So the fuck what? I could practically hear his deep, rumble reply as he rolled his eyes. He had the best voice in the world—even at eighteen, it had

been radio-DJ deep, with great enunciation, and age had only made it better. I'm a sucker for clear consonants and low tones. I used to volunteer to do all the data entry on our group projects just so Bryce would have to read to me. Even long lists of numbers sounded sexy as hell coming from his mouth.

"Hey what's this?" I asked during a lull, making my way to a machine set up at the corner of the booth. They hadn't brought any of the large pinball and upright video games from the bar, but they had brought a couple of classic table-top machines.

"Dude, that's Bryce's baby. Be gentle," Tony said.

The warning only made me inspect the small cabinet more closely—it looked like an old black-and-white TV in a cabinet turned on its end. Triangles floated on a tablet-sized screen ringed in gold and blue dots. A controller sat in front of the machine with a little "Ask for Assistance" sign in Bryce's blocky handwriting.

"Is this a Vectrex?" I kept my tone appropriately reverent, the way car guys might inquire about a rare Mustang. The vector-based gaming console from the early '80s was indeed rare—they'd been sold for less than two years, having never caught on. Now they were cult favorites for the classic-games crowd.

"Yep." Bryce finally left his post at the far end of the booth and came to stand next to me. "It wasn't working when I bought it, but a little tinkering took care of that."

Knowing Bryce, a "little tinkering" meant a complete rebuild down to the circuit board. "Can I play?"

"Sure." He moved so I could reach the controller. With no chairs on this side of the booth, we had to squat down to see the screen to play. "I've got the perfect game for you."

My chest went a bit tight as he carefully searched an ancient box and removed a game cartridge and screen overlay. He wasn't just letting me play his machine. He wanted me to have a good experience—and that was totally Bryce in a nutshell, taking care of people even when he least wanted to.

"Thanks," I said, watching as he swapped overlays—thin films that went over the screen and altered the graphics—and popped in a cartridge labeled "Cosmic Chasm." If only the gulf between us was as easy to fix as swapping screen overlays from "awkward" to "the way things used to be" and waiting for the friendship program to load.

“No problem. Got this Vectrex and all the cartridges right before my dad passed, but it just sat until recently. Needs a good workout.”

How about you? I wanted to ask. *You just sit around? Had a good workout recently?* But that type of flirty banter had never been my style. Instead, I said the other, less-dirty thought on my mind. “I’m sorry about your dad.”

Bryce shrugged and continued fiddling with the controllers. “He was sick a long time. Guess it was his time. But thanks for the plant. And the note.”

I’d been in the process of relocating from Oxford to Boston when Bryce’s father had passed. Flying back for the funeral had been a bit beyond me, but a “Sorry, Dude” on his Facebook page seemed horribly inadequate. Instead, I’d typed up a memory from freshman year, recalling all those times his dad had taken us out to dinner. I’d been a hick from Pine Bottom, just outside of Bend, and burgers at a sit-down place was my parents’ idea of a big annual treat. Bryce’s dad had taught me how to behave in a fancy restaurant—what silverware to use, how to treat the wait staff with effortless grace, what to order. I’d treasured those meals we’d shared, and not simply because it meant more time with Bryce. Later in life, when I’d had to attend fancy receptions at Oxford and MIT and meals with prospective employers, I’d been profoundly grateful for the tutelage.

“He was a good man,” I said as Bryce passed me the controller. *He raised a good son.* “He was so proud of you, you know? He’d be proud of the bar too.”

“Maybe. Don’t know if he’d be thrilled by all the love his machines are getting,” Bryce said. Bryce’s father had collected classic pinball machines. The tinny, cheerful music of the Vectrex couldn’t drown out the sorrow in Bryce’s words. He’d been very close to his dad—would have lived at home for college if his dad had let him—and I knew the loss must have gutted him. I wished I had more than a handful of memories to offer him as comfort.

“I can’t wait to see the games. See the bar, I mean.”

Bryce frowned. “How long are you in town for? Figured you were just passing through on your way to Bend to see your folks.” There was a heavy message of *move along* under his words.

“I’m in town for a bit,” I said cautiously, not sure how much to spring on him now.

“Oh.” He drew the word out long enough for me to blow up a string of mines on-screen. Long enough for me to figure out he’d rather I do another

three years at Oxford than be back in Portland for more than a few hours. *Tough, buddy. You're going to have to deal.*

"Couple of days at least."

His eyes narrowed. "Where are you staying?"

I'd been afraid of him asking that question too early in the day. "Well... ah..."

"I told him he could have my room," Tony said, coming over to put a hand on Bryce's shoulder. Bryce promptly shrugged it off, but Tony continued, "Since I've been sleeping at Karen's so much anyway, it didn't seem right to make the college guy have to pay for a hotel."

Bryce stared at me with such focus that it was a wonder I wasn't incinerated into dust. Good thing he didn't actually have superpowers, otherwise I was pretty sure he'd be using them for evil right about then.

"You didn't think about asking me?" he said finally to Tony, voice straining to stay level.

"Your house is huge." Tony shrugged. "And Clark is one of the Nerd Army."

Ever since freshman year, Tony had been big on his "Nerd Army"—a group of science and math majors who shared the same dorm freshman year and ate meals together in the dining hall. Tony was the self-appointed general, conducting missions such as impromptu D&D tournaments and outings to comic book shops. He'd known Bryce from high school, and I got conscripted for service by virtue of being Bryce's roommate.

"I can get a hotel," I spoke up, saying exactly what I'd said on the phone to Tony, but more forcefully now. While I wasn't above angling for more time with Bryce, I'd also been raised with manners beyond "crash at the house of the guy who least wants to see you."

"No you won't," Tony and Bryce said at the same time, Bryce much wearier.

"You sure?" I asked, trying to not seem too eager.

"I've got Tony until Karen takes him off my hands for good. Charles is back now. Last year Angela and Derek both crashed for different periods," Bryce said with more of that resigned weariness.

“Derek as in my ex, Derek?” My voice wasn’t anywhere near as deep as Bryce’s to begin with, but it went up into cartoon-heroine range at the thought of Derek staying in Bryce’s house.

“Also in the Nerd Army.” Tony held up a finger, like reading off a point of order at a meeting. “He should be around sometime this weekend too. You guys can catch up.”

That *so* wasn’t happening. Derek was an okay guy, but we’d broken up sophomore year when I’d had to face the fact that Derek was a really poor fill-in for Bryce. But then Bryce went and got a boyfriend before I could get up the courage to tell him I wanted more than being best friends. Derek had distracted me from my goal once before, and it wasn’t happening again. And if Derek had done more than “crash” at Bryce’s house, I was going to need to clang some of Bryce’s heavy weights together.

Preferably around both of their heads.

“Hope he does stop by. He left a bunch of books in the room I’m in now and some Star Wars sheets,” Charles volunteered, coming over to the games table.

Yup. That was totally Derek. Decor by Think Geek. And I could have kissed Charles, sticky gray makeup and all, for the revelation that Derek had had his own room—as in not Bryce’s. There was no guarantee they hadn’t hooked up in the past five years, but at least they hadn’t lived *together* together.

“There’s an after-party at the bar when the dealer room closes at eight,” Tony said, ever our cruise director. “I’ll show you my room after that.”

“I could use pizza *now*.” Charles leaned heavily on the table with the games.

Creeeeeaaaaak. The table let out a mighty groan and buckled, one of the legs folding in.

“Frak.” Bryce sprang into action, shouldering the weight of the table to keep the games from sliding to the floor. I saved his Vectrex from pitching off while Tony clicked the table leg back into place.

Riiiiiiip. Bryce stood again, but his costume stuck on the table edge.

“*Fuck*.” No more wimpy curses from the Dark Knight. His sleeve was slashed open and blood welled up from a narrow cut on his arm.

“Owie.” A kid walking by pointed to Bryce’s arm.

“Heck. Anyone have a Band-Aid?” Bryce asked.

“They might have one up at the front in guest services. I could check,” Tony offered.

“I’ve got a first-aid kit,” I said. “It’s in my backpack in the trunk of my rental car. And a sewing kit. I can fix your costume.”

“Well aren’t you prepared?” Bryce dabbed at the cut with some napkins and winced.

“Come on.” I tapped his good arm. “The guys can watch the booth. I’ll fix you up.”

Bryce gave me a look like he’d rather hike naked up Mount Hood in January than be alone with me even for a fast trip to the parking garage.

“Here. Take my vendor badge so you can get back in the exhibitor entrance.” Tony handed me his pass, which dangled from a lanyard with the Comic Con logo. He gave me his classic lopsided grin with a little “go on” gesture. He couldn’t be more obvious about wanting to thrust Bryce and I back together—first the room, now this. Heck, knowing the nerd yenta, Tony had probably loosened the table screws.

Bryce didn’t make any small talk on the long trek back to my rental car. But that wasn’t all that out of character. He wasn’t the most talkative guy on a good day. He was much more about action and getting stuff done and making sure people had what they needed than about things like conversation. It was one of the ways we fit so well together—we never talked over each other and we knew how to occupy the same space in companionable silence.

I’d had a lot of friends over the years and more than a few boyfriends, but no one whose quiet I enjoyed quite like Bryce’s. Of course, the quiet was usually much warmer than the Arctic breeze currently wafting off Bryce.

“This is me.” I unlocked the tiny red economy car I’d picked up at the airport. I grabbed the bag from my trunk, then opened the passenger door. “Sit here. I’ll clean you up.”

The cut was in an awkward area on the back of Bryce’s arm. No way could he bandage it himself even if he took up yoga instead of spending all that time in the weight room. Still he made a face as he sat down.

“I know, I know.” I made a clucking noise as I dug out my first-aid kit. “You’d rather not have my hands on you. You’ve made that clear enough. Just grit your teeth for a few moments, okay?”

“I never said that.” Bryce watched nervously as I unwrapped the alcohol swabs. “And I’m clean by the way. Tested recently.”

“Good to know.” I was more the germaphobe of the two of us, but I was also the one with the sex life less likely to warrant frequent testing. Back in college, Bryce had plenty of hookups while I tended to stick to a series of boyfriends. And yeah, for a stranger I totally would have dug out the little non-latex gloves that came in the kit, but I wasn’t missing the chance to touch Bryce’s skin, even incidentally.

“You want to take your shirt off?” I asked, totally out of practicality.

“No. It’s a jumpsuit with a molded chest piece. Pain in the neck to get on and off.” He leaned back, the horns of his mask scraping the car’s ceiling. He wrenched off the mask with a groan, tossing it on the seat next to him.

And there he was. Shaggy dark hair, several weeks past needing a trim, darkly stubbled jaw that, knowing his ability to grow a beard, meant only a few days without a razor, and gorgeous eyes more gold than brown, especially when happy or turned-on. Right now, he was neither, so they were more of a copper-kettle shade. And regardless of precise color, he looked none too happy with my perusal.

“This is going to sting,” I warned as I took his arm and swabbed the cut with the wipe. “Oh hey! What’s this? Ink?” I spied a geometric pattern teasing at the gap in the fabric.

“Yeah.” Bryce winced as I cleaned the cut, but pulled away when I tried to move the fabric for a better look at his ink. “Stop it. It’s no big deal.”

“You never used to have tattoos,” I said.

“Yeah, well, a lot’s changed in five years, Clark. Didn’t expect I’d stay the same forever, did you?”

Yeah, I kind of had. In my head, he’d stayed twenty-one, a good-natured guy as game for a World of Warcraft pick-up raid as a homework project. I didn’t know this Bryce—the one with extra muscles and tattoos and a huge chip on his shoulder. I didn’t know the business owner or the guy who’d inherited a huge old house and populated it with stray friends.

But I wanted to.

And I desperately wanted to discover every one of his tattoos. With my tongue.

But I'd lost my chance at that years ago and another chance didn't seem to be on the horizon. Instead, I gently applied antibiotic cream to his cut and affixed the Band-Aid.

"I'm going to have to stitch your sleeve while it's on if you can't take it off." I retrieved a pre-threaded needle from the tiny sewing kit.

"Do your worst." He leaned back in the seat, arm dangling towards me. His clipped tone said what we both already knew—I'd done my worst already by leaving. No needle was ever going to be as sharp as the pain of walking away from that kiss.

I pulled the spandex fabric away from his arm best as I could. "I can do a better job tonight," I offered. Man, he smelled so good. Being this close to him was torture.

"It'll be fine." His eyes flicked from copper to gold as I tightened my grip on his bicep. *Bingo*. I wasn't alone in being affected by our proximity.

"And I really can get a hotel room. I don't mean to impose." I took little stitches, careful not to nick his golden skin.

"Tony's right. It's a huge house. No reason for you to pay for a hotel." He didn't lie and say I wasn't an imposition. I'd always liked that about him—he was polite, but never false.

"Well let me pay you back by doing a better sewing job tonight." I took a final stitch, tied the knot, then did what I did instinctively when sewing my own stuff and broke the thread with my teeth.

Which put my lips about a millimeter from Bryce's arm.

"Clark? What are you doing?" Bryce's voice went deeper than usual and he peered down at me. Our faces were close enough now that I could feel his warm, coffee-laced breath. Even that scent was familiar and I wanted to taste him so bad.

He didn't pull away. Instead our eyes held, and the entirety of our friendship played out in two deep breaths. *Inhale. Freshman year. Wanting Bryce so badly but wanting his friendship more. Exhale. All the bad experiences dating guys who were never going to live up to my Bryce-sized expectations. Inhale. The Kiss. Exhale. All the years of missing him.*

And still he didn't move. And neither did I.

Another breath. This one closer. One of us moved, or maybe we both did. His stubble brushed my cheek and—

“I can’t do this. Not again.” Bryce shoved me out of his personal space, sending me crashing into the car door. My efforts to keep my balance and stay upright failed and—very un-Superman-like—I landed on my ass on top of my backpack.

“Hey, you guys okay?” someone called from the vicinity of the other row of cars.

“Peachy,” I said, standing up. By the time I dusted myself off, Bryce was gone in a swish of black cape and heavy-booted footsteps that echoed through the cavernous garage.

Chapter Three

Bryce

Nearly kissing Clark wasn't the stupidest thing I did that day. The almost-kiss was rather predictable—get anyone that close to Clark and they'd be tempted by his perfect, full mouth. His cheekbones were angled in a way that emphasized his chiseled jaw, and when he concentrated on something like sewing, there was something almost otherworldly about his looks. All hard angles and icy eyes and warm body way too close...

So maybe my momentary lapse could be blamed on basic human instinct and not on stupidity. No, what was stupid was how I lurked around him and listened in on his conversations the rest of the day. I didn't actually *talk* to him myself, mind you. I carefully avoided him as much as one could in a tiny booth with far too many bodies per inch. Our booth was so crowded with costumed friends coming and going that it was sometimes tough to spot the actual customers. And everyone wanted to catch up with Clark.

Most of Tony's Nerd Army had stayed local after college graduation. A few people went on to grad school in Eugene or Corvallis or the Seattle area, but they all came back for big events like PDX Comic Con. Clark, having won the Rhodes Scholarship and then going on to MIT, was something of a conquering geek hero. I'd take a crowbar to the Vectrex before I admitted how much I stalked him on social media, but knowing in theory about his life at Oxford and in Boston was different than hearing the stories in person.

Hence, the eavesdropping. And it paid off when Karen, Tony's girlfriend, asked Clark, "So you seeing anyone?"

"No. I was seeing a biomedical engineer for a bit at MIT, but we broke up in September."

"Tell me about the British guys. Do they all have those yummy accents?" She leaned forward, Wonder Woman costume straining against attributes even I found impressive.

"Um. The ones native to England do." Clark rubbed his mouth, trying not to laugh. "But there's a lot of variety in the accents—Oxbridge, Geordie, Scouse, Cockney, Welsh—"

Karen cut off his classification list with a high-pitched laugh. *Thank you, Karen.* Clark's ability to classify *everything* with precision and exactness was a

trait both maddening and endearing. “Come on, dish on the hotties. Did you hook up with anyone there?”

“I dated a bit. I was more concerned with getting my doctorate done in three years.” Clark managed to sound disinterested and kind at the same time. Karen had come around after Clark had left for Oxford, so she didn’t know that hookup was not part of Clark’s extensive vocabulary. He was totally a serial monogamist, and he only dated guys similarly inclined. Freshman year, he was more serious about the “three-date rule” than a lot of our female friends. My own rule back then was a bit more... flexible. My allergy to dating was a big reason why I didn’t pounce on him while we were roommates the first time around. *Idiot*.

The fact Clark had no current boyfriend was of zero interest to me. Zilch. And if I repeated that enough times I might actually start to believe it.

I still didn’t believe it by the time the dealer room closed and we ended up back at the bar.

Charles left the booth at 4:30 to get back to the bar for the dinner crowd, and Tony headed there around six to set up the bar’s private party room for a post-con after-party. Clark stuck around the whole day, although he did wander the convention for a bit, returning with comics and T-shirts for his nieces and nephew back in central Oregon. We attended the same midafternoon panel on science in comics, but I very deliberately did not sit next to him.

Which really only hurt me, not him. I missed getting to hear his comments on what the panel got wrong, his little huffs about lack of precision. If you asked Clark, he’d never own up to being a talker, but he was, especially compared to me, and I loved the way he muttered comments under his breath almost more than if he’d tried to engage me in a lengthy discussion. In the years since he’d been gone, I’d gradually stopped hearing his voice in my ear at things like a conference or while watching documentaries on TV, but all it took was a few hours back in his presence to have me craving his words like a drug I’d thought I’d long since quit.

By the time I stripped off my costume in the bathroom back at the bar, my nerves rattled like change in the tip jar, and I felt more in need of a few shots than my thirstiest customers. But I never, ever drank on the job. I reminded myself of this as I put on my black jeans and black “Gotham Coin” T-shirt and tied on my half apron.

I stopped in the party room where Charles had set out a buffet of bar food for our friends who had been to the con, particularly those who had helped at the booth. Supposedly, they were chipping in for food and drink for the after-party, but I had a feeling the jar at the end of the food table would come up short at the end of the evening. Oh well. Wasn't like I wasn't used to floating my friends. I just thought more about money now as a business owner, knowing that my cushion of savings couldn't subsidize the bar forever. We were close to finally turning a profit, and I took pride in that.

I grabbed a plate with some wings and potato skins to help fuel my shift behind the bar. I ate standing up, avoiding the long table filled with old friends where Clark was holding court. Clark had also changed and looked both older and more handsome in a red polo and blue jeans, hair more messed up than the slick Superman-style.

"Hey, Bryce. This fish and chips is *amazing*," he called to me. "Best I've had since England."

"I'll tell Charles," I said gruffly.

"What does he use in the batter? I swear I taste hints of coriander and cumin."

I laughed because it was such a Clark thing to remark on. I had only a vague notion of which spices were which, but Clark's taste buds had the precision of a gas chromatograph. "Fish. He uses fish."

Then he laughed too, and it was like the years slipped away and we were back in the dining hall at Reed, me eating noodles while he sussed out the notes of basil and red wine and garlic. My dad had loved taking Clark out to dinner with us because Clark was a natural-born foodie while I was only really good for cleaning my plate and determining when a steak was done to my liking. My chest got a strange ache as I realized the two of them would never share a meal again.

I should take Clark to the Thai place Dad discovered right before the last illness—

No. No, I was not traveling that path. Sharing a meal with Clark, however pleasant the thought, would not be as easy as catching up with one of my other friends. Clark dates. I don't.

And on that note I gave his table a mock salute and headed out to the bar area. The party room was in the rear of the place, opposite a long alley of video

games and pinball machines. Chrome, high-top tables and stools filled out the area in front of the huge glass windows overlooking 23rd and the rest of the Alphabet District. The large wood-and-chrome bar in the center of the room anchored the whole space, and I felt some of my tension bleed away as soon as I stepped on the rubber flooring behind the bar.

We were hopping with a post-convention crowd of costumed cosplayers and the regular Saturday night crowd that was a mix of singles and couples out for date nights. I'd never seen us so busy before, but I quickly fell into my rhythm of taking drink orders from the servers and patrons at the bar. I loved mixing drinks. Some people might have said I was wasting my degree, but they likely didn't understand the sense of peace I got tending bar. My dad had taught me how to mix cocktails long before I could legally drink, and I took pride in handing out quality drinks, in making people smile when I flipped a bottle or did a little showy garnish.

But that night was insanely busy, no time for flair bartending or anything more than keeping my head above water. Our two servers were struggling to keep up with the traffic, and I had to help bus tables more than once.

"How can I help?" A familiar voice sounded in my ear as I wiped down a four top near the bar. *Clark.*

"Just enjoy yourself," I said, channeling my dad when he hosted a big party. It was easy to forget Clark was taller than me until he loomed over me, all broad shoulders and disarming smiles.

Clark snorted. "Seriously. You're swamped. I've talked to everyone. Twice. Put me to work."

I regarded him through narrow eyes. I knew his tolerance for small talk wasn't much more than my own. He liked to be busy and useful and his open smile said the offer was genuine and not coming from some sort of guilt.

"Can you wipe down tables?" I hated giving him grunt work, but I didn't have time to talk him through mixing drinks.

"Sure. Tell me where there's a bus tub and I'll clear glassware too."

And so we passed several hours in quiet synchronization, just as we had at the conference booth once Charles and Tony had cut out. We didn't need to talk to work well together. Clark handled being personable and putting people at ease while I kept the drinks coming. He proved himself to be a very capable pinch-hitting server, keeping the tables and ledges where people set drinks clean and even taking orders once one of the servers showed him our system.

Things started to slow down as we neared closing. The kitchen shut down at eleven and that was generally when people started clearing out. We weren't a late-night haunt, at least not yet, and we'd been sticking to a midnight closing time.

"You can take a break," I said to Clark. "And remind me to give you your share of the tips."

"Absolutely not," Clark said, taking the stool in front of me. "I'm just helping out a friend. It was fun."

"Fair enough," I said because I knew I'd say the same in his shoes. "But that doesn't mean I can't give you a drink on the house. What'll it be?"

I readied a glass for a Ninkasi Pale Ale, the local beer of choice he'd drunk all through college. But he surprised me by asking, "What do you have that's dark and bitter?"

Me. "Not on tap, but I've got Vlad the Imp Aler in bottles," I said, citing a local dark and sour ale our regulars clamored for. I pulled one out for him. "Glass?"

"Bottle's fine."

"You've changed," I said, watching his throat muscles work as he took a long swallow.

"Yep." He regarded me steadily over the rim of his beer, ice-chip blue eyes almost silver in the light of the bar. "But not as much as you might think."

"I don't know, man. A switch from pale to dark is pretty serious," I wisecracked, mopping down the bar in front of him, mainly to have an excuse for not moving away.

"I also do more trail running than road running. Did two mud runs last year. And I eat whole-wheat bread."

He'd been on the track team in college and also had run a number of charity 5k and 10k races. And his love of plain sourdough bread made into cinnamon toast was something I teased Mr. Budding Foodie about a lot.

"My." I pretended shock. "Tattoos can't be far behind." His open curiosity about my ink had been a serious balm to my ego. Made me feel like maybe I wasn't alone with this strange need to know every way he'd changed and every way he was still the same.

“Wouldn’t you like to know?” His expression was pure sin and hit me like a shot of Pappy Van Winkle.

“You’ve got ink?”

“You going to show me yours?” he countered. Like his taste in beer, the look in his eyes was new. Different. More adult and predatory. And I liked it far more than I should.

“Nope.” I scanned the thinning crowd. “Better see if anyone else needs a refill.”

I strode away, trying not to scurry like a spooked cat, even though I kind of was.

I left the bar at the same time as Charles and Clark, and after making the short drive in separate cars, we arrived at my house within moments of each other. We came in through the mudroom off the kitchen. No one used the ornate double front doors unless it was a party.

“Did Tony even put out clean sheets?” I groused at Charles, not wanting to play the congenial host at one a.m., but a lifetime of good manners prevented me from just stalking off to bed.

“I’ll check,” Charles offered, rubbing his face. There were still traces of gray makeup in the creases around his mouth and on his forehead.

“I’ll grab some towels.” I didn’t trust Tony to keep his bathroom well-stocked, especially since he’d begun spending most of his time at Karen’s place. Supposedly it was because her Northwest Portland digs were closer to our bar, but, in reality, I think he would have trekked all the way across the river to Vancouver to be near her.

“You guys.” Clark set down his backpack and held up his hands. “You don’t have to go to any trouble. Really. Just point me at Tony’s room, and we’ll call it good.”

I ignored his protest and grabbed a stack of towels from the cupboard above the washer and dryer in the mudroom. “Here.”

“I’ll show you to your room, sire.” Charles made a showy bow. His terrible fake British accent got Clark laughing. “Can’t have you wandering around the manor unescorted.”

“I wouldn’t mind a tour, actually.” Clark looked meaningfully at me. And part of me really wanted that—wanted to take him room to room, watch him notice details no one else would. He’d want to see all the places I’d loved as boy, want to know which decorative touches were from when my mother was still alive, which were my dad’s, and he’d immediately know which changes were all me. The other sane part of me knew that such a stroll would lead to nowhere good, so I waved him on with Charles. And if a small piece of me stung like I’d yanked the bandage on my arm off too fast, well, that was my own fault for letting Clark under my skin again.

A half hour later, I actually had yanked off the bandage. I replaced it with a clean one after my shower. I’d also shaved for reasons I wasn’t willing to examine. I was toweling off my hair when a knock sounded at the door. I’d been half-expecting this really, but that didn’t stop my pulse from revving like my V-Strom motorcycle.

“Yeah?” I opened the door to Clark. I lounged in the doorframe. I might have known why he was there, but it didn’t mean I was going to make it easy for him and usher him straight to my bed.

“Hey. Sorry to bother you.” Clark smiled sheepishly.

“What do you need?” I looked him up and down in a fashion designed to let him know I knew he was lying. He was *all* about bothering me. And not like Clark was a hardship to look at. He’d showered too, and was wearing a blue Reed T-shirt and a pair of faded red flannel pants that looked vaguely familiar. Droplets of water still clung to his neck and Adam’s apple and I wanted to lick each one off.

“I almost forgot about your costume. Really wasn’t my best repair job. I’d like to fix that sleeve better before tomorrow. Also, your cape is starting to fray on one corner. I can take care of both for you.”

“That’s why you knocked?” I didn’t quite believe him, even as I moved so he could follow me into the room. I was airing the costume out on a chair in the corner of the room.

“Of course.” His eyes narrowed and he scooped up the costume with clipped, efficient motions. “What? Did you think I’d come to seduce you? You’ve made it really clear you’re not interested. I don’t generally come on to the grumpy and unwilling.”

“Hey, I’m *not* grumpy.” I didn’t dispute the unwilling part, and he arched one thick eyebrow.

“You are.” He shook his head sadly. “You’ve always been a bit... gruff. But you didn’t used to be this prickly. Are you *happy*, Bryce?”

God. No one and I mean *no one* asked me that. I had more money in the bank than any of our friends. I owned a historic home in one of Portland’s most sought-after neighborhoods, free and clear. I had the luxury of starting a business and turning my hobbies into a career a lot of guys only dreamed about. Even while my family had shrunk, I had a large and active circle of friends who worked hard to make me forget how alone I really was. In short, I had a life a lot of guys envied.

But happy? Like waking up content and going to sleep not restless? Not feeling like something more was just out of reach? I tried to think when the last time was I’d had that.

Clark’s head tilted, studying me in that electron-microscope-intense way he had. His eyes were soft and compassionate, becoming more soft gray than blue. And I knew. Senior year. Waking up, knowing Clark would already have my coffee started. Going to sleep after hours of messing around on some project. *I was happy then.*

“Yeah. I’m fine,” I lied. I pushed the question back on him. “How about you? New life treating you good?”

A strange expression crossed his face. His mouth opened. Closed again. “Peachy,” he said finally.

He started for the door, but paused abruptly and gave me another searching look. He’d always seen so much more of me than either of us acknowledged, but this particular look rubbed me as raw as a motorcycle skid without my Kevlar jeans.

It wouldn’t take much to keep him from going, keep him talking. One piece of truth. *No, I’m not happy. Not really. Yes, I want you still. Please don’t go.*

Please don’t go. The words echoed across the last half decade, howling in my ears, but I let him pass. My hands fisted at my sides, even my bare toes clenching to keep from reaching for him.

Chapter Four

Clark

It was no big surprise when two a.m. came and went and I was still awake. Bryce's costume lay neatly repaired on a chair in the sitting area of Tony's room. I'd never required a ton of sleep and, once I passed midnight, a second wind could often trigger intractable insomnia. Not that I usually complained—I got some of my best work done during all-night work sessions.

Problem was that I didn't have any work to distract me and nothing on my phone was engaging enough. My friends back in Boston were all involved in end-of-the-year activities, but nothing on social media was pressing enough to warrant more than a cursory perusal. Tony's room was a strange mix of Elizabethan decor mingled with early Star Trek, and while all the Kirk love was very typical Tony, snooping through his stuff held zero appeal for me. I'd spent the last few years in an apartment, having finally, blessedly left the dorm life beyond, and Tony's posters and minifridge full of beer (okay I did snoop a bit) made me feel like I was back at Reed and should go roam the halls and see who else was up.

Of course, given that one could park a small jet in the room, it would be the largest dorm room I'd ever seen, with furniture straight out of a magazine shoot interspersed with a few IKEA pieces I assumed were Tony's contribution. Bryce's own room was much smaller, and I had a strong feeling he'd given Tony the master suite rather than claim it for himself after his father passed. The one thing Tony didn't have in his room was a TV. I hadn't asked Bryce for the Wi-Fi password, so I couldn't stream a show or movie on my tablet to get my brain tired enough sleep. That was the only thing that ever worked to get me sleepy. I could read for hours and not drop off, but pop on a movie and I was often out by the end of the first act.

But wait. I'd spotted a well-appointed family room off the kitchen, complete with cushy couches and the largest flat-screen TV I'd seen in a residence. Charles hadn't been kidding about Bryce's home being more manor than house, complete with the thick columns framing the exterior. It was three stories with the sort of Craftsman details shared by all the early 1900s homes in the area. I took the rear staircase closest to my room to avoid traipsing past Bryce's door.

Oh hell. I ended up in a totally unfamiliar part of the house, some sort of garden room which led to a piano room which did not lead anywhere near to the kitchen. I discovered a showy front living room, a massive dining room, yet another dressy living space with white velvet couches that looked like they had never held a human. No trace of the homey kitchen-dining-family room combo that had looked more lived-in than all these other spaces combined.

Thump. I'd been trying to avoid turning on too many lights which was stupid because I ended up toppling over an end table. Luckily nothing broke and I righted it, shaking myself off in the process. Limping slightly, I finally discovered the kitchen "wing" tucked discreetly behind two paneled doors that could be opened or closed as the family (or heating bill) so desired. I went to the TV and discovered a style of controller I'd never seen before. Some sort of pricey streaming/home theater combo deal that was far out of my income bracket.

I was awesome with tech, but I wasn't Bryce, who could make friends with any gadget in under thirty seconds and have it doing his bidding two minutes later. No, I was more of a read-the-manual dude, but there was no manual to be found and no combo of buttons seemed to turn the darn thing on.

Blzzzzzzzzzz. A horrible static crackling noise came from the speakers, and I quickly muted the volume. *Hell.* This had been a terrible idea.

I was about to return to my room, when a deep voice behind me said, "What do you think you're doing?"

I whirled around to find Bryce, eyebrows raised, looking like he was trying hard to be all grim and dour instead of laughing at me. I missed the guy who would have laughed.

"Couldn't sleep." I said. "I didn't want to bother you for the Wi-Fi password—"

"So you thought you'd explore?"

"No! Well, not *intentionally*. It was more of an accidental tour."

Bryce scratched his surprisingly smooth jaw, and now he really was hiding a laugh.

"Do you know this is the fourth room with couches I found on this floor? Maybe fifth? This place is bigger than some of the dorms!"

Score. That got a full-bodied chuckle from Bryce. "And you wondered why I complained so much freshman year about our tiny double?"

"I'm still surprised you didn't live at home," I said. I'd been bound to the dorms all four years by the terms of my scholarship, but Bryce had stuck around despite having what seemed like plenty of other options.

"It was the one condition my dad had for me, actually. He wanted me to go to an Ivy like he did, but I refused. It felt too soon after mom's death to leave him, so I picked Reed. But he said I had to have the residence-hall experience for him to keep paying tuition."

"Man. Leaving all this behind must have sucked." I gestured at the gleaming stainless steel appliances and dark wood cabinetry.

"Leaving him was the hard part," Bryce said quietly, with a stark honesty I'd rarely seen from him.

"I'm sorry." I was struck again by how inadequate those words really were. Bryce had lost not only his father, but the person he was closest to in the whole world. Even at school while he had me and Tony and the whole Nerd Army occupying his social life, along with assorted boyfriends and hookups, he had still talked to his father daily and texted even more often than that.

He looked so lost standing there against the breakfast bar that I did something that had come naturally once upon a time and put an arm around him. I'd ached for him in the weeks after I'd learned of his loss, wishing I could give him the sort of hug I knew our friends were showering him with. To my surprise, he didn't immediately shake me off, instead leaning in a bit before he seemed to remember himself and shrug away from the contact.

"Thanks, but I'm fine." He clawed at his hair as he paced away from me. "No need to get sentimental. So you got a second wind and now you can't sleep, huh?"

"Yep," I said. He knew me so well. I was the insomniac whose sleeplessness was caused by my own workaholic tendencies while he was a chronic night owl. We'd been a great pair once upon a time.

"Wanna know a secret?" He beckoned me closer.

Anything. "Yeah?"

"This isn't where I usually watch my TV. Too drafty in here. Great for a movie night with the gang, but I'm not sure what Tony did to the speakers last time he hooked up everything and I haven't had a chance to fix it."

"Not just me then." I looked down at the cursed remote still in my hand.

“Oh it’s totally you.” He grinned, another hint of the old Bryce. “But let me show you the Bat Cave.”

“The Bat Cave?” This I had to see. Actually, any space, any secret Bryce wanted to share would be welcome. Anything that got us back on our old easy footing.

“That’s just what Tony calls it.” He took me down a slim hallway half-hidden by the large fireplace in the family room. Not a secret passage exactly, but pretty darn close. “My grandfather was into collecting coins and had a room for his collection, but neither of my parents shared the passion. After he passed, my dad converted the space, and I’ve just added my stuff here and there.”

The dark, wood-paneled hallway appeared to go nowhere, but Bryce leaned on one panel and it swung open to reveal possibly the coolest room I’d ever seen.

It was two levels—a sunken living room with cushy suede couches and a huge flat-screen TV. The TV was nestled in dark wood cabinetry that also housed a full bar. The room’s upper level was all pinball games, each expertly spaced and lit with track lighting that made them seem like museum pieces more than arcade staples. Along the walls hung framed posters from some of Bryce’s favorite comics, panels from *The Tick* being most prominent. The games and space might be inherited from his father, but the art was all Bryce. A weird, warm feeling descended over me—this space felt more intimate than any other in the house, and, strange as it was, I felt honored he was showing it to me.

“Holy cow. Is that Target Pool?” I approached an ancient, yet gleaming, white-and-silver box.

“Sure is. I restored that one myself. Dad bought most of the games in working condition, but once I learned to work on them, he’d sometimes pick up project pieces for me.”

“So this is where you keep the pricey collectibles you aren’t putting in the bar?”

“Some of them.” Bryce gave another deep chuckle. “Dad was a bit of a hoarder, especially after he retired. There are more in the garage and the carriage house. I cleaned out his storage units for the bar. Eventually I’ll whittle down the rest. Maybe sell a few.”

“Not this one.” I reverentially touched another machine, this one a Whitewater game from the early 1990s. I’d read a thesis on strategy for the game and had heard Bryce’s father wax poetic about it, but I hadn’t seen one in person before.

“Want to play?”

“Can I?”

“Yeah.” Bryce’s smile got a bit wistful. “This was always Dad’s favorite. He’d get a kick out of watching you lose all your coins.”

“Crap. I don’t have quarters.” I patted my flannel pants like one might magically appear.

“I do.” Bryce lifted a bucket off the shelf. “A lot of the games in here I’ve rigged to be free play, but Dad always liked keeping a couple to take coins.”

“Want to show me first?” I asked.

He grinned and slid the quarters in. I was a fast learner and could pick up most games on the fly, but I wasn’t about to turn down the chance to watch Bryce play. He had a far more aggressive video game style than me. Whereas I never slapped or rocked a pinball machine, he played recklessly, with the intensity of someone out to bend the machine to do his will.

He bent over the machine, muscles flexing under his thin “I’m here because you broke something” T-shirt. Even the muscles in his neck went taut as he worked the machine. It got every bit of his focus, and he put his entire body into each play, rocking on the balls of his feet with each hit of the flippers. The lights and noises of the game filled the space, but it was Bryce who really clogged my senses, made me light up like one of the obstacles in the case.

He got bonus ball after bonus ball, but I didn’t begrudge him any of the playing time.

“Come on, come on. Right there. Yeah. Right there.” He talked to the game like he was coaxing a lover. He alternated between muttering and biting his lip on a particularly tricky sequence, and I had to suppress a moan at the sheer sensuality of Bryce attacking the game.

Finally, he lost. I suspected he’d become aware of me waiting and watching and he’d scratched on purpose. He wiped off his forehead like he’d just had a good workout. “Your turn.”

My turn didn’t last nearly as long as Bryce’s—I’d learned exactly nothing watching him other than how aroused he still made me.

“You’re doing calculations in your head instead of just following your instincts,” Bryce complained as he fed the machine more quarters. “Think less about odds and probabilities and angles and just enjoy the ride.”

I made a noise, forgetting for a second we were talking about the game.

Bryce snorted like he knew exactly which dirty places my mind had wandered to. “Come on. One more round, and then I’m putting on some *Red Dwarf* to put you to sleep.”

My second turn lasted about as long as the first, but I tried to channel Bryce and not overthink the game. Didn’t help because I kept overthinking *us*.

Bryce got his fancy TV system ready to stream the show before joining me on the couch. This was kind of our thing—terrible sci-fi in the middle of the night. At decent hours, we both shared a love of the good stuff, but the middle of the night was strictly for cult classics and atrocities. *Red Dwarf* was one of our favorites. He leaned forward, pulling closer a stuffed ottoman that was larger than my dining table.

“Still a bit drafty,” he muttered as he popped the ottoman opened and removed a fleece throw and tossed it to me.

He’d made the drafty comment earlier in the family room. Rather un-Bryce-like, as he always ran hot, going barefoot in our room even in winter and sleeping with only a single blanket versus my stack.

He cares about you. The concerns about drafts were all about *me*. He’d brought me to his special room because he cared about my comfort.

My chest went hot and tight, and my hands fisted in the fleece. I forced out what I hoped was a lighthearted laugh. “Bat signal blanket? Really?”

He snorted. “Gift from Tony.”

I shook the blanket out, spreading it out over my lap before I held one corner open. “Share?”

I held my breath, watching a range of emotions play out on his face. Just like insomnia and love of bad TV were our private things, this was another secret thing between us. I was pretty sure he would never, ever admit to it, but sharing covers and pillows was part of our TV ritual.

The snuggling up together was something that had evolved over several years, and we never discussed it. I’d been too scared to talk or even joke about it—afraid of losing that contact with him, afraid of taking the next step and

making it the prelude to something more. And by some unspoken agreement, it wasn't something we did when one or both of us had a boyfriend. But during our single-guy stretches it wasn't unusual at all for us to wake up next to each other, the movie or TV show still going, our bodies cuddled together. Even though I'd often wake up hard and aching, it wasn't really a sexual thing, and jumping Bryce at such a vulnerable moment always seemed like a violation of something sacred. Instead, we'd disengage slowly, moving back to our own spaces.

Just as I was about to drop the cover and look away, not wanting him to see my disappointment, Bryce nodded once, almost imperceptibly.

Luckily I was attuned to discovering minute data and I patted the square of cushion next to me, exhaling in a rush as he slid under the blanket.

Chapter Five

Bryce

I'd been wrong about what Clark wanted earlier when he knocked at my door, and I was pretty sure he meant his offer to share the blanket as a similarly harmless friendly gesture.

But as soon as I slid over, my ability to concentrate on the show went down to nil. I was not a cuddly guy, something all of my exes could testify to, some of them rather noisily. But with Clark, things had always been different.

It had started innocently enough, both of us cramming onto one bed to watch a movie on my laptop or sharing dorm couches way too small for two big guys. It was only natural to stretch an arm on the back of the sofa or share a pillow on the bed, heads almost-but-not-quite touching. But at some point, I started craving movie-watching time with Clark, and that scared the ever-loving shit out of me.

I didn't want to need him like that.

Didn't mean I called a stop to it either. I wasn't strong like that, but I was also careful not to take things to the next level. After all, if I needed him so badly when we were just friends, then how much more could he hurt me if we were a real couple? Thoughts like that kept me from making a move, especially our first year as friends, until that day senior year we'd both given in.

And we all knew how well that turned out.

An amazing friendship destroyed and all because I couldn't keep my lips to myself. The last few hours had reminded me how much I liked being around Clark—working next to him, talking with him, gaming with him. All of it was better with Clark along. And if we could have some semblance of that old friendship again, it would be stupid to jeopardize it, right?

I still slid over.

Still let my legs brush against him, still relaxed into the cushions, my body settling comfortably against his like it had known the way for years and had just been waiting for me to catch up. And when my arm felt weirdly trapped between us, it was the most natural thing in the world to stretch it along the back of the couch.

Clark exhaled like he'd just completed a really tricky game sequence. His full-body relief had me sighing too, had my hand dropping to his shoulder, pulling him against me. My heart beat like I'd just pounded out supersets at the gym, my whole body feeling alive and tingling simply by having him near.

"Bryce?" Clark looked up at me, a hundred questions in his eyes.

"Shhh," I said. I couldn't, *wouldn't* discuss this. I needed it too much to reduce it to words and labels and uncomfortable truths. "Watch the show."

I was a total hypocrite because I didn't watch the show one bit. I watched Clark, watched how his eyes crinkled when he laughed at the show, watched how he relaxed more and more against me, watched when his eyes started to flutter shut. My hand drifted to his hair, sifting through the silky strands. That was new—not something I'd let myself indulge in before, but Clark hummed with contentment against me and hell if I was stopping.

Clark made sleepy little noises and nestled against me. Well, as much "nestling" as a six-foot-three guy with bigger shoulders than mine could accomplish. A warm and protective cape unfurled inside me, wrapped both of us in a cocoon where all the issues between us dropped away and there was only him and me holding him while he slept.

It was possibly the most perfect moment I'd had in the last five years, and I'd had some major high points, but this quiet embrace was *everything*.

I needed this. That was my last thought as I too drifted off.

I woke up to the TV having jumped at least two episodes ahead, characters reacting to some disaster on the ship. Their raised voices had probably roused me. Or maybe it was Clark, smushed against my side. Our legs were up on the ottoman, feet tangled together, and I was one good shift of my hips from being on top of him.

Every muscle burned like I was trying to keep a two-hundred-fifty-pound barbell aloft, trying not to sink into the inevitable.

Clark's eyes fluttered open, and he smiled. A shy, almost bashful smile that was also so *pleased* it made my chest ache and my arms tremble.

"Your eyes are gold," he mumbled. "Antique rose gold—"

"Go back to sleep," I commanded. I couldn't withstand any more sappiness from him. My willpower was shredding thread by thread.

“Don’t want to.” He nuzzled into me more. “I don’t want to miss even one moment of this. And if it’s a dream, I don’t want to risk a different one starting.”

“Maybe it’s a flashback,” I muttered, trying to convince myself more than him. No matter how familiar his bulk against me was, no late-night moment had ever been this charged between us. Sure, I’d been turned on before when we’d dozed next to each other, but I’d been able to ignore it. This was more like ignoring the giant five-story OMSI billboard. Only instead of advertising a science museum to come explore, this sign practically ordered me to explore Clark. Experiment. Try something new.

Friendship. Reinvented.

I must have smiled at my own idiocy because Clark’s lips curved again, revealing his perfect white teeth and making his chiseled chin jut forward. His jaw had the lightest dusting of stubble. I wanted to run my tongue against it.

I could do one-armed pull-ups and support my body weight without flailing. Heck, I could probably bench press Clark if I really wanted to. And yet, after all that gym time I didn’t have the simple bodily control to stop myself from rolling into him, aligning our torsos and placing his hard chest under mine.

“Oh, hello,” Clark said with a pleased grin. His arms came around me, locking me in place.

Ha. As if I was about to escape.

Clark was the scrap of driftwood keeping me from drowning. Or maybe he was the undertow that was going to do me in, but either way, I was powerless to move. Powerless to do anything other than bury my hands in his hair and my face in his neck and inhale. He smelled like the lemon and rosemary soap his mother made: a homey, uniquely Clark scent that I hadn’t realized how much I’d missed until it surrounded me.

He took a deep breath at the same time, something magical happening where time and our breath slowed down and synchronized. That I was going to kiss him was a given now, but neither of us rushed it. We lay there, breathing, holding, *knowing*.

Finally, I raised my head and his mouth was right there, waiting for me. Our mouths met softly. The lightest brushing had my bare toes curling against the ottoman. What was funny was that I was generally a pretty aggressive guy in bed—I was the one who made the first move and the one who set the tone,

usually with a lot of rough kissing and determined grappling until I and the other dude got to the fucking or sucking in short order.

But I wasn't that guy with Clark. With Clark I was content to go at his slow, meandering pace. Our first kiss had been far more about enthusiasm than finesse, but once I ceded direction to Clark, he proved himself talented, using lips and tongue and teeth in concert to drive me crazy, wielding restraint and control like erotic weapons. He kissed like he ate—savoring each bite slowly like there would be a quiz on the precise ingredients later.

The build was so slow and deliberate that I didn't notice when we crossed the line from trading kisses to rocking against each other. Clark was a couple of inches taller, but lying down like this, we lined up perfectly, dicks rubbing together through the loose fabric of our pajama pants.

"Oh my God, you feel so good." Clark's head tipped back, and I finally gave in to the impulse to lick his jaw and nip at his neck. The rough texture against my tongue sent electric shocks tingling down my back.

He groaned, and his hands left my shoulders to clutch at my ass, driving me harder into him. And apparently my body needed that direction, because his taking control of the motion of my hips tipped me unexpectedly close to orgasm.

"Yeah. Like that. Harder." I moaned, body tensing, but staying pliant enough to let him move me at will.

The more he thrust and clutched at me and the harder he dug his fingers into my ass, the closer I vaulted to the edge.

"Bryce. Oh fuck. Bryce." Clark panted my name, and I'd never loved it more than hearing it on Clark's lips, head tipped back, totally lost in passion. I'd never hate my name again if I could only make Clark moan it over and over.

"Clark. Need..." I moaned.

"Going to..." His eyes squished shut, his mouth making tight little inhales that I swore I felt all the way to the tip of my dick. He pulled me tight, grip bruising now. The second his mouth caught mine, I came on a strangled moan, jerking hard against him, feeling his whole body shudder as he too came.

"Holy heck." He laughed, hands petting me all over like he was checking for breaks. Not a bad impulse. I felt cracked, core parts of myself all jumbled up and rearranged. Took me a bit to come back to earth, gradually becoming aware of the drone of the TV and the late-night nip of the air. He leaned up to

brush a kiss on the side of my face. “I haven’t come in my pants in like a decade.”

“At least,” I grunted, using the gruffness to hide how rattled I felt. I sat up, disentangling our limbs, and ran a hand through my hair. I flipped off the TV system, and the silence only made me feel stickier and sillier. “Gonna need another shower.”

“Want some company? You could fit a whole basketball team in the shower in Tony’s room.” Clark’s grin was too wide, eyes and cheekbones too tight, like the effort of seeming casual might be more than his facial muscles could pull off. My stomach gave a weird little flip. I wasn’t doing so well with the casual either.

The smart thing to do would be to end this insanity right here, retreat to my room and spend the rest of the weekend avoiding Clark.

Clark’s smile wavered as I hesitated. “Tell me I’m not sleeping alone without even getting to see your skin?”

I laughed. “You’ve seen me naked plenty.”

“Yeah, but I haven’t seen your tats.” He gave a playful tug at my shirt, but his voice was too bright, facial muscles still working double time to keep that smile up. It was his nervousness that inched past my resistance. This mattered to Clark.

And maybe all we’d ever have was this night. Sure, the morning would suck donkey balls, but I couldn’t deliberately knock that expression of barely contained hopefulness off Clark’s face right then.

“My bathroom’s probably cleaner than Tony’s,” I said at last, standing before holding out a hand to help him up from the couch.

His answering smile was deep and genuine and he bounded after me as I led the way upstairs.

My bedroom wasn’t the master, but it also wasn’t my childhood room, which I now used as an office. My room had once been my mother’s best guest room, and I moved into it partly for the large glassed-in shower. I might not have been able to face taking over the master bedroom, but I shared Clark’s appreciation for a nice-sized shower.

It was the middle of the night and my eyes were doing that late-night, burning-itchy thing. I put the dimmer on in the bathroom.

“Oooh.” Clark-the-ever-observant made a pleased noise. I’d known he’d like the candlelight effect, and yeah, maybe I’d messed with the lights to make him smile as much as for my vision.

His smile lit me up inside, made my whole body feel like I’d spent hours hanging out under the warming lamp. I kissed him as I took big fistfuls of his shirt. Naked? Sure I’d seen Clark change clothes a zillion times, but I’d never gotten to do the undressing. My body still hummed with the recent orgasm, and this wasn’t about arousal as much as about a deeper need I refused to name. I needed to kiss him, to strip him bare, to learn that he did not, in fact, have any tattoos.

“You lied,” I said as I shoved his pants down.

“I did?” He bit his thumb. His hands were broad and oversized, even for a guy his size. I wanted them all over me again.

“You made me spend my last shower wondering where you might have a tat. Tease.”

“Oh, *that*. Yes, I’m horrible.”

“The worst.” I kissed a birthmark I’d never noticed before on his shoulder. He tanned easily in the summer, but now, in early spring, his skin was winter pale, faint freckles on his shoulders standing out. From a distance, his chest looked smooth, but this close up I could see the sparse hairs around his nipples and between his pecs.

“My turn.” Clark pushed off my shirt before I was done with my perusal of him. “Holy cow. I was thinking one, maybe two tats. This is...”

“Excessive?” I didn’t really care what he thought of the hobby I’d discovered after he left, my first tat being a fuck you to the world at large, the later ones more thoughtful additions because I genuinely loved the process of getting inked.

He circled me like I was a statue at the Portland Art Museum, a strange piece of sculpture he was going to need to catalog later.

“This one was first.” He touched the Tick tattoo on my left bicep.

“Lucky guess.” In college I’d talked about getting it, but it had taken a while before I finally decided to stop theorizing and actually plunked down in the artist’s chair.

“And these are for your mother.” His finger trailed across the hummingbird with a spray of hydrangeas on my left pec.

“Yeah.” Knowing Clark, he could probably label the exact varietal, but I’d just brought the artist a picture of the huge bush in her favorite corner of the yard.

“And this one is for your father.” He touched my biggest piece. It started below my right collar bone and spread out into a full sleeve on my right arm. All done in inky bluish-black ink, it was a complex series of M.C. Escher patterns and textures.

No one else who had seen my art immediately got the significance, and even though I’d started the large panel after my dad’s passing, only Clark had looked at me with such understanding. He traced the various tessellations, eyes wide with a kind of awe I hadn’t seen from him before. He was Clark, so of course he found the dates and initials hidden in the patterns, fingertips circling each number and letter.

“I’m going to get pinball art on my back,” I said gruffly.

“But you haven’t picked which yet.” His palm skated across my back like he could already see the art. “And you weren’t ready before.”

I nodded sharply. Pinball was the great love my father and I shared. Like my mother with her garden, my father’s love of Escher was exclusively his thing, the prints that decorated his offices his own personal treasures. He and Clark had discussed their favorites at length over dinner, and I’d watched more from a distance, participating but not really emotionally invested. Working with the artist to come up with the perfect Escher tattoo had been healing in a way that I couldn’t articulate, but Clark seemed to get it.

“How many artists did you interview?” he asked as he stroked my right arm again.

“What makes you think I didn’t just go to the one who did Tony’s Flash tattoo?”

Clark made a scoffing noise. “You’re picky about who you let touch you. No, for something this special, you would have been willing to travel. Seattle?”

“Damn. You are part bloodhound.” I flipped on the shower to distract myself from the tightness in my chest. I kicked off my pants before I tugged him under the scalding spray with me—too hot for me, but perfect for Clark who made a happy noise.

He stuck his head under the spray, but to my surprise, he fiddled with the handles, bringing the temperature back to moderate.

“I can compromise,” he said with a laugh.

“Sometimes.” I caught his mouth in a kiss to ward off thoughts of the big compromises neither of us had been willing to make in the past.

I’d kind of expected us to head straight for shower fuckery, but I should have known better. Clark took the process of getting clean very seriously, opening up my various shampoos and bodywashes from the long shelf on the wall above the shower and sniffing each.

“What are you doing?” I took one from him, not looking at the label. I squirted a dollop on my hand before rubbing it over his chest.

“I’m trying to find the one that makes you smell like expensive soup.” Clark opened another. “Ah. Found it. My mother would kill to pull off this blend. Such a delicate yet masculine herbal—”

“It was a gift.” I looked down at the bottle. “From a guy, but hey, if you want to send the bottle to your mom, I’m not attached.”

“Ex-boyfriend?” Clark’s nose wrinkled. “In that case, I hate it. I’m having Mom send you a case of sandalwood to chase that stuff out.”

“You’re cute when you’re jealous.” I kissed him.

“Was he someone special?” Clark asked as he grabbed a different bottle. His hair fell in damp clumps around his face and I couldn’t see the expression in his eyes.

“Nice guy, but not particularly.” I decided not to tease him.

“What about Derek? Was he special?”

“Derek, your ex who also lived in my guest room about a month too long?”

“Yeah.” Clark aggressively shampooed my hair, fingers digging into my scalp.

“We made out once. You were right. He kisses kind of like an aardvark.”

“He totally does.” Clark made another of his pleased noises. “So you guys weren’t a thing?”

“Nope. Now can you leave some hair attached please?”

His touch gentled immediately. “Sorry.”

“How about you? Anyone special in your travels?” I tried to keep my voice light.

I felt him shrug behind me. “Some very nice guys, but no one I particularly miss, if that’s what you’re asking.”

It was indeed. We were wading through something, a fundamental truth circling around and around that I was only too happy to let filter down the drain in favor of safer topics. I tilted my head back to kiss him, but Clark was busy soaping me.

His touch wasn’t unpleasant, but it took me a bit to relax into the attention—kind of like the first few minutes of getting a tattoo before my body got with the program and decided to ride the wave of endorphins. But once it did, the same sort of trance-like high descended over me and I couldn’t tell whether three or thirty minutes passed with him working out kinks I hadn’t known existed.

He washed my arms and my calves with the same steady focus, making encouraging little noises, the more I let go and let him do his thing. Rising, he dropped kisses all along my spine.

“Mmmm. I should wash you now.” My voice sounded drugged, and I didn’t follow up my halfhearted offer by reaching for the soap. Felt too good to stand there, hot spray cascading over both of us, him working some sort of voodoo on my neck.

“Not done yet.” His voice took on a seductive tone as he moved to soap my hips and ass.

“Hey!” I yelped as he slid his slippery fingers down my crack. Those square inches weren’t ones my infrequent shower buddies usually paid any attention to. “A little warning?”

“Should I buy you dinner first?” Clark laughed, but didn’t remove his hand, instead slipping back and forth, playing in the lather. He nipped at my neck.

I moaned despite my protests. His fingers felt sure and strong against my rim, and his teeth on my neck had the perfect amount of bite.

“Do you have supplies in your room?” he asked against my ear.

“Rather sure of yourself, aren’t you?” I pulled away to rinse, not at all sure I liked him knowing so much about me, seeing *all* of me, not just the parts I liked to show off. Clark saw every detail, every nuance, and it was a bit terrifying.

Clark stopped me before I could escape the shower. He wrapped both arms around me, pulled me tight, my back against his front.

“Hey. This is just us, right?”

I made a snort because it was the middle of the night, we were naked and wet and pressed together and in my bathroom—this was the most “just us” we’d ever been. And yeah, that was probably a large part of what was freaking me out.

“We can do whatever you want.” He kissed right under my ear. “Or sleep.”

“We’re not sleeping.” I pushed back against him, his hard dick pressing insistently in my back.

“Good.” He nipped where my shoulder and neck met, and he could pretty much have me right there if his teeth never left that spot. “I know you, Bryce. I know what you like. What you hate to ask for. *I know you*. Let me do this for you? Let me give you what you need.”

What I needed. What I needed was for him to keep saying my name in those patient, almost loving tones. I needed his strong arms around me to never let go. I needed him not to leave again. I needed this not to screw up our friendship all over again—an impossibility. A mere kiss had detonated the best friendship I’d ever had. Tonight was sure to be another atomic event in my history with Clark. And yet I didn’t move away.

Instead, I relaxed against him. Let him hold me up. And nodded, because I knew Clark didn’t need to see my face to read my yes, knew he wouldn’t make me say the words.

What I needed, what I’d *always* needed was Clark.

Chapter Six

Clark

I turned off the water and grabbed two towels from the neatly folded stack on the built-in shelving outside the shower. I wrapped Bryce in the towel before he could protest my attentions. I liked toweling him off for the same reason I liked washing him so much. I'd never known a guy so in need of pampering—or so resistant to it. Bryce carried the weight of the world on his sturdy shoulders, never letting on how badly they ached or how much he needed someone to rub them. I wanted to be that person for him, and I tried to tell him that with my motions as I gently toweled him off.

Bryce and I knew things about each other that no one else did. It was the product of so many late, late nights and early mornings together. Earnest conversations over beer and silly truths spilled in the middle of terrible TV.

And so I knew that Bryce liked to bottom. A lot. But he didn't like to have to ask for it and hated any sort of negotiations about "turns" or who was doing what to whom. Basically he wanted a clairvoyant toppy dude who saw past all the shields Bryce threw up as decoys and who wouldn't make him ask or discuss it afterward. For all Bryce was out and had been out since high school, he wasn't the most comfortable with this part of himself.

He was so self-assured in every other part of his life that it made me want to wrap him in my arms and cuddle him until he realized that he didn't have to be Bryce-the-all-powerful with me. I wanted him to see that it was okay to let me take care of him—in all sorts of ways—because he took care of so many people and problems every day. He needed a space to let go, and I wanted to give that to him.

I kissed him under the warming lights of the bathroom, soft glow wrapping around us, and tried to tell him all that with my lips. Maybe I hadn't realized these things back when we were kids, but I saw clearly now the person I wanted to be for Bryce. Part of me had been scared before, not ready to confront this thing between us, but I'd waited too long for this moment to shrink away this time.

"I know you're part iguana, but I'm roasting here." Bryce laughed a bit uncertainly as he tugged me out of the steamy bathroom.

He went right to the ebony wood nightstand beside the bed, rummaged through a drawer and tossed some things on the bed. The lube and condoms were interesting, for sure, but I was also interested in what else the drawer might contain. I peered over his shoulder, trying to see—

“Stop that.” He shut the drawer firmly.

“I want to see your toy collection.” I faked a pout. “I know you have one. I’ve always been too broke to afford the good stuff, but I figure you’ve got to own some impressive... collectibles.”

As predicted, that got a good laugh from him. “It’s a drawer of sex toys, not rare action figures, and if you’re nice I *might* show you some things. *Later.*”

Later. I liked the sound of that because it meant Bryce was thinking beyond tonight, even if he didn’t consciously realize it yet. I had no intention of letting him play this off as a momentary insanity thing, but that was a conversation for later as well.

“Action figure sex toys might be wicked cool though. I could think of a few uses for a light saber...” I gave him a wink as I bounded onto the bed. After so many years of making do with a single, Bryce’s giant king felt like an island paradise, and I barely restrained my urge to bounce and roll. “Now get over here.”

He laughed. “You’re different than... Never mind.”

“What? You expected me to be boring in bed?” The muscles in my neck jumped. Didn’t he know me better than *that*?

“Nooo.” He stretched out next to me, less tense than he’d been in the bathroom. “Well, maybe a bit. You’ve always been so... buttoned up. But it’s more the... forcefulness I didn’t expect.”

“You’re not complaining.” I didn’t make it a question. I could see from his straining dick and the deep gold of his eyes that he liked it when I took over, even if the quirk of his mouth said he wasn’t too happy about how much he liked it.

I pushed on his shoulders until he was flat on his back, then lowered my mouth to his. The needy way he met my mouth made me growl low in my throat. So much barely contained hunger. He could easily seize control, devour me, but instead he made little impatient noises while I licked my way into his mouth. Slowly. Just to torture both of us, and maybe also to prove that we’d go at my pace and he’d like every second of it.

Pulling back to breathe, I let my hands wander over his fuzzy chest, trail over his mesmerizing tattoos. I'd known him with far less fuzz and acres of golden skin—a teenager's body belying his deep voice and strong facial features. But this Bryce had grown into himself. The tattoos totally fit who he was, and I wanted to spend hours tracing them with my tongue. All man. All mine.

With anyone else, this was the point when I'd ask how they liked things, but with Bryce I simply watched. If I paid attention, he'd show me what he liked, even if he couldn't put it in words. Sure enough, after a few moments of me stroking his chest, Bryce grabbed his towel, spread it next to him and wordlessly flipped over on to it.

"You planning to catalog the exact colors of my tats all night?" His tone was all brash, but his feet twitched restlessly.

"Nope." I remembered what he'd responded to in the shower and nipped at his shoulders, biting and licking my way down his spine.

"Better be writing a check you plan to cash." His voice was a low rumble. His glutes twitched as I moved between his legs. Yup. One only had to be observant with Bryce. And patient.

I licked *all* the way down, one smooth stroke from his first lumbar vertebra past his sacrum, down his crack, skating over his rim. He groaned, a noise I'd only ever heard him make when doing dead lifts in the gym, and his whole body shook.

He drew up his knees, giving me more access. The more I teased with my tongue and mouth, the more broken noises he made, deliciously heady little grunts and muffled curses.

"Ung. Huh. *Please*." The "please" sounded more like a command than a whine, and that was sexier than hell—listening to him beg in that deep voice of his. The noises made me a lot more... *enthusiastic* about this particular act than I typically was. His begging made me bolder, made me explore and try different combinations of lips and tongue and fingers to make him nuts.

I grabbed the lube he'd tossed onto the bed and warmed some up with my fingers before working him open more, licking and nuzzling his ass cheeks at the same time.

"*Fuck*. Clark. Nuuuugggh... stop... teasing. Just go."

I didn't ask if he was sure, but I took my sweet time complying, putting on the condom in between more fingering.

"Like it fast and dirty?" I asked as I positioned myself at his entrance. "Typical."

"How... so?"

"Always chasing the big rush. Even when you think you're not." I nipped at his shoulder as I pushed in with a smooth stroke. He wanted the burn—thank you very much to our little drunken chat for that little tidbit. I'd taken *copious* mental notes, and I could also read the tension in his back muscles.

He rewarded me with a moan that might have been pulled from the depths of Mordor. He thrashed and bit the pillow, even as he pushed back onto me, filthy muffled curses spilling from his mouth.

I lavished his back with kisses, a soft counterpoint to the hard thrusts he demanded.

"Oh *fuck*. Clark." His hands cast around restlessly, and I captured them, pinning him to the mattress with our interlocked fingers. The sheets pulled loose from the bed, but I didn't slow down.

"Clark. Oh Jesus. Clark. I need..."

"I know. Take it. Right there for you." Meaningless encouragement overflowed my mouth, interspersed with more kisses to his neck and back. I could feast a lifetime on Bryce's shoulder blades alone.

"Fuck me." That moan was softer, more broken. He'd reached some deep place inside himself now, completely giving himself over, and my heart went warm and open with satisfaction that I'd done that for him—gifted him with the space where he could freely ask for it.

And freely get it. "Always."

"Yes. God, yes." His head tipped to the side, and I used my longer torso to stretch until I could press a clumsy kiss to his mouth.

His mouth was soft and tasted salty from the sweat beading up on his face, but what really did me in was the little sigh he gave as our lips met. In that instant, my brain shifted from the "Oh my God, I get to fuck Bryce Weyland" celebration dance to the "I love Bryce, and I get to share this amazing thing with him" symphony.

I couldn't tell him that, couldn't let those words tumble out, could only focus on trying to make this as mind-blowing for him as it was for me. I slowed my thrusts, trying to make it last, but he made a noise of protest, pushing his hips back against me.

"Can you come just from my cock?" I angled my hips, trying to maximize the slide against his gland. His cockhead had to be dragging against the terrycloth, but he hadn't made a move to free his hands. If anything, he was clutching me harder.

"Not... sure." He panted. And he lied. He could. I could feel it in the bunching of his back muscles, in the sweat dripping off him, in the way he met my every thrust, and the subtle flutter of his hole against every upstroke. He just wanted to be told.

"Don't think you have a choice." I bit him where his shoulder and neck met, that spot that made him pliant and electrified at the same time. "Do it. Come from my cock."

"Go harder. Don't stop."

"Not stopping." My own need to come was screaming in my ears, balls tight and hamstrings burning as I slammed into him.

Love. You. Love. You. With each hard thrust, the words seemed to reverberate through my body, to the point I was stunned he couldn't hear it too, couldn't sense the rhythm guiding us both higher.

"Clark. I... Jesus. Clark... *Clark.*" He said my name with such a mixed-up myriad of emotions it would have taken me a year to label them all, but I thrilled to each variation.

Yes, it's me. Me doing this for you. To you. With you. Me. Me. Me. And you. Us. Together.

He moaned, head tossing, seeking, then he bit my thumb as he cried out. That was it for me, and I really hoped the hard clench of his inner muscles around my cock was him coming, because no way was I holding back now. Whatever finesse I'd had at the beginning was long gone, and I pounded through my final thrusts, orgasm rocketing through me.

"Yes. Finally. Like that. Clark." Bryce spoke utter nonsense, but also absolute truth.

Us. Finally. Exactly like this. *I love you*. The emotion throbbed through my whole body as I slowly came down from the orgasm, gently disentangling our bodies, kissing his damp neck. I knew better than to put voice to the words, no matter how desperate I felt, so I settled for collapsing next to him, pulling him against me until we were half spooning, him splayed out like a starfish, me finding a way to be wrapped around him regardless.

He turned his head and our eyes met, his a shade I'd never seen before, an almost glowing amber. Maybe I couldn't say the words. Maybe he couldn't hear them. But this right here, this moment between us—it was more powerful than even the most complex equation. All physical processes? Screw that. Everything I needed to know was right in Bryce's expression. Keeping his eyes locked on mine, he brought our linked hands to his mouth, kissed the back of my hand.

His lips moved like he wanted to say something.

Say it. I will if you will, I tried to beam the thought at him through my eyes.

Finally, he spoke, voice sounding rough and low. "I better set an alarm for the morning."

He rolled away to mess with the clock on the nightstand, then fussed with the towel, cleaning both of us off before flipping off the lights and flopping back down.

Well. Okay then. Maybe the pretty moment *was* all me. Or maybe we were both fucking cowards. Someone was going to have to talk, and soon. Right when I'd resigned myself to a long, cold climb up insomnia mountain, he pulled me into a tight embrace, his front to my back, breath gently huffing into my hair. Later. We could talk later.

Chapter Seven

Bryce

I woke up alone, but this wasn't particularly troubling. Even though we both tended towards very late nights, Clark had always been able to fuel his genius brain on less than five hours of sleep, while I luxuriated in my ability to sleep in. In college, I only scheduled morning classes if Clark was in them and bugged me to join by promising to do the lion's share of the group work. Of course I never told him he had me at, "We can take this one together!" Taking an early class was the least of what I'd have done for Clark once upon a time.

No, waking up alone was almost a relief. It let me wallow in what an epic mistake I'd made last night. Before, I'd had this hazy sort of image that Clark and I would be good in bed together, but it was like reading an auction description for a vintage game—absolutely no guarantee the item would live up to its billing or whether the trip would be worth it. But now I knew—Clark was unequivocally worth any trouble. And what we had together wasn't some banged-up old Pac-Man game, barely worth the money for its case. Sex with Clark was the equivalent of finding a wooden cabinet upright Blaster game in pristine condition, and I was going to spend the rest of my life craving the Clark experience.

I punched my pillow. I'd had a lot of sex in my life—probably more than Clark to be honest—but no one had ever so effortlessly figured out what I liked in bed and delivered on every dirty promise. Across the room, my Batman costume was laid out on a chair. Clark had clearly been busy. I checked the clock—the con didn't open until ten on Sunday, so I had time before I had to get into character. I took a fast shower and threw on a pair of sweats.

It would have been too much to hope that Clark had left already, and I could hear him and Charles talking as I came down the stairway closest to the kitchen. On second thought, maybe I did need my costume. A Dark Knight mask would be perfect to hide how very much I didn't want this awkward morning-after conversation. And I really didn't want it with an audience.

Charles was in half his costume—pants but no gray makeup yet. Probably just as well since he was stuffing his face with the waffles Clark was dishing up. Sticky cosplay makeup sounded miserable to me. Also miserable? Clark Kenmore taking over my kitchen. Bacon I didn't even know we had sizzled in a

skillet. A plate of scrambled eggs sat on the breakfast bar while Clark worked the waffle maker like a short-order chef. Clark and Charles must have figured out the speakers again because some of the music we listened to in college was softly playing. In short, it was the most domestic scene my kitchen had known in a decade.

Terrifying.

The longing to go in and the urge to run were at war in my brain, but my feet turned to blocks of ice—like some supervillain had frozen me in place in the doorway.

“Bryce!” Clark smiled big. He too looked freshly showered and wore jeans and a T-shirt. I couldn’t help grinning at the image of him cooking in his superhero costume. He poured a cup of coffee into my favorite Wolverine mug—the one with deep gouges in the oversize cup. Holding it out, his smile wavered a bit. The ice locking me in place finally melted, and I stepped forward to grab it.

“Morning.” Clark came closer, and I thought for a second he was going to kiss me. But something in my expression must have warded him off because he pulled back at the last second. “Still take it black?”

Charles snorted. “And motor-oil thick.”

“Hey, start making the coffee, and you can start complaining.” I took a stool at the breakfast bar next to Charles. I didn’t need the coffee—I was already plenty jumpy.

“Hey, I’m happy to have someone else cook for me.” He gestured with his fork at his waffle. “We should have Clark come in on weekends. Do brunch at the bar.”

Clark made a face at that. “No offense, but I do my best cooking for two. Errr... three.”

“Touché.” Charles mangled the word as usual. “And noted. Bryce, you’re an extra wheel. Get out.”

I laughed. I didn’t want to but I laughed anyway. Charles gave me a much more pointed look than usual. “Oh, and by the way, I’ve never been more grateful for my white noise machine. Just saying.”

I was supposed to be the calm and collected one. Unflappable. Clark was the more prudish one who should be blushing and looking away guiltily. But

that wasn't how it went down. I coughed and sputtered in my coffee while Clark placidly grinned and heaped a plate with waffles, eggs, and bacon. He slid the plate in front of me, completely unfazed by the teasing.

"I don't think I can eat all this," I said. Clark grew up on a farm, eating giant breakfasts. The dining hall ladies all loved him at school. I grew up with a mother who preferred to lunch, not breakfast, and a protein shake usually did me till noon.

"See, I'm telling you. Sunday brunch is so big in this town. We open early. Clark tells me how to make these..." Charles helped himself to another waffle. "When do you go back anyway, Clark? We were so slammed last night you didn't really get the full Gotham Coin experience."

"You just want to try some recipes on me." Clark laughed. Charles had long coveted Clark's status as a supertaster who could discern minute differences in a batch of food—back in college, once Tony and Charles and some others moved into a campus apartment, he was always trying recipes on Clark. "And I've got a flight Tuesday, but—"

"You know, I really should get my costume on." I drank the remainder of my coffee in one chug and pushed up from my stool. I had known Clark was leaving. I wasn't stupid. I'd known he was leaving while we were making out and while we were fucking and I'd known it when I woke up, but somehow it still hit me like a medicine ball to the gut. Clark's life wasn't in Portland anymore, and I was no more ready to beg him to make a change than I had been five years ago.

"Thanks for the food," I said on my way out of the room because both my parents would be rolling over in their graves if I didn't make the barest of effort with manners.

"Bryce!" Of freaking course Clark came clattering up the stairs after me. "Bryce, wait."

Was it really only last night that I'd loved the sound of my name on his lips? I hurried ahead to my room. "Gotta get ready."

I stripped off my sweats without looking back at the doorway. I knew he was still there. I could hear his little huffs of breath and smell his soap.

"Can we talk?"

I made a noise that was just this side of "Go away."

“Bryce.” Clark came closer, put a hand on my back. “Are you that upset that I’m flying back to Boston?”

“Nope,” I lied through teeth clenched so tightly, my dentist would be able to put his kids through Yale fixing all the cracks.

“Yes, you are. And we probably should have talked about this last night—”

“We both got what we wanted, right?” I said gruffly.

“No.” Clark surprised me with the firm reply. “Not if you’re going to pull away like this—”

“What did you think? We’d be all holding hands and announcing our coupledness to Charles and Tony this morning?” Oh fuck. I made the mistake of looking at Clark’s face for an instant, long enough to see his eyes turn a sad silver shade and see that, yes, he had been thinking something along those lines.

“No.” Now he was the liar. “But I figured we would *talk*. And I could tell you that I’m coming back in a couple of weeks.”

“Great. You and Charles can trade recipes.”

“I’m coming back for good, Bryce. I have to go back and do the graduation thing and pack up, but I’ve got a visiting professorship at Reed for this coming year—”

“Congrats. What’s happening after this year? Stanford? Caltech? Something in Silicon Valley perhaps?”

Clark sat on the edge of my bed while I pulled on the rest of my costume. “You’re still bitter, aren’t you? You’re bitter that I took the Rhodes—”

“Of course I’m not. You won one of the most prestigious awards anywhere. I was happy for you then and I’m happy for you now.” It was the right thing to say, but the words tasted sour.

“You could have spoken up, you know,” Clark said. “When I asked if you saw a way for it to work.”

“I didn’t,” I said bluntly. “And I don’t now either.”

“You seriously couldn’t do distance for a couple of *weeks*?” Clark held up his hands.

“No, I seriously can’t do a relationship with you.” I didn’t realize until the words were out how much I meant them. My insides felt like a shattered car

windshield, barely holding together, one swift kick from caving into a million pieces.

“Why not?” Clark appeared genuinely befuddled, all wide eyes and upturned hands.

I attached my cape. This was already the single most bizarre conversation of my life. Might as well make it even more bizarre and add the mask. I jammed it on my head. “Because you were right the first time. We’re doomed to hurt each other. Maybe not now, but eventually we will.”

“So let me get this straight. You don’t trust me not to leave and you don’t trust me not to hurt you, so you’ve decided that this terrible, barely civil *acquaintanceship* we’ve had the last several years is preferable to trying for something real?” Clark leaned forward, elbows on knees, looking at up at me in my costume. It would not have been possible to feel more ridiculous than I did at that moment.

I nodded curtly. It was illogical. And I hadn’t really thought about it in those terms up until that moment, but trust Clark to cleave through all the rubble in my mind and find the stone of truth. I would have been perfectly happy to storm off and assume he wasn’t coming back to Oregon. But that was really just the excuse. Clark said once he “could” fall in love with me. But I’d been in love with him for years now, and how could I really trust him? How could I trust myself?

“You’re punishing both of us, and I’m not even sure you know *why*.” Clark followed me as I strode to the door.

He didn’t give up, following me down the stairs and into the kitchen as I tossed the van keys at Charles. “You can take the rental truck. I need to take my bike.”

Short of two hours in the weight room, riding the bike was the best way to shed this restless, almost ill sensation taking hold of me.

“Bryce. Stop.” Clark followed me across the back patio which overlooked the rest of the yard and the large garage. The patio was ringed by a low brick wall with a few taller brick pillars and Clark leaned on one. His feet were bare and I doubted he’d follow me along the rocky path to the garage. Which, ironically, made me feel sicker. Guilt lodged in all the places that should be occupied by a warm breakfast and easy conversation with Clark. “I think this is really about your dad. Bryce, I’m not going to die.”

“Don’t try to analyze me. You’re a mathematician, not a psychologist.” I sped up my steps to get away, but the image of Clark leaning against the pillar, face all reasonable and concerned, lingered even after I entered the garage.

I stuffed my cape and mask in the under-seat storage on the bike. I fumbled my way into my Kevlar motorcycle jacket and jeans over my costume. I was being a total and complete jerk. And truth was, Clark wasn’t that off base. The logical part of my brain knew he was being rational, and I was being crazier than a cartoon villain on the ropes.

I drove away, mind still reeling as I searched for the peace that always came even with a short ride. It didn’t come. Was Clark right? Was this about punishing him for his decision five years earlier? Or was this about me being scared of losing someone?

The wind slammed into my face under my helmet and the bike’s usual soothing vibrations felt like a dental drill, rattling my teeth and making me grip the handlebars tighter than usual.

Out of necessity, I had gotten damn good at being alone. Oh sure, I had the large circle of friends, but soon Tony would probably leave and move in with Karen. Charles seemed like he’d taken up permanent residence, but who knew when he’d find a cute little foodie to call his own and pack up? After my mother’s car accident, it had been just my father and me, but I’d had over half a decade to come to terms with his eventual leaving too. Everyone left in the end. I honestly didn’t know if I had it in me to take a chance only to have it ripped away when Clark too moved on.

Chapter Eight

Clark

I had no idea how long I sat on the brick wall of Bryce's patio. Actually, calling it a patio was a bit like calling *Star Wars* "a movie"—technically true but completely ignorant of scope. It was more of an outdoor room with real furniture and a built-in grill. It was a space meant for parties, not moping.

"Bryce take off?" Charles came out onto the patio and sat in a padded chair near where I was perched. You'd never know it if you saw him take over a kitchen, but Charles was totally a "why stand when you can sit and why sit when you can lounge" sort of guy who didn't expend a lot of energy for anything other than LAN computer gaming parties and cooking. That's why it was a bit surprising that he followed me out here. Jesus. I truly was hard up if Charles thought I needed consoling.

"Yeah."

"Guess sex doesn't solve everything, huh?" Charles asked mildly, almost curiously. I was pretty sure Charles was asexual or somewhere close to it on the spectrum, with sexual relationships being more of a scientific curiosity to him than something he wanted in his own life. He had never dated, nor professed unhappiness about that in all the time I'd known him.

"No." I groaned. "It doesn't. And I knew that. We should have talked..."

"You guys have never been very good at that." He stretched, crossing his feet in front of him.

"What do you mean? We talked all the time in college." I drummed my fingers against the cool bricks.

"About games, yeah. And about projects and about everything other than the fact that you were in love with each other."

"I'm not so sure it was mutual." I didn't dispute the love part, but judging by Bryce's reaction that morning, I wasn't at all certain about what, if anything, he felt.

"Look, if even *I* could see it, you have to trust me. You both fell in love freshman year, and then spent the next three being giant idiots. Did you at least tell him today that you love him?"

I made a sound not unlike the geese that populated the canyon in the middle of campus at Reed.

"I'll take that as a no. You probably went for *logic* and reason." Charles shook his head woefully. "*Math majors*." He said the last like one might say "Shania Twain fans."

"He's the one being illogical. He wouldn't even let me explain my five-year plan..." I trailed off realizing exactly how ridiculous I sounded.

Charles raised a bushy eyebrow. "Really, Clark? Your five-year plan? The dude is still reeling from the death of his dad, has never gotten over you leaving, and has a martyr complex the size of the metro area. Logic is supposed to help that?"

How Charles could see everything so clearly was baffling to me. "So what? I'm supposed to beg? Apologize? Grovel?"

"It's not a multiple choice test, Clark." Charles held up his hands. "How about you try speaking to him like it's a volcano scene?"

"A volcano scene?" He'd lost me.

"You know, in the movies. The scene where one person of the couple is dangling over a fiery pit or has a gun pulled on them or some other danger. And then they both spill their guts and say everything they haven't been able to before."

I blinked. Rapidly. Swallowed hard. "You're really quite brilliant, you know?"

"I know." Charles smiled serenely.

Now the only challenge was finding that courage without dragging Bryce to Mount St. Helens and hoping for another volcanic eruption to trigger truth-telling.

Instead of praying for cataclysmic events, I put on my Superman costume, got my hair into official Man-of-Steel style and headed for the con with Charles. Charles, bless him, made the choice a bit easier by telling me he didn't know about parking the big rental van. I'd learned to drive using a half-ton pickup, so very few driving challenges fazed me.

Parking in the crowded convention center garage really wasn't that big a deal. However, the withering look Bryce gave me when I approached the booth made me feel like I'd rammed a cement pylon.

"I'm here for the pictures," I said a bit too testily in lieu of actually greeting him.

"Thanks," he grunted.

Damn stubborn caveman.

"I'm going to get more shirts from the van." Bryce moved out from behind the counter.

"Need help?" I couldn't resist asking.

"No, thank you." Bryce strode away.

"You two are impossible." Tony rolled his eyes. He was full of good humor this morning. Someone had clearly gotten laid last night judging from how he kept cuddling up to his Wonder Woman girlfriend. No side of awkward for those two.

That's what I want. I'd never seen it so clearly before—I wanted to be a couple with Bryce. A long-term, forever sort of thing. And Charles was right. There was nothing logical about that at all. It wasn't about giving Bryce a list of reasons why we should be together—it was about telling him how I felt, something I hadn't really done five years ago or this morning. I'd been waiting for Bryce to move first, Bryce to say the words, but Charles was right—that wasn't going to happen.

I could bemoan that fact about him, or I could accept I loved him despite his inability to articulate his feelings. Bryce had good reasons to keep his feelings close to his chest. If there were a fiery lava flow separating us, would I really wait for him to admit his feelings first? Did I want to spend the rest of my life with my feelings for Bryce being my kryptonite—my biggest weakness—instead of taking the risk of making them the bedrock of my life?

"I'll be back," I said to Tony and the others. I dodged through the Sunday morning crowd—passing Captain America, The Hulk, Ironman and many small cartoon characters trailing their noncostumed parents.

I want a family with Bryce. The surety of that thought guided my steps. I didn't just want him to give me a chance—I wanted to give him my heart. And in all the words I'd said trying to get Bryce to listen to me, that intent had been

missing. I wanted to talk schedules and trans-continental moves, but I hadn't said the three words that mattered most.

I caught up with Bryce in the parking garage. He was looking around, and his blank expression seemed totally lost. I figured only part of that was our argument—he'd stalked off without checking with Charles to see where we'd parked.

"Need help finding the van?" I asked. "Or the keys?"

"What are you—? Never mind. Yes."

"You could have tried asking Charles or me where we parked." I pointed toward a space several rows over. "Follow me."

The van was parked by a wall decorated with colorful graffiti. The Sunday con crowd was just starting to arrive, making the garage way busier than I wanted for this talk.

"You can give me the keys now," Bryce said as we neared the van. "Please."

"Nice to know you still have your manners." It probably wasn't the best opening, but I was still working up that we're-all-about-to-die courage.

"Clark..." He held out his hand for the keys, and it was the quaver in his voice that did it.

"I love you," I said. "I love you and I should have told you that this morning when you were trying to walk away." Yeah, the memory of him walking away and not even *talking* still stung.

Bryce's eyes darted around and his voice lowered. "That's the sex talking—"

"I fell in love with you November fifteenth, freshman year, at two o'clock in the morning. I had a paper due in six hours."

"And your laptop broke," Bryce said slowly.

"Yes. And you were trying to sleep, but I'd tried everything to get it working again. I finally asked you for help, and you ended up pretty much disassembling the entire machine on our floor."

"And that made you love me?" Bryce rubbed his jaw.

"You were cursing at the hardware, and I apologized for keeping you awake, and you looked up at me and you smiled this most ridiculous smile..." I

could still picture it, pure devilish delight. “And you said, ‘This is the most fun I’ve had in weeks.’ And something in me just *knew*.”

“But Derek? And the other guys you dated?”

“I was waiting for you to make a move,” I whispered. “I waited all freshman year for you to try *something*, but you didn’t, so I decided I was imagining the chemistry, and that you were supposed to be my best friend. I kept hoping the feelings would go away, but they didn’t. They only got stronger. And I got more scared of ruining our friendship.”

“Then you got the Rhodes.” Bryce sighed.

“Then I got the Rhodes,” I agreed. “And all I could see was a disastrous breakup and me losing my best friend in the process. And all I could think about was how awful it would be if it was just getting off for you and me losing my heart.”

“You already had mine,” Bryce said, voice raspy and low.

“Pardon?” I wasn’t sure if I’d heard him right.

“You had mine. I don’t have a precise moment like you—I just know that I wanted to jump you when you were first unpacking in our room, but you were all about *dating* and *rules*, and I knew what a hellacious mistake it would be for us to hook up. And then one day I didn’t want to hook up.”

“You didn’t?” He had me more twisted around than the cape whipping around behind me. I couldn’t have cared less for the shape of my costume at that moment.

“No. I *wanted* to date, and I wanted to follow all your rules. And that scared me even worse. And then one day I realized that losing your friendship would be the worst thing of all. But you had my heart, even though I kind of wanted it back.” Bryce continued rubbing at his face, like he couldn’t believe the words he was letting come out of his mouth.

“I should have stayed,” I said, finally giving voice to the thought that had plagued me for five years. “I should have told you how I really felt. And your dad was sick. I knew you couldn’t leave the area. I should have—”

“I never would have forgiven myself.” Bryce slumped against the van. “Let you miss Oxford? No way. But yeah, maybe we *both* should have spoken up. Been more honest about what we were feeling. Worked something out.”

I nodded. My chest felt like it might crack in two from the force of wishing for a time-travel machine. “Because in the end, I still lost my best friend like I’d feared and, Bryce, that’s what I miss the most. I miss *you*.”

“I missed you too.” Bryce’s voice was a charred whisper grating against the concrete floor. “So much.”

“And I’m not going away,” I said firmly. “I’m taking the visiting professor gig, but I’m also working with some people on a start-up of an app for health care workers using my modeling work from MIT. The goal is to get a company off the ground...” I was rambling, so I took a deep breath. “Bottom line: I’m not leaving. And I *need* you to believe that. I know I’m asking you to trust me here, but even if you don’t want me, I’m sticking around.”

“But you’re racking up awards right and left as one of the most hotshot young mathematicians. There have been magazine articles about you, for Pete’s sake.”

“You’ve kept track of me?” I couldn’t help but smile.

Bryce coughed. “Maybe.”

“Did any of those articles say I *have* to be based in a certain zip code? They talked about my skills, sure, but they didn’t get into how much I miss it here.”

“I wouldn’t want you settling.” Bryce scratched his neck and studied the scarred floor of the parking structure.

“I wouldn’t be settling. I’d be getting everything I’ve always wanted.”

He was quiet a long moment. Too long.

“What do *you* want, Bryce? What would make *you* happy?”

My hands clenched, whole body tensing. Even my feet inside my red boots curled up, everything riding on his reply.

Chapter Nine

Bryce

Clark was waiting for me to say something. More precisely, Clark had been waiting years for me to say something. Do something. And I still didn't know if I could.

"I know it's scary," Clark said in soothing tones.

"I'm not scared," I lied.

"Well, I'm terrified." He laughed nervously. "Completely petrified."

"What if we've both changed too much?" It seemed my fears were tumbling out whether I gave the words permission or not.

"I'm not worried about that," Clark said, reaching for my hand. "I know the guy I fell in love with. And I've *tried* to get over you. I really have."

I growled a little. I didn't like the thought of the guys he'd dated in his quest to move on.

"And I know that if we don't try now, we'll *both* regret it for the rest of our lives. Sure, there's the risk that we won't work out. Maybe you've developed some super-obnoxious new habits—"

I snorted.

"—or vice versa. But that's a risk we have to take."

"I don't like risk," I admitted.

"Bryce, you ride a motorcycle, you opened a bar which is one of the riskiest investments, and you routinely do workouts that would risk injury to lesser beings."

Oh God. I really was going to have to spell it out, wasn't I. "None of that involves *feelings*." I felt slightly nauseous just saying the words.

"Oh, you mean *emotional* risk." His face softened and he grabbed my other hand too.

"People leave." My voice came out all clogged. "They don't even mean to, but they do. And it cuts me up inside, and I *hate* that feeling. I *hate* missing people—"

“Sssh.” Clark brushed a kiss across my cheek. “I know. And none of us ever know how much time we have. I should know. Even the best mathematical model can’t predict tragedy.”

“I couldn’t stand it if something happened to you,” I whispered against his ear.

“Does it help if I tell you I feel the same way? I’d go crazy. But I’d also go crazy if I have to spend the rest of my life watching you be alone and unhappy because you’re scared.”

I hadn’t thought of it that way. I pictured a future where I watched Clark date other people, hang out within our friendship circle, never again mentioning the pull between us. A future where we were mere acquaintances, and I never again got to see how silver his eyes got late at night or hear his satisfied laugh when he won a game level. A future where I knew he was fucking someone else while I stayed in my little bubble, reluctant to even tell someone what I needed. A future of casual hookups and no blanket sharing, couch cuddling, or just *being* with someone.

I didn’t like that future very much at all.

“Maybe being scared together is the only solution,” I said at last.

“Sometimes you just have to don the cape and pray you fly.” Clark laughed, a lot of relief tingeing his voice. “But I think it’s easier when you have a partner.”

“Partner in crime fighting don’t you mean?” I laughed because I needed to lighten things up before the burning in my sinuses became unbearable. “We are a *very* unlikely duo.”

“Shut up and kiss me,” Clark commanded, just enough edge to his voice to get me to leap over the last of my fear.

I wrapped my arms around him, stretching to cover the difference in our heights. A gust in the parking garage caught both of our capes, making them swirl around us.

And thus, on the second day of the comic con I found myself in a Batman costume kissing not just Superman, but the guy of my dreams. A week ago, I never could have seen this moment coming. Heck, two days ago I thought I might never see Clark Kenmore again, and here I was kissing him. And not just kissing him, but embracing a future with him. I’d never, ever admit it, but it’s

possible it was the most Hollywood-style kiss of my life, complete with Clark practically lifting me off my feet, one of mine kicking out behind me. I had a feeling life with Clark was going to keep me perpetually slightly off kilter.

One year later

“You almost ready?” Clark came bounding into the kitchen through the patio door, dogs fast at his heels.

Never going to be ready. I had spent all morning—okay—all darn year getting ready for this moment, and now that Clark was here and everything was in place, I found myself at a complete loss for words. Luckily, Clark seemed oblivious to the strange tension making my chest feel too small.

“Can’t believe it’s time for the con again already.”

“It’s because you’ve been on professor time,” I grumbled. “All that grading has your brains scrambled.”

“Oh! You made breakfast!” The smile on his face was worth the effort I’d gone to.

“I can cook... some,” I said. Clark did a fair amount of our cooking. I did a fair amount of ordering takeout and wheedling meals out of Charles, but I *could* cook too. Today was special enough that I’d wanted to do something out of the ordinary for Clark and dusting off my mother’s quiche recipe for an early brunch seemed fitting.

I’d been busy while Clark had been out for his run with the twin terrors and had even set the table in the eating nook off the kitchen. Krypto and Ace sniffed the air like they too might be getting bacon.

“Go lie down,” I said without a lot of force behind the words. I knew they wouldn’t. They listened to Clark (but only sometimes) because he took them for long runs on the trails around town and bought them pricey snacks at Portland Market. We’d had the pair of Lab-mix puppies about two months, and during that time, they’d been the most expensive impulse purchase ever—destroying a couch, part of a fence, and somehow still worming their way into our lives. The rescue folks tried to convince us that they’d keep each other company while we were at work, and one look at Clark’s face had told me they were *both* coming home. He wasn’t about to split up such a tight friendship.

Home. It had been several years since this had truly been a home, a place where a family lived and played and grew. And as much trouble as the dogs were, I wouldn't trade any of it. Which was the whole point of the breakfast.

"Is it really one year today?" Of course, Mr. Exact hadn't forgotten what today was. He sat down at the table, dogs muscling past the chairs to lie at his feet.

"Yup." My throat felt thick.

"I love you." He gave me a very indulgent smile. "Thank you."

"For breakfast?"

"Well that too, but thank you for choosing us. Thank you for taking a chance."

"It paid off," I said gruffly.

Clark gave me a warm look, one I recognized well, his eyes turning into silvery blue beacons. "Think we might have time for a shower after breakfast?"

"Yeah." The skin on the back of my neck heated. When Tony moved out, we remodeled the master and moved in my king and two big dog beds. It had been time. And we put a four-headed shower with separate temperature controls in the bathroom. Clark was in heaven, but the look he was giving me told me he was thinking more about the lube in the shower than the new features. And I was okay with that, far more than I was a year ago. I had an incredible, *genius*, hot boyfriend who made me happier than I'd been in years and whom I loved fucking me every chance we got. I didn't need to go wearing a "Team Bottom" shirt around our friends or anything, but I was much more okay with liking what I liked now.

"Hey, what's this?" Clark pointed at a little box next to his silverware. His finger hovered above it like he was afraid something in it might leap out and bite him.

"Something I want you to wear with your costume." I studied my quiche like it was the most interesting mingling of egg and dairy in the history of the world.

"A new cape? It's much too small for that," he teased. I could see out the corner of my eye that he still hadn't touched the box.

"I like your current cape just fine," I muttered. *Open it.*

“Too small for boots, although mine are wearing a bit thin—”

“You can have all the boots you want if you’ll just open it!” I couldn’t hold it in any longer.

“Okay, okay.” Clark laughed, but his laugh had a nervous edge to it. I finally brought myself to look at him as he opened the box. “A... ring?”

“Um, yeah.” My hands shook against the table. It was a simple, heavy platinum band, but the light etching on it reminded me of my tats as well as some of Clark’s complex models. “Your costume doesn’t have gloves like mine, and I figured your hands would be really bare, and people might get the wrong idea...”

“And what idea might that be?” His voice was light but the tension around his eyes gave away his own nerves.

“That you’re up for grabs. Gay-pride Superman’s been popular at the other cons we’ve gone to. Everyone wants a picture with you. And this time I want that in the picture too.” I pointed at the ring.

“I see.” Clark raised an eyebrow at me. “You’re going to have to help me out here, Bryce. Any particular reason that ring needs to be in the pictures? You’re not thinking I’m going to run off with the first Larry Lane who winks at me right?”

Gah. He was totally going to make me say it. “I think we should get married.”

“We *should* or you *want* to?” Clark’s forehead creased adorably. “Because if it’s just you thinking you should make an honest man of me and the kiddos, we’re totally fine freeloading here indefinitely.”

“Fine. I *want* to marry you. I want to marry you because I trust you to stick around and not leave me, and because all of our friends will kill us if there’s not a big party soon—”

“There’s an excellent reason.” Clark laughed kind of shakily. “I think they’re still recovering from Tony and Karen’s wedding. I know I’m still recovering from wearing Stormtrooper gear for four hours.”

“How about we agree right now, no Star Wars cosplay wedding?” I laughed.

“How about you actually ask me?” Clark said quite cheekily.

“Will you marry me?” I swallowed hard. “Ooops. Forgot this part.” I slid from my chair to kneel beside him. “There. That’s better. Will you marry me?”

“Yes. Now get up, you goof.” He tugged me to standing, then stood himself, kissing me soundly. Gradually the kiss morphed from something celebratory to something hotter, more primal, and I had a feeling breakfast was rapidly cooling, but couldn’t summon up the energy to care. I had a future to worry about.

The End

Author's Note

Portland does indeed have several Comic Con conventions each year. I combined the best of these events to make the fictional PDX Comic Con for Bryce and Clark to attend. All characters are fictional, and any resemblance to people living or dead is coincidental. If you enjoyed the Portland setting, you might enjoy my Portland Heat series of novellas as well. And look for more geeks and nerds from me in a new series launching with *Holiday Upgrade* in late 2015.

Author Bio

Annabeth Albert grew up sneaking romance novels under the bed covers. Now, she devours all subgenres of romance out in the open—no flashlights required! When she's not adding to her keeper shelf, she's a multi-published Pacific Northwest romance writer.

Emotionally complex, sexy, and funny stories are her favorites both to read and to write. Annabeth loves finding happy endings for a variety of pairings and is a passionate gay rights supporter. In between searching out dark heroes to redeem, she works a rewarding day job and wrangles two toddlers.

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