

LOVE IS AN OPEN ROAD



Don't Read in the Closet 2015

LOVE YOU MORE

Sienna Bishop

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

LOVE YOU MORE

By Sienna Bishop

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.

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

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Photo Description

Two men, short dark hair, no tattoos, shown from the waist up only. They appear to be naked and are clasped in a tight embrace. No faces are shown.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I've been hurt badly. In my first month away from home, enjoying newfound independence on my college campus, I was brutally raped by a stranger. I had barely begun my homosexual exploration, kissing and some hand jobs, with a few men who were also experimenting, when it happened 7 years ago. I have not been able to enjoy sexual relations with another man ever since. It has affected every one of my romantic relationships and I am sick and tired of being alone and afraid. I have decided to ask my best friend, a man I first met in junior high and trust with every part of my being, to help me overcome my fear of intimacy and sex. Yes, he is straight, but his love for me is strong and he suffers along with me when my fears arise. My hope is that he can help me, taking baby steps, enjoy the wonders of sex by touching me and loving me. I know that it will hurt when our intimate time together is over, but I'm not going to think about that right now. I need the overwhelming dread and fear of other men stricken from my mind before I can worry about anything else.

GFY, hurt/healing/comfort, no cheating, emotional sex as hot as fire and a HEA. I'd like to see these MCs well matched and versatile in the bedroom. I leave everything else up to up, my dearest author

Sincerely,

Gigi

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: friends to lovers, hurt/comfort, first time, gay for you, college, military

Content Warnings: non-explicit rape description after the fact

Word Count: 51,929

Author's Note

Gigi's lovely prompt called for Deacon to tell this story, but he wasn't feeling talkative and Tucker was, so that's how it ended up. Also, because Tucker isn't exactly a get-to-the-point kind of guy, the story starts with the beginning of their friendship, several years before the action in the prompt. I tweaked the timeline a bit to fit better with their lives. I hope you enjoy their story.

Acknowledgements

I'd like to offer a big thanks to my betas, Goodreads author Anna Birmingham and new member Teri, both friends from my former life as a fanfic addict. They were wonderful at keeping me on track and focused when I really wanted to throw my laptop under a bus. Also, mega thanks to Jul and Debbie for such amazing editing work. They blew me away with their professionalism and attention to detail. Big hands of applause and air kisses to all my wonderful helpers!!

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Prologue

I'm not gay.

I've been a womanizer most of my life—which I'm not proud of—and a marine for the last six years—which I'm very proud of. I've been a mediocre poker player, a fair superior officer, a pain in the ass to my mom since the day I was born, and a surprisingly good lawn boy during high school.

But I've also been a best friend, probably my most noteworthy achievement in life. When Deacon, who was assaulted in college, finally admitted that he needed help conquering some pretty heavy-duty intimacy issues, I immediately volunteered to help him. It didn't matter to me that I wasn't gay, and I never stopped to think about how it would affect me afterward. All I cared about was helping him get on with his life. Beyond that, I guess I just figured that after walking away scot-free from a hundred other beds, a few nights in his wouldn't be any different.

About that, I was very wrong.

Deacon's dating now, which I assume means fucking because he told me once that guys don't like to go out with guys who won't go to bed with them. Since he goes out *a lot*, I'm guessing we were successful. And honestly, I'm happy for him. I'm glad that he's finally moved on with his life. Nobody deserves to be happy more than him.

But now I really need to get on with my life too. It's been five months since that weekend when I tiptoed out of his apartment at four a.m., sure the memories would fade and I'd go right back to my old ways, but it hasn't exactly worked out like that for me. More to the point, I haven't gotten off with a single other person since then. Not one. That's the longest I've gone without since I was thirteen years old.

At first I tried to tell myself I was just taking a break from meaningless hookups, or the timing was bad, or I didn't need the distractions. But five months is too long for lame excuses, which is why I'm holed up tonight in a sleazy bar with a hot chick who's left no doubt about the fact that she wants to fuck me in the parking lot. We're pretending to dance, but she's got her tongue in my mouth and her hands on my ass and she's grinding her pussy on my cock like we're shooting our own personal sex tape. I'm trying damn hard to want her. Six months ago, I would've had her flat on her back an hour ago. But the

person I was back then apparently doesn't exist anymore, because all I can see is the exit sign, and I know in my heart that I'm pissing in the wind telling myself nothing's changed.

The song ends and I disentangle myself from the girl, peel off some cash for the bartender, and head out to my truck. My bags are already packed. I can be on the road in half an hour if I want to, be back at Deacon's place by tomorrow evening if I push it. And yes, I realize with no surprise, that's what I want most of all. It's been five months and I'm done trying to fool myself. I left my heart at his door, and it's time to get it back.

Chapter One

First day at a new school always sucks, but starting eighth grade in November is the worst. Everybody's already got their thing going on, and a new kid is about as welcome as a rash. But me and my mom had just moved into her new husband's house—his name was Bob, but I'd nicknamed him Cheater because that's how he and my mom got together—and I had no say in anything. This was a topic we'd had several brutal fights about in the last few months, and we'd just finished up another one when she kicked me out of the car in the parking lot.

So I walked into homeroom stewing in my misery, saw the room was almost full, most of the kids there already, just a few empty seats left. I was looking them over, trying to figure out who looked like somebody I could deal with and not have to kill, when the teacher said, "You're Tucker Reed, right?"

Everybody got kinda quiet then, looking up at me standing between the door and the teacher's desk, and I could hear them all whispering "new kid" back and forth across the aisles. I could feel their eyes on me. It made my skin crawl, made me want to run right the fuck out of there and keep going till I got to the river, where I wanted to dive in, sink to the bottom, and never come out.

I tried to keep all that hidden, though, because I didn't want anyone to know what a pussy I was. I just squared my jaw and said, "Yeah," my voice cracked and rusty coming out of my paper-dry throat.

The teacher gave me a look that said she could already see I was gonna be trouble. After a few seconds, she shook her head and said, "Find a seat." Her voice was flat and cold, no smile or nothing, and she went right back to grading papers or whatever she was doing. I was on my own.

At this point I had to look at them again, a bunch of kids I'd never seen before who were already judging me. They could see the way my clothes were too new and didn't really fit me right, and how my hair was sticking up in the back because I could never get that cowlick to chill. Even the mud on my ratty kicks flagged me as an outsider, since I'd stepped in the boggy spot in the school yard everybody else had missed.

I pegged the troublemakers in the back corner, figuring I'd end up there eventually, but I knew better than to just walk into that crowd uninvited. Then I saw this one kid look up from the middle of the room. He had a kinda blank

expression on his face—no judgment, no expectations—like he'd really been so sucked into his giant book that he hadn't even noticed I was there till that very second. He glanced from me to the empty seat beside him, twisted his lips into a sorta half smile, then went back to his novel. It wasn't a red-carpet welcome but was better than anything else I'd seen and all the invitation I needed. I flopped into the seat. Three seconds later the bell rang. The teacher slapped her notebook closed and told everybody to shut up and pay attention. It was just another day in paradise.

I rode my bike to school the next day and got to the classroom early. Most of the other kids were hanging around in the halls talking to their friends but I wasn't a part of them yet, and not interested in trying to fake it. The guy from yesterday was already at his desk, reading his book again. I didn't know if that meant he didn't have any friends either, or if he just liked to read more than he liked to hang out with the cool people, laughing at inside jokes and trashing the new kids and other losers.

I took a quick peek at the cover as I slid into my seat, saw it was one of the Harry Potter books—not that it mattered to me because I never read anything unless somebody made me. My culture consisted of bad TV and playing video games on my PlayStation. I used to hang out at the Y, shooting hoops and smoking with the guys, but that ended once I moved to Cheater's house in the suburbs. The Y was all the way across town, way too far for me to go on my bike.

I'd stopped at a convenience store on the way in, got a giant cup of coffee, and tried to buy some cigs too, but stores in this part of town wouldn't sell me any. I was jonesing pretty bad for a smoke, my leg twitching in the aisle like a junkie's. If the teacher gave me any shit about the coffee, I might just get up and walk out, but right then she had her head down at her desk, doing her own thing and ignoring us.

He kept reading for a minute, ignoring me till my tapping finally drew his attention. He flicked a curious look from my leg up to my face, then cocked his head and asked, "What's up with that? If you're fixing to have a meltdown or something, maybe you better sit someplace else."

I just stared at him for a minute, and he shrugged like he didn't really care if I talked to him or not. Suddenly I wanted at least one person in the world to like me, and at that moment he was my only candidate. His expression was open

and easy, no judgment anywhere that I could see. I figured it could go my way if I didn't fuck up, so I said the first thing I could think of. "You got a cigarette?"

He laughed and shook his head. "Dude. I'm thirteen. I've got some Twizzlers if they'll help."

I wasn't gay, but I wasn't brain-dead or blind either, and when this guy smiled at me I realized he had to be one of the hottest boys in class. This made me wonder even more why he was sitting in the classroom reading Harry Potter and offering the new kid candy. He should've been out in the hall with the popular folks, ruling over the other guys and flirting with the girls, trying to score a make-out session between classes.

I wasn't bad looking either. I knew this because the girls at my old school would hang out and let me get dirty with them sometimes after ball games or whatever stupid dance my mom made me go to. The girls at the Y would go further, and, yeah, I took advantage every chance I got, but looks-wise, I wasn't in his league. I was too tall, too skinny, and my hair hadn't figured out which way it wanted to go. This kid, though, had thick brown hair that looked like he'd just crawled out of bed, but I knew it was on purpose because I could see the gel in it. And he was filled out, not a jock but not a beanpole like me either. His eyes were this deep brown like a Hershey bar, and he had crazy thick eyelashes and no pimples which—for eighth grade—made him pretty much perfect.

I was impressed, which pissed me off a little. I was hoping he might be a friend, but all the perfection made me suspicious. He seemed almost too good to be true, whereas I was the most imperfect boy in the world, or at least in the state of Alabama. I didn't see any way a friendship with him was gonna work out for me.

But either he didn't see my mess or just wasn't ready to drop me on my ass yet, because he reached down, pulled a baggie of red Twizzlers out of his backpack, and handed it over. "Help yourself, man. But you better ditch that coffee before the bell rings," he tacked on, nodding at my cup. "No drinks in class except water bottles."

I could take the hit about the coffee off him better than the teacher, but I still felt obligated to complain. I grumbled, "Fuckers," and sucked the rest of it down even though it wasn't hot anymore and tasted like ass.

I made an awful face at the cup, and he laughed like he thought I was funny. His laugh was this pure, happy sound that made me feel about a thousand times better than anything else that had happened to me in the last year and a half since my mom got caught coming out of her boss's house on her lunch hour and turned my whole fucking world upside down.

My other friends hadn't dumped me or anything. Most of their moms were fucking around too, so my new status didn't ripple those waters at all. Even when things had been good with my folks, my old life had been tainted and sleazy, and I guess on some level I knew it. Me and the guys spent our weekends hanging out in the shadows in seedy parts of town, bumming cigarettes off each other and drinking beer when we could get it because we didn't have anything better to do. Our folks didn't know where we were and didn't care, as long as they didn't have to bail us out of anything.

That's just the way my life was. I didn't hate it but this guy with his bright smile and his friendly laugh and his handsome face... it was like he was offering me a fresh start along with his friendship. For the first time, the thought occurred to me that maybe I didn't have to pick up where I'd left off—dodging cops and street thugs. Maybe my life could go in a different, and better, direction. He was wholesome and smart and everything I usually avoided like the plague, but this time I had no urge to run because he also gave me my first glimmer of hope that I might not have to end up in jail or at the bottom of the river after all.

Chapter Two

His name was Deacon James. We spent the next couple of weeks bonding over Twizzlers, energy drinks, and cafeteria lunches. He tried to explain Harry Potter to me, and we talked about our favorite video games. I noticed the other kids watching us for the first few days, confused expressions on their faces like they couldn't figure out why he was talking to me, the bad-boy outsider in the beat-up leather jacket and worn-out jeans. I quit wearing the new stuff Mom bought me after about two days because it didn't feel like me, and I could only deal with so much change at one time.

The kids from the *in* crowd sometimes talked to Deacon when I was around, and he was always friendly and nice to everybody. Eventually I figured out he was just a nice person in a way you usually don't find in kids, or *anybody*, really. Most people in my world seemed to be carrying around a shitload of baggage and hang-ups and crap, giving them all hard edges and bad attitudes. But not Deacon. He was just motoring through life, enjoying the experience and not getting too wound up about much of anything.

“So, Tuck, how far have you gone with a girl?”

We were at his grandparents' lake house for Thanksgiving break. I'd spent turkey day with Mom and Cheater. Cheater's daughter and her geeky boyfriend had come too, making it about the most awkward holiday meal ever. Thank God Deacon invited me to go away with him on Friday. My mom was so happy to get rid of me; she said yes as soon as I asked, didn't even think twice.

It was Saturday night, and we were in our room at the cabin, both of us sitting on the bottom bunk, him reading a new book, *Artemis Fowl*, and me thumbing my Game Boy, trying to get the hang of the Harry Potter game I'd borrowed from him. By this time we'd talked about all kinds of stuff, but girl talk was different, more personal. This was also our first sleepover, and I was ready to take it to the next level if he was. It wasn't like I had anything to be ashamed of.

“I got a couple of hand jobs right before we moved,” I said, not looking up, still in the game, but I wanted to know about him too, so I added, “How 'bout you?”

He didn't say anything for a minute, and I crapped out in the game and looked up. He was staring at me like I was some mystical creature from one of his books. "Seriously? You got a *couple* of hand jobs? From a girl?"

I smirked. "No, dude, from a parking meter!" He rolled his eyes and I said, "Of course from a girl, dork. Who else would I get one from?"

"I don't know. Maybe a hooker?"

"Hookers are girls too."

"But we're kids, Tucker. How old was she?"

I shrugged, trying to remember, not sure if I'd ever really even known. "Fourteen, maybe? Fifteen?"

He looked more bummed than happy for me, and I felt a moment of true fear, like maybe he wouldn't want to be friends with me anymore. "City kids get started early, man. Nothing else to do," I explained, trying to make myself seem a little less slimy in his eyes.

He took a minute to absorb that information, thumbing his book about evil fairies, and I could imagine he was feeling the giant gap between my world and his. I certainly was, and it was terrifying. I'd only known him for a few weeks, but already my whole life felt different because of him. The last thing I wanted was for him to kick me to the curb now, disgusted by all the inappropriate shit I'd done.

Finally he leaned his head back against the wall, the light from the lamp shining on one of his cheeks, the other side of his face in shadow. "I went to a party with some kids from the neighborhood. We played Spin the Bottle, and I kissed Hallie Winters. I wanted to touch her boobs but I was scared she'd freak out."

I swallowed and tried to think back to when I'd wanted to touch boobs for the first time. It hadn't actually been that long ago. Summer had been really eventful for me, sexually speaking. Before that, getting to touch a girl anywhere had been a huge big deal. Since I didn't know Hallie Winters, I couldn't guess how she would've felt if he'd gone for it, so I just told him my general experience.

"Most girls are okay with it, as long as you go slow. Don't try to force it, you know... and don't squeeze too hard. They hate that!" I laughed to show I was speaking from bad experience. He smiled, but it was weak, and I added, "I

bet she woulda liked it. I heard Connie from third period talking about you the other day. She thinks you're hot. I bet she'd let you for sure..."

He smiled, showing a little more confidence, but then he ducked his head, as if embarrassed again. "Do you have any condoms?"

"Duh. Of course," I said, nodding. "You planning on needing one soon? You gonna call Connie up when we get back home, go for the big time?" I grinned and poked him in the leg with my toe.

"No, ass, I just want to see one. I've never seen one up close before."

That wasn't what I was expecting to hear at all. "Seriously? You never even got one out of a vending machine, just to check it out?"

I'd bought my first one when I was nine. Of course, sex was in my face a lot more than it was in his. His parents were happily married and did their thing in private. Mine were a hot mess, and their fucked-up shit had oozed out onto me more times than I wanted to think about.

He shook his head and I couldn't quite get my mind wrapped around that. How could he never have been curious until now? "How come?"

"I just never did. I didn't care about it before, but now I do." He sounded defensive, his flare of confidence all gone. I didn't want to freak him out with more questions, so I shut my mouth, scooted off the bed, fished my wallet out of my duffel, and flicked him a foil pack.

The condom landed on his thigh, and he stared at it for a minute before he palmed it, then brought it up close to his face to study. He was smart—a superstar in math, and way smarter than me in everything—so even though I was worried he'd think I was too trashy to hang out with anymore, it felt good to find something I knew more about than he did. It evened us out some.

"Can I open it? Is it your only one?"

"No, man, go for it," I said. The freakishness of us being in bed together and him playing with a condom was not lost on me. We weren't actually *in* the bed, though. He had the quilt pulled up to his waist but I was sitting on top of it with my back to the wall, my long legs sprawled everywhere. We were both wearing sleep pants and sweatshirts, and it wasn't like he was going to whip his dick out and put the thing on.

He ripped open the package, sniffed it, and wrinkled his nose. "Gross," he said, just like the kid he was.

I laughed. “No shit!”

He toyed with it for a minute, then stuck two fingers up in the air and rolled it down on them, staring at it like a science experiment.

“If you wanna try it on for reals, take it to the john, please,” I muttered. He grinned and pretended to reach for his crotch. I covered my face and yelled, “Gross!” Then I kicked at his leg and we both busted out laughing. He tossed the condom at me, and I batted it away like it was a rubber snake. We tussled for another minute, then broke out in a full-blown pillow fight, an excellent distraction from all the weirdness.

The next morning when I climbed down from my bunk to take a leak, I stepped on the condom, laying on the floor by the bed. Relieved to find it, I flushed it and the wrapper down the toilet. The last thing I needed was for his parents to think I was a bad influence—or even worse, that I was getting kinky with their boy. He was the best thing I had going in my life, and I didn’t want to take any chances on fucking us up. Unlike my folks, his mom and dad were all up in his business, and I’d answered more parental questions since meeting them than I had in my whole life. My sex life was a side of me they didn’t need to know about, like *ever*, but especially not before we were even in high school.

Chapter Three

I didn't end up getting another hand job until the following summer, when I spent a couple of weeks at my dad's place and I could get back over to the Y. It was with the same girl, Cassidy, and she said she'd missed me. We made out a couple of times but it was weird more than hot, like I'd forgotten what to do or something. My old friends were still hanging there, and they let me back into the gang. But I wasn't the same person I'd been when I left, so it was weird with them too. We smoked some jays, listened to tunes, and laid around by the pool at Cassidy's apartment. It was pretty much the exact same as the summer before, but I was restless and bored and nothing felt right. I didn't fit anymore. My dad had a girlfriend who didn't like me even a little bit, so hanging out at his apartment sucked too. So although I still hated living with Mom and Cheater, I was glad when my two weeks were up and I could go back to their place.

Cheater hooked me up with a decent lawnmower, so I mowed yards in the neighborhood almost every day during the week, and ended up spending most every weekend with Deacon. His parents took us to the lake house a lot. I tanned up good but his skin got much darker. When we played in the water and his trunks rode down, the color change was so stark it looked like half of him was painted. I never said anything—it wasn't a big thing I obsessed on—just something I noticed that was unique about him. I'd never seen a tan line like his on anyone else.

At night we watched movies and played video games, and he read. I started one of his old Harry Potter books just to see what all the fuss was about. I figured it'd take me about a year to get through since it was so thick, but I was surprised to find myself getting caught up in the story like everybody else. Before long I was asking him for the second book.

The next summer my dad wanted to go see his folks, so we spent a whole two weeks on a little dairy farm in Virginia. Things had gotten better with my dad—he'd wised up and dumped the chick he'd been dating. She was like fifteen years younger than him... it was fucking weird.

I'd bought a cell phone with my yard money, and me and Deacon talked almost every day. One day my dad cornered me, wanting to get the skinny on

me and girls. I told him I wasn't seeing anybody—which wasn't totally true—but I didn't have a for-real girlfriend, and I didn't want to tell him about what I did have. The whole thing was awkward, and I could tell he thought I was lame. I was grateful when my phone rang, giving me an excuse to bail on him so I could talk to Deacon.

For the next few days, Dad gave me strange looks whenever Deacon came up in conversation, till one day Deacon called while we were in the car, and I couldn't get away from my dad to talk. Dad turned the radio off and made it real obvious he was eavesdropping, but I just rolled my eyes at him, because it's not like we were scheming anything. When he heard us talking about normal teenage-boy stuff—the kids at school, whether we were gonna try out for football, even books and *girls*—he finally got over whatever bug had crawled up his ass about us. Maybe he thought we were doing drug deals or something. Funny how he never got suspicious about what was going on with the losers I used to hang out with, but once I was hanging out with somebody decent, that's when he decided to get interested.

I was with Deacon the first time he used a condom for what it was meant to be used for. Not like *with him* with him, but on the scene. We were at the lake house the summer before our senior year. I'd been bumping nasties for a couple of years by then, but he hadn't done it yet, and since he was seventeen, he was starting to sweat it. His folks had let us invite a few friends for the Fourth of July weekend, and one of them was this girl Madison, who'd made it pretty clear she wanted in Deacon's pants.

It was weird because he was all nervous and tweaking before they did the deed. Afterward, though, he didn't say much, not even when we were in our bunk beds later—me up top, him on the bottom, lights out—and I got a chance to ask him about it.

“So how was it? She rock your world or what?” I was teasing but serious too, because I knew this was a big deal for him. I didn't expect a bunch of details—Deacon wasn't a kiss-and-tell kinda guy—but I figured he'd at least have a little something to say.

He stayed quiet for a minute, but I knew he'd heard me. We'd had a million conversations in those beds and he always heard me. At last he said, “Yeah, I guess,” his voice low and honey smooth, but he might as well've been talking about a new flashlight for all the excitement he put into it.

“Seriously? That’s the best you got?”

“What do you want me to say, Tucker? It was fucking. You’ve done it. You know what it’s like.”

“Uhhh... *yeah*, and even if it’s not shit hot, it’s still way better than *not* fucking, right?”

He kept quiet for another minute. When he finally said, “Yeah, it was great,” I could tell he was lying. I wanted to ask him what went wrong, but I didn’t want to embarrass him. I figured he’d tell me when he was ready. He did, but it took him a whole year to get up the courage to do it.

The next summer, we were back at the lake house, just the two of us. It was our last weekend together before I went off to boot camp. Deacon had gotten accepted at the University of Tennessee, in Knoxville, and he was leaving a few weeks later. He’d tried real hard to get me to go with him, but I was sick of school, and I didn’t have the bucks for tuition anyway. Mowing yards had gotten me a decent pickup but it couldn’t stretch to cover tuition.

Mom didn’t want me to go into the military either. She said Cheater would pay part of my way, and I could get loans for the rest. But I didn’t want any more money from him, and I didn’t want to start out my life floating in debt either. The Marine Corps would pay me to go to school, teach me something cool, and get me the fuck out of Alabama. I knew it wouldn’t be easy, and I’d probably end up eating sand for a few years, but that was okay. I wouldn’t be the first guy to do it, and I sure wouldn’t be the last.

Deacon didn’t like my plan one bit, but we’d already fought about it and made our peace. He got why the military was the best path for me, and we were done talking about it. Our last night there, he handed me a beer and headed out to the pier. I snagged a bottle of Jack off the counter and followed along, figuring shit was about to get real, and we might need it. I knew something had been bothering him... he’d been quiet for weeks. Not the peaceful, Zen kind of quiet I was used to with him, but the uneasy kind that meant he wanted to talk about something and didn’t know how. It had been there off and on since the summer before, when he fucked Madison. I was almost positive he hadn’t been to bed with anyone else since.

He was already sitting on the end of the dock when I got out there. We’d been out on the water all day and were still in our board shorts. I was wearing a

T-shirt but he wasn't, and I couldn't help but check him out as I walked up behind him because hell, he was fucking gorgeous, and I could admit to being a little jealous. His back was nut-brown and muscled up good from working out. His hair was on the long side, and he hadn't shaved all week. I wasn't the human skeleton I'd been when we first met, and I was definitely in shape from months of ass-breaking yard work, but he still had at least ten pounds of muscle on me.

I sank down beside him, careful not to get a splinter from the rough wood, and he shot me a shifty look before turning back to the water. This was definitely confession time. I handed him the Jack, and then I twisted open my beer. He took the bottle and sipped before setting it down between us.

"So, you wanna tell me what's up?" I prodded after a minute, because listening to the lake lapping against the bank was nice, but it wasn't getting us anywhere.

He sighed and slumped forward, like whatever he was dealing with was heavy. I bit my lip. We kicked our feet above the water, back and forth, left, right, left. The motion made me think of boot camp. I wondered how I'd be able to stand it, but it was too late to back out, and it wasn't like I was running over with acceptable options even if I could change my mind.

Out of nowhere, he said, "You remember Cody Elliston?"

Yeah, he was a major prick was my first thought, but I clamped down on it because I realized we were doing more than taking a random trip down memory lane, and my true feelings would probably put a giant downer on the conversation. Instead, I said, "Yeah, he graduated a couple of years ago, right?"

Deacon nodded, sipped his beer and readjusted his butt on the hard, hot wood we were sitting on. I waited, pretending to be patient.

"He was home for a few days this summer. I ran into him at his folks' hardware store." He took another quick sip of his beer, then rolled the bottle between his hands. "It was while you were visiting your dad."

"Oh... 'kay," I said, trying hard to figure out why that sounded so much like an admission of guilt. I was pretty sure I hadn't lost my best-friend status even if he had hung out with the guy a couple of times. He'd never mentioned it, but he wasn't obligated to tell me every single thing he did.

Just *most* everything...

“Did you know he’s gay?” he blurted out suddenly. I cranked my head around to stare at him, totally caught off guard by the information as well as by the grim expression on his face. Deacon was never big into gossip like most kids, and he didn’t go in for trashing people either. The few times we’d talked about people being gay, he’d made it real clear he didn’t judge.

Personally, I was a live-and-let-live kinda guy too, and I didn’t particularly care if Elliston fucked other guys or polar bears. But sexual orientation aside, he was still a prick.

Deacon didn’t seem to have the same opinion about him though, so “Uhhh... no...” was all I could think of to say that wouldn’t throw a roadblock in the conversation. I had no clue what was coming, but I sensed it was going to be important, and I was pretty sure it wasn’t going to be about Cody Elliston.

“Me either,” he said, staring out at the water.

I was beginning to wonder if we were going to get to the point before I had to leave for boot camp. I decided to prod a little. “So he told you this while he was in town? What... did you guys hang out or something?”

He shrugged. “Yeah, I guess. He invited me over to Carter Wyatt’s house. Some guys from their class were back. They had a little party.”

That stung, although I didn’t exactly know why. I didn’t own Deacon and had never felt threatened by him doing things with other guys. I decided I was just cheesed because he hadn’t told me sooner. I tried to keep the jealousy out of my voice when I said, “And he came out to you at Carter’s house?”

“Not exactly. I mean, that’s how it turned out, I guess, but coming out to me wasn’t the point of the conversation. He’d come out to his folks the night before, and he was telling me how that went. The news about him being gay was just part of the story.” He looked at me, all somber and intense, and added, “You come out to people you care about, not random dudes from high school.”

“So why did he *tell* you?”

“Uhh... I don’t know. Because he was drunk and I was *there*.”

The sun was getting low in the sky. We only had about an hour of daylight left. We had beer to drink and steaks to cook, and I really didn’t want to spend our last night together reliving Cody’s drama, but Deacon was giving off a real serious vibe so I tried to stay focused.

“How’d his dad take it?” I asked, floundering, unsure where I was supposed to be going with this odd information about a guy I didn’t even like.

“He was pissed, but Cody said his mom got him calmed down. He said he thinks they’ll be okay, maybe by Christmas.”

I nodded. “Cool. Good for him.”

I drained the last of my beer and was just thinking about going to get a couple more—I could see his was getting low too—when suddenly he looked me straight in the eye and said, “I’m pretty sure I’m gay too, Tucker, and it’s freaking me the fuck out.”

Chapter Four

We sat there staring at each other for long, silent seconds, my mouth frozen open where I'd been about to ask if he wanted another beer. Deacon hadn't shaved all week and, though the heavy stubble made him seem older than eighteen, the misery and panic in his eyes betrayed him as the desperate kid he was. Knowing he was hurting was like a knife in my gut.

Maybe there wasn't a right thing to say at that moment. If there was, it definitely wasn't what came out of my mouth next. "No way, man. What are you even talking about?"

We stared at each other for a minute, then he shook his head and turned back toward the water, clearly disappointed. The realization that I'd butchered it already twisted the knife even deeper, because he'd always been there for me from the very first day we met. This was the biggest thing in his life, and right off the bat I was totally letting him down.

"Yeah, I am, Tuck," he said softly, still staring straight ahead. "I just wanted you to know."

I took a deep breath, trying to get my head out of my ass and figure out what I was supposed to say. "Okay, I'm sorry, alright? Just give me a minute. That's not exactly what I was expecting to hear."

"What did you think I was gonna say?"

"I don't know... maybe something about me not getting my ass shot off over in the desert or something..." I laughed, a harsh, unfunny sound. "Not this, though. I never got a gay vibe off you at all."

He didn't say anything, but the vibe he gave off right then told me I wasn't making any progress salvaging the situation. When he made to get up, I clamped my hand around his wrist. I knew if we left the dock, the conversation would be over, and I would be a major loser.

"Deacon... seriously... How do you even know? Maybe you're just confused because it wasn't any good with Madison." A thought hit me and I frowned, suddenly pissed. "You didn't do shit with Elliston, did you?" I asked, squeezing harder on his arm, not even trying to hide how I felt about that idea.

"No, ass, I didn't," he sneered, not bothering to hide his feelings either. "How'd you know you were straight?"

I thought about that for all of two seconds, then said, “What the fuck kinda question is that? I just *knew*.”

He arched one dark brown eyebrow at me. “And you didn’t question it? You didn’t go fuck a guy just to make sure you didn’t like dick better?”

I opened my mouth to ask him what he’d been smoking, but the superior look in his eyes stopped me. It took me a minute to follow his logic but finally I caught up.

“No.” I glanced down, saw I was still holding his arm. It was hard and muscled in my hand, and suddenly I was thinking all kinds of things I didn’t need to be thinking, like how other guys were going to be touching him and getting close to him in ways I never would. I muttered, “Fuck!” as I let him go. I saw him flinch just before I looked away, back out into the darkening horizon.

“Jesus, Tucker, I thought you’d be the easy one.”

Taking a deep breath, I tried to rein in my temper. “Were your folks mad?” I asked, remembering I wasn’t the only person in the world he had to tell. Or the hardest.

“I haven’t told them yet. I was hoping telling you would help somehow.” He laughed bitterly. “Guess I was wrong. I never realized you were so down on gays.”

“I’m not down on *anybody*! Fucking hell, Deacon, you just caught me off guard!”

“What the fuck was I supposed to do? Make an appointment to tell you? Throw some dirty magazines around the living room and wait for you to notice?”

“No, but if you’d given me, say—*any fucking clue* about this in the last six years—then maybe I wouldn’t be so goddamned surprised!” I shot back, furious with him for keeping secrets and with myself for being such a prick once he finally opened up.

“You’ve slept with at least six different girls already, not to mention all the ‘sure things’ you left behind when we were out together and I didn’t hook up with anybody. I’ve slept with one girl one time. That wasn’t even a teeny tiny clue to you that *maybe* something was up?”

Put that way, I realized I was not a very sharp tack, or else I’d been ignoring something major right under my nose. Either way, it took my attitude down a

notch. “Not really. I just thought something went wrong with her and you got scared.”

He looked at me like I was crazy. “Uhh... like what? She grew teeth in her pussy or something?”

I rolled my eyes. “No, ass. Like the condom broke or you came too fast,” I said, thinking back to my first time. “First times can suck. Mine sure did.”

Since I’d lied to him about that particular event, this comment was actually a confession, and even in the middle of his own personal drama, it got his attention. “What happened?” he asked, his forehead scrunching up with curiosity, crowding some of the mad out of his eyes. “I thought you said it was great.”

Although I didn’t want to talk about it, it was a break from fighting and a chance for me to calm down. Plus, he was telling me something superpersonal. An embarrassing confession from me might even things up a little.

“You remember I said my first time was with Amy Steadman, after the Halloween bonfire out at Kelso’s farm?”

“Yeah. You left early with her, and I took your truck and picked you up at her place on my way home.” His lips twitched a little at the memory as he sipped his beer, then he laughed. “Jesus. I didn’t even have my license yet, and I know I drank at least three beers that night. We were so lucky I didn’t get stopped. My dad, your dad, *and* her dad would’ve all been standing in line to get a piece of our asses. Bob too!”

I laughed with him, and suddenly things felt normal between us, like we were friends again. “Yeah, I know. But her parents were gonna be out till late, and she was panting in my ear and rubbing on my dick, begging me to go home with her. I couldn’t say no.”

“So what went wrong? You were stoked when I picked you up. And word around school later was you’d made her pretty happy.” He was watching my face, like he always did when we talked, and when I turned to him we were so close it should’ve been weird. It wasn’t, though, and I didn’t pull back. Being close to him had always felt right, and knowing he was gay hadn’t changed that for me.

“Amy wasn’t my first time.”

He cocked one eyebrow and I kept talking. “My first time was with Cassidy. You remember—the girl I messed around with sometimes when I stayed at my

dad's?" He nodded. I never talked about her much, but enough for him to know who she was. "She was dating some loser that summer so we never got together, but I went for a weekend right after school started and they'd broken up." I shrugged, took a quick sip of the whiskey. "I saw my shot and I went for it."

"And?"

I remembered it like it was yesterday. "Huh. Where do I even start? We were at her apartment. It was always a pigsty, but it was way worse that day because the air conditioner was broken. It was hot as fuck and the place reeked. She had a ceiling fan in her bedroom, but it was next to useless. I could barely breathe, and our skin kept sticking together because we were both sweating like dogs." I shuddered just thinking about it. "Of course, I got done way before her, and she wanted me to go down on her to finish her off. I didn't want to but I did. It was nasty, and I could taste jizz on top of everything else. I totally wiggled out because I thought the condom had broke."

"Damn! Did it?"

"Fuck no, thank God." I shuddered. "She caught me digging around on her floor for it afterward, and when I told her what was wrong, she laughed and said the jizz was probably left over from the night before." I looked straight at him. "Her ex had stopped by with some beer, and there was nothing good on TV so they ended up fucking."

His mouth dropped open and his eyes got big and horrified looking. "And she didn't even take a shower?"

"I don't know and I didn't ask. All I know is I was fucking happy as shit when my dad moved out of that hellhole."

He studied me for a minute, then shook his head quickly, like he wanted to get those images out of his head as fast as possible. "Ok. I guess I can forgive you for not telling me about that," he said, then drained the last of his beer.

"Thanks." For a few seconds, I watched a fish darting in the water below our feet, till I worked up the courage to look over at him. "Can you forgive me for being too caught up in my own shit to realize you were gay?"

"I don't care that you didn't know then, Tuck. All I care is how you feel about it now."

"Dude. I feel the same. You're still you. You're still my best friend." He was watching me, asking for my honesty, so I tried to be as up-front as I could be. "Maybe I'm a little pissed you didn't tell me sooner."

“I was afraid it would make things weird between us. I didn’t want to ruin our last summer.”

“I’m sorry,” I said, and must’ve sounded sincere because he relaxed some beside me, and I could feel the last of the tension leave him. I sighed. “It wouldn’t have ruined it.” I threw my arm over his shoulder, hot from a day in the sun, and hugged him to me. “Seriously, I don’t care who you fuck.”

He gave me a wary glance from beneath his killer eyelashes. “Cody Elliston?”

“Oh, sorry but no,” I said, waving my hands in front of us both in a no-way motion. “I will kick your ass if you stoop to doing him. He is *such* a dickwad.”

Deacon laughed, easy for the first time in hours. As he shrugged me off and pushed himself up from the dock, he said, “Yeah, I know. But he’s gonna be at Knoxville, and he’s the only gay person I know, so you need to get over yourself at least a little bit. He invited me to come check out his frat house once I get there.”

That intel made my stomach churn, but I knew I needed to get over myself. Deacon was going off to college to start a new life. I could either be cool about him spending time with Cody—as well as a buttload of other guys I didn’t know and probably wouldn’t like—or not. Those were my only two choices, and I didn’t want to lose him, so I knew which one I had to pick.

“Yeah, fine, whatever...” I said, grabbing the hand he offered to pull myself up. “I’m gonna be dead from doing a thousand sit-ups while you’re drinking beer and cruising for dudes with Elliston. Fucking awesome!” I grumbled. But then I grinned and elbowed him in the ribs so he’d know I was just messing around.

He elbowed me back. “You’re just jealous because for once it’ll be me getting laid while you’re trying to figure out how to make your own bed!” he joked as we started back for the house.

I kept pace with him as we walked along the dock, our shoulders jostling as we walked closely down the center to avoid the splintered edges. Technically, I knew his days of going home alone were about to be over, but hearing him say the words made it one hundred percent real. “So, speaking of fucking, have you got with a guy yet?” I asked as I followed him down the steps to the yard. I knew he could hear the edge in my voice, but I couldn’t help it.

“Like who?” he asked, shooting me a quick, hard glare over his shoulder. “And don’t say Cody or I will hit you, swear to God.” I was pretty sure he meant it.

“I don’t know any other gay guys around here, Deak. I’m not trying to be a dick. I’m just asking.” I held the screen door open and walked in after him, letting it slam shut behind me.

“And like I already said, I don’t know any either. Besides, I’m not sure when I’m gonna tell my folks, and I don’t want them to hear about it before I’m ready. You and Cody are the only ones who know.”

“Yeah, fine. Okay.” When he handed me a fresh beer from the fridge and asked me which schools I was aiming for after boot camp, I went along with the obvious distraction, glad to talk about something else till I could get my head straight about him.

Later that night, we went out onto the deck and crashed out on some lounge chairs. We were full and more than a little drunk, and as we listened to the water and watched the stars, my Deacon angst came clear to me.

“You’re right, you know,” I mumbled, letting my head fall sideways on the chair to look at him.

“Course I am,” he said, toasting the stars with the last of our beer. He turned to me and grinned. “About what?”

“That I’m jealous.”

His grin fell away as we stared at each other. “Dude. I was just kidding. What are you even talking about? You’ve got nothing to be jealous about. You’re gonna kick ass at boot camp, and then your life’ll be amazing!”

“You going to college isn’t what I’m jealous of, doof,” I said, poking him in the ankle with my toe.

“I know you’re not jealous of Cody,” he said, but with a question at the end, letting me know he wasn’t really absolutely sure.

“I am.”

“Why? You’re right, he’s a dickwad. He’s not gonna be my new best friend, and we are definitely not gonna hook up. Why would you even care anyway? You’re *straight*, Tuck. It’s not like you wanna hook up with me.”

I rolled my head back so I was staring up at the stars again. “I know, but it’s just... we’ve been tight forever, and I never had to share you with anybody else. All your other friends were just casual, you know. I was the only one who was in on all your secrets.”

I shut up for a minute, still pissed because he’d waited so long to tell me this most important secret. I didn’t want to end our night with another fight, though, so I swallowed my anger and kept going.

“Now you’re gonna hook up with some new guy, sleep with him, and probably fall in love, and I can’t compete with that. He’ll be the one on the inside, and I’ll be stuck on the outside looking in—and there’s not a damn thing I can do about it.”

“You slept with a bunch of girls and that never happened. Why do you think it’ll be any different now?”

“Because I never fell in love with any of those girls,” I said, speaking up to the stars. “But you *will* fall in love—that’s just how you are—and when it happens, everything will change. That’s just how that shit works.”

“It’ll be the same with you, Tuck. You’ll meet some dude in your platoon and you’ll get close. Everybody needs a friend, and he’ll be going through all the same shit you are, while I’m writing papers and doing proofs and getting wasted on Jell-O shooters. Just because you aren’t fucking him doesn’t mean he won’t take my place.”

He was right and it just about ripped my heart out. “Fuck, Deak... I don’t want that to happen to us,” I whined, feeling like a big baby, but the booze and the tiredness and fear of the future were all working on me hard, stripping me down to the bone.

“Me neither, but you said it man. That’s how life works. We can’t stay in high school forever.”

“I know *that*, but I want us to stay best friends forever.”

“Yeah, well, me too,” he said, and we stared at each other in the darkness, my eyes burning with tears I refused to shed. “Who knows, you know? Maybe we can make it happen. I’m game to try if you are.”

He held his fist out and I bumped it with my own. “I am,” I vowed and swore to myself this was one promise I would not break.

Chapter Five

We left the lake the next morning. Deacon dropped me off at home, sent me off with the tightest hug I'd ever gotten from anybody and a promise to bore me to death with letters from school. I packed up the few things I'd been instructed to take with me to boot camp, kissed my mom, and shook hands with Dad and Cheater, then caught a bus to Parris Island, South Carolina. The next thirteen weeks of my life were every bit as hellish as everyone had said they'd be, and I cried myself to sleep a couple of nights before I finally found some kind of peace in the shared awfulness of the experience. I thought about Deacon a lot and lived for mail days when I almost always had a letter from him, sometimes two. He told me about his dorm room—he was sharing with Alex, one of his geeky friends from math club who, surprisingly, I wasn't jealous of at all—and all about campus life.

Though he didn't come right out and say it, I could read between the lines well enough to know he was in over his head too. Not like me, of course, but he'd always been on the quiet and shy side of friendly, and college was all about meeting new people and making friends, which weren't his specialties. Plus, he was trying to deal with the whole gay thing, a secret Alex hadn't gotten briefed about until after they unpacked. That hadn't gone as well as it could've, but they were still roommates, so it could've gone worse.

I sometimes forgot how reserved he was with other people, since he'd never been that way with me, but it came through in the letters. I could tell he was a little disappointed, but life seemed to get better for him once he got past the first couple of weeks. He went to an LGBT meeting and met some folks in the same boat as him, and afterward he got up the nerve to get coffee with a guy who'd been staring at him in English class.

He's really cool. He's not out at home either, so we're both pretty clueless. Neither one of us is looking for a boyfriend, but it's still good, you know, just finally getting to try stuff. I guess this sounds stupid to you, since you've done everything a million times already, but whatever... I won't freak you out with all the details, but I guess I just want you to know I'm probably not gonna die a virgin after all! LOL.

I read that paragraph over and over, though it didn't really say anything except he'd met a boy and they were making out—*maybe*. It was all vague and

unspecific. He didn't tell me the guy's name or what he looked like. After that he moved on to other stuff, and that was all the information I got on the dude. At the end of the letter, he said Cody Elliston's frat was throwing a party that weekend and he was going, was thinking about pledging but hadn't decided for sure.

*I've gotta get out there and start making something happen.
Life isn't gonna show up in my dorm room. Especially not with
Alex hanging around eating pork rinds and beef jerky 24/7. Oh
my God, what a farter!*

I laughed at that, and tucked the letter away, thinking about Deacon holed up in his dorm room in a gas mask like the ones I'd thought I'd die learning to use. I'm not sure if I didn't focus on the party because I didn't want to or because he'd done a good job of downplaying it, but it didn't really sink into my brain. Plus, I had about a hundred other things weighing on my mind at the time, and I could only spend so much time thinking about Deacon or anyone else, even me. There wouldn't be any questions about Deacon on my next test, so I used the remaining time to study before lights out.

I didn't get any more letters from him.

At the next couple of mail calls, I didn't think too much about it, especially since there was always something for me, a letter from my parents or grandparents. I even got a few from my stepsister, who turned out not to be quite such a monster once I got to know her. After a week, though, I started to wonder what was going on with him. At first I told myself he was just really busy with school and maybe even dating by then. But as another week went by, and then another, it became clear that there was more to it than him just being too busy to write. I kept writing to him, hoping I was just paranoid, but in my heart I was pretty sure I knew what had happened. He'd met a guy and suddenly he didn't have time for me anymore.

I sent my last letter to Deacon ten days before my graduation from boot camp. I didn't ask him what was wrong because if he had wanted to tell me, he already would've. I just told him the date and that I wanted him to come if he could. Back in the summer, once he'd quit trying to talk me out of signing up, he'd promised he would be there, but things had clearly changed since then.

Still, I must've been holding onto some little bit of hope in my heart, because when the day came, I scanned every new face that came through the

gates, looking for him, and was bitterly disappointed at the end of the day when he hadn't shown. *Unbelievable*. We'd fallen apart already, our friendship not even able to hold up to three months apart. I'd really thought we'd be friends forever—if not best friends, at least really good ones. I couldn't understand how anyone or anything could cause him to cut me off like that, without even a word or any kind of explanation.

He had, though, and I had no choice but to accept his silence. Graduation weekend was torture, trying to smile at all my family, who'd shown up proud and ready for the whole song and dance of a formal Marine Corps event. I spent the little bit of free time I had in the gym, pummeling the bag and lifting weights, just to get through it. When my mom asked me about him, I told her he was busy with school and couldn't get away. She just nodded and moved on to something else, and he didn't get mentioned again.

I went straight to infantry school after boot camp. Some of the guys took leave, but I didn't want to go to either of my parents' houses, and I had nowhere else to go. Originally we'd planned for me to go to Knoxville and hang out for a weekend. Deacon was going to show me around campus and introduce me to some of his new friends, but that option was clearly gone.

I didn't get the chance to go home at Thanksgiving, which was fine with me, but almost everyone went home at Christmas. I didn't want to hang around an empty base feeling sorry for myself, so I bought a plane ticket and showed up at my mom's on Christmas Eve with no plans to go anywhere till after the New Year. Being home felt weird, wearing my old clothes, sleeping in my old bed, eating Mom's cooking, and watching football with Cheater. I actually didn't think of him as *Cheater* anymore. He was just Mom's husband, Bob. He'd turned out to be a pretty decent guy once I got over being pissed at him for wrecking my world when I was a kid, then being a hard-ass when I wanted to be a slacker.

About the third time, Mom—looking all worried and concerned—asked me if I'd seen Deacon yet, I decided I wasn't going to let our friendship go without at least finding out what went wrong. I checked my cell phone for the eight thousandth time since I'd gotten it back after boot camp, but there were no missed calls from him. It was obviously on me to make a move if we were going to have any chance of salvaging our friendship.

I knocked on his parents' front door on the Tuesday after Christmas. His car was the only one in the driveway. I figured if shit was going to be awkward or

weird, we'd be better off without an audience. I knocked twice, then rang the doorbell. I had my cell phone out and was thinking about calling him when he finally yanked the door open. He didn't look happy to see me, but more than that, he didn't look happy at all. His eyes, which had always been so full of life and curiosity, were flat. There was no spark of anything—annoyance, boredom, even anger. He almost didn't even look like himself. I'd seen a similar look on a couple of guys back in basic, right before they gave up.

We stared at each other for a minute, his dead eyes starting to freak me out, till finally he blinked, let go of the door knob, and disappeared back into the house. I was starting to get a really bad feeling. As I followed him in, I went over in my mind the last letters I'd gotten from him and tried to remember the last one I'd sent before he quit writing, wondering if maybe I'd said something stupid to piss him off. I was pretty sure I hadn't. I couldn't imagine anything I could've said to put that look on his face. *But if I hadn't done anything wrong, why had he cut me off?*

I trailed him all the way through the house and up the stairs to his bedroom. He slammed the door behind me and then flopped on the bed. I took a minute to look around, seeing the same old room I'd spent a thousand hours in over the last few years, but barely recognizing it. He'd always been a neat freak, but college must've changed him because there were piles of clothes all over the floor and dirty dishes stacked on his desk. Deacon was face down on the unmade bed. Even the bottoms of his socks were dirty.

It took me a minute to get a handle on what I was seeing, but eventually it dawned on me something was wrong, like *seriously* wrong, and all my anger went up in smoke. Whatever was going on with Deacon was way bigger than me saying something stupid in a letter, and I felt like the biggest shit ever for letting him slip away so easy.

I flopped on the bed beside him and stared up at the ceiling for a minute, hoping maybe he'd say something, but the only noise in the room came from outside—the kids next door playing basketball in their driveway. Deacon stayed mute.

Finally I decided to ease a toe into the water, then make it up as I went along.

“So I survived boot camp,” I said, trying to keep my voice even and normal.

“I heard.”

“It sucked.”

“Yeah, I think they mention that in the brochure, right?” His voice was muffled by the pillow.

“Yeah. They actually might’ve undersold it some, though.” I wanted to ask him what the fucking fuck had happened to him and why he’d cut me off, but I couldn’t get the words out of my mouth. It was like he was too fragile, and whatever had messed him up was still dangerous and unmentionable. Or maybe I was just a chickenshit and didn’t want to hear about some dude breaking his heart already. I’d never had my heart broken, just my ego bruised a few times, so I didn’t have a clue how to deal with it. I could pick off a target at eight hundred yards like a champ, but my skills in picking up the pieces after a busted-up relationship were nonexistent.

Also, I didn’t like the idea of some other guy mattering so much to him that he looked like someone had sucked his soul out with a Hoover. We’d been best friends for years, shared every thought and feeling we’d had—well, except for *one*—and within six months some new guy had obviously come along and become way more important than me. That sucked almost as much as boot camp.

We lay there not saying anything else for a few more minutes—my gut clenching up into a knot the size of Rhode Island—till he eventually rolled over and sighed. His hand fell on the bed and pressed up against my hip. I wasn’t sure if it just happened that way or he reached out on purpose, but I was thankful for the contact.

Chapter Six

“I’m sorry I quit writing.”

I looked over at him but he was staring up at the ceiling, not looking back, which I didn’t like. But then his fingers moved, pressed a little harder to let me know he was with me, and I was content to settle for that instead of eye contact.

“Yeah, me too.” I wanted to tell him how much it hurt, him dropping me like that when he was the one person who really kept me going some days, but I decided to let it go. Like the last time we had a superserious conversation, this was about him, not me. I was determined not to fuck it up again.

“So, you gonna tell me what happened? I mean, I figured you got hooked up with some guy and maybe he was jealous of you being friends with me or something?”

He didn’t say anything, which I took to mean maybe I was on the right track, or maybe I was totally talking out my ass, but at least he seemed to be listening. It was obvious whatever happened had been major, and I decided to try to lighten the mood a little bit before we both drowned in his misery.

“I mean, especially if he saw a picture of me with my awesome new haircut.” I rolled onto my side, smushing his hand under my thigh. I grinned as I pointed at my shorn head; the little bit of hair I had left was dark brown, my summer blond swept away at the base barber shop long ago. “If this doesn’t make a dude feel like he’s coming light to the party, I don’t know what would.”

After a beat, Deacon cut his eyes over at me. Although he didn’t outright smile, his lips did twitch a little as he took in my high and tight, just enough to let me know he hadn’t become completely immune to me in the five months since we’d said good-bye. It gave me heart and confidence, and I decided to push for more.

“Am I even close? In the last letter I got, you said you’d met some guy in class and y’all were hanging out and shit, and then you just disappeared.” The humor blinked out of his face instantly, and he turned his head to stare back up at the ceiling. I didn’t want to get myself kicked out, but I couldn’t quite let it go. “Dude, seriously, if you fell in love and got your heart broke, you can tell me.”

His jaw clenched, and I could feel him shutting me out, which was not the direction I wanted to go in. I decided to cut my losses. “Or don’t tell me.

Whatever. I just missed you, and it sucked when you quit writing.” I flopped onto my back and stared up at the ceiling too. It was white and boring, so I tilted my head just enough to see him out of the corner of my eye.

He closed his eyes, rubbing his hands over his stubbled face. His arms had been hard with muscle last summer, tan from all the time we’d spent at the lake, but they were slim and pale now, like he hadn’t seen the sun or the gym in a very long time. I was a couple of inches taller than him, but Deacon had always been into working out, so he’d never seemed smaller than me till now. I was tan and buff from hours outside, doing calisthenics and running, while he looked like death warmed over. It made me feel even more protective of him, like I needed to try to save him from whatever had wiggled him out so bad.

As I was about to give up and ask him about Christmas, he sat up and sighed. “That’s not exactly what happened, but yeah, it was some shit with some guy, and I’m being a giant pussy about it, and I’m sorry. I’m sorry I ditched you, I’m sorry I’m hiding out feeling sorry for myself and acting like I’m the only person in the world who ever got a raw deal.”

He took a deep breath and scooted back till he was leaning against the headboard. “I’m cool.” I raised my eyebrows at such an obvious lie, and he said, “Yeah, I know I look like three-day-old roadkill right now, but I’m *gonna* be cool, I promise. Tell me about school, what you’re doing now. You’re in North Carolina, right? At Cherry Point?”

We spent the rest of the afternoon catching up. I told him about my classes and my surprising skill with a sniper rifle. I wasn’t actually planning to become a sniper, but everyone had to go through weapons class and I was proud of how well I’d done. After a while, my stomach growled so we ordered a pizza and devoured it along with a six-pack of Cokes, sprawled out on his bed.

Eventually we heard the garage door close. A couple of minutes later, his mom showed up at his door, tears in her eyes as she grabbed me up and hugged me. I was pretty sure the hug was more about the smile on his face than about me being in her house again.

“Mom! Seriously! Let go. You’re gonna break him,” Deacon said, right about the time I was starting to really need to breathe.

“Don’t be ridiculous, Deacon,” she said into my shoulder, still squeezing me tight. “He’s a marine. Surely he can handle one hug from a middle-aged mother.”

I laughed and pulled back, drawing in a deep breath. “I don’t know, Mrs. James. You’re pretty strong. Have you been hitting the gym on the QT?”

She smiled up into my face, but she couldn’t hide the worry in her eyes. “Not hardly,” she said, shaking her head. “I’m just so happy to see you, Tucker. I’m sorry we weren’t able to make your graduation. Your mother said it was very impressive. I know they’re so proud of you.” She patted me on the shoulder and took a small step back, a smart move since the cluttered floor was an accident waiting to happen. “Us too.”

“Thank you.”

“I would ask if you want to stay for dinner, but looks like you boys already have the food situation taken care of,” she said, nodding toward the almost empty pizza box.

“Yeah, Mom, we’re too stuffed for anything right now, but thanks.” Deacon got off the bed and headed for the door, obviously ready for her to go.

She took the hint and moved in the same direction, smiling back at me one last time. “Take care, Tucker. Hope to see you again before you head back out.”

“Yes ma’am. I’m sure you will,” I said, feeling slightly embarrassed from all the attention. I was glad when Deacon finally shut the door behind her.

As he turned back into the room, he looked around and seemed to notice the disaster he was living in. “Fuck! What a mess!”

“No kidding. Maybe you need to sign up for home ec class or something,” I joked, reaching for my coat, not really expecting an answer.

“I don’t think they offer one at UNCC, but I’ll be sure and check.”

“Wait... what?” I asked, totally caught off guard. He’d been at UT-Knoxville, his dream school. Why would he be transferring already?

“You heard me.”

“Well, I don’t know. It sounds like you just told me you’re going to the University of North Carolina instead of Tennessee, but that can’t be right.”

He looked up from where he was mounding dirty clothes on his bed. “Yeah it can, Tucker. People change schools all the time.”

“I know, but Knoxville was all you talked about for years, and you had a full-ride scholarship.”

“Plans change, dude,” he said, shrugging. “And I got offers from North Carolina too. They’re still interested.”

“So you’re just up and going, then?”

“Yep.”

“Which campus?”

“Charlotte.”

I pulled my jacket on slowly, watching him. He looked about a thousand times better than he had when I got there, but he still had a long way to go. “One of these days you’re gonna tell me what the fuck happened.” When he shot me a “back off” look, I honored it. “Not today. I’m not asking any more questions today, but someday I wanna know.”

He didn’t say anything back and I let it drop. “Listen... I gotta go. I’m working at the recruiting office for a couple of days, and I gotta go in early in the morning. But if you’re not busy for New Year’s, I was thinking maybe we could get outta here for a couple of days, head down to the coast?” He looked up, interested. “Bob bought a condo down in Pensacola, said I could use it whenever I want.”

“Really?” Deacon had listened to me bitch about Bob for too many years not to be surprised.

“I know. Guess he’s pretty pumped with the whole marine thing. It’s so much better than jail.”

“No shit!” Deacon smiled. “Yeah, actually the beach sounds pretty great. When do you wanna leave?”

“Cool,” I said, heading for the door. “Friday morning? As early as we can get our asses in gear, unless you’ve got something going on.”

“No man, early’s good. Perfect actually,” he said, following me out, tromping down the stairs behind me. I said good-bye to his parents; then we walked outside. It was cold and he wasn’t wearing a coat.

“I’ll call you or something tomorrow, man. Get back inside before you freeze!”

“Jesus, no kidding. It’s fucking cold as balls out here.” He rubbed his arms but didn’t make a move toward the house. I stood there too, waiting. We felt almost back to normal, except for that four-month hole of unexplained silence. “Thanks for coming by, Tucker,” he finally said, stepping closer to me. Even if

he wouldn't tell me what went wrong, I could tell he was hurting way more than me. I wasn't a big hugger, but I couldn't stop myself from grabbing him and wrapping him up tight for a few seconds. His arms around my back told me I'd done the right thing, and when I drove away a minute later, he waved me off with a real smile on his face.

Chapter Seven

The ride down to the coast with Deacon was awkward, which was a new experience for me. We'd spent Tuesday afternoon talking—mostly about me—but there was only so much excitement I could wring out of the Marine Corps, especially since I'd only been in for a few months. When Deacon told me he was transferring to UNCC, he'd made it clear he wasn't going to tell me why. I was left with a bunch of frustrating questions and a minefield of iffy topics I wasn't sure if I could talk about or not. Once we'd covered every possible subject for idle chitchat and still had over an hour to go, I decided to test the waters.

“Have you been to the campus yet?”

“Nope.”

“Are you gonna live on campus?”

“It's a requirement for freshmen,” he said, his voice flat and bored sounding.

“What about next year?”

“I'll probably get an apartment.”

“Your parents gonna spring for that?”

“Grandparents.”

“You think you'll go back home for the summer?”

“No.”

Deacon wasn't a one-word kinda guy. Even when he was tired, or the subject wasn't something he was interested in, he always made some kind of effort. I decided to give it a rest for a while. As soon as I said “Gotcha,” he pulled a book out of his bag, a clear signal that conversation time was over.

This was just too bad because I only had three days to spend with him, and I wasn't planning to watch him read the whole time. He'd agreed to come on this trip with me. He was going to have to give a little. Maybe he'd be more interested in talking about his major.

“They got a good math department?” I asked, just as he cracked open a huge novel with a spaceship on the front. Math had been his major at Knoxville,

what he'd always talked about going into, and I had no reason to think that had changed.

But apparently it had, because he shrugged at his book and said, "I don't know. I didn't check."

"I thought you said you were going on a scholarship."

He sighed. "It's a general scholarship based on my SAT scores. I can study anything I want."

Based on Deacon's response, I felt safe assuming his grades hadn't been the problem. I gave him a minute to keep talking but of course he didn't, so I forged ahead. "So if you aren't gonna study math, then what's the plan?"

He sighed again, not even pretending to want to talk, and thumbed his book. "I don't know. Maybe psychology."

I caught myself right before I said something stupid like *Why would you want to get a job listening to other people whine about their problems all the time?* Instead I asked, "Huh. So what kind of career are you thinking about?" He could be the one to tell me he was going to spend his time listening to people whine, and *then* I could ask why he'd want to put himself through that kind of torture.

"I'm not sure yet. Maybe counseling, or therapy if I decide to get my doctorate. Or I could always teach."

His voice was absolutely flat, zero passion about this new thing he wanted to do with his life. Deacon used to talk for hours about new developments happening at the forefront of technology, discoveries that could make a better world for everyone, especially for people in third world countries. When we were in high school, he couldn't wait to get to college and really start to learn things he cared about. I hadn't even realized math was important in feeding or inoculating the world, but he was fascinated by everything about it. Or he had been.

"Whatever happened to joining a think tank and saving the world?"

He snorted and shook his head. "I can't save the world, Tucker. Nobody can. It's a fucked up place, and there's not a goddamn thing anybody can do about it, *especially* not me."

I stared at him in shock for several seconds until he said, "Dude. Drive!" and I turned back to the road just in time to yank the wheel and miss the mile marker I'd been heading for.

That was the most un-Deacon-like thing I'd ever heard him say, even more surprising than when he'd told me he was gay. He'd never been a pessimistic person. Even when he'd talked about the awful conditions so many people lived in, he'd stayed positive. He'd always seen the good in people, always made the most of life. This was new and dark, and I didn't like it at all.

“What the fuck, Deacon?”

“Just drop it, okay? I'm going to a different school, and I'm gonna study something else. I'm nineteen, for fuck's sake. Freshmen change their minds about shit all the time. It's not like I'm the only person to ever realize they made a bad choice.”

He never stopped staring out the window as he talked, never looked over at me once. Traffic was picking up so I had to pay attention to the road, but I could tell from the angry tone of his voice he was totally over the conversation, so I gave up completely. More than wanting to know things he wasn't ready to tell me, no matter how much I badgered him, I wanted for us to have a good time. I had no idea when we might get another chance to be together. Hell, if I eventually ended up in Afghanistan, we might never get another chance, period.

So instead of pursuing answers like I wanted to, I said, “Okay. Fine, man. You win. I'm done trying to get in your business. But just know that whatever fucked up thing happened to turn your whole worldview upside down, you can tell me. I know you don't wanna tell me now, but whenever you're ready, I wanna hear it. Whatever it is, I've got your back.”

He shot me a fierce look, brown eyes narrowed and hostile, but I returned it with the calmest, most undemanding face I could muster. I could be patient. I could wait.

The condo was nice, very basic and boring, but Mom said they planned to fix it up a little, then start renting it out in the spring. It had two bedrooms and two baths. The master bedroom had a king-sized bed and sliding glass doors, which opened onto a balcony overlooking the beach. Deacon put his bags in the smaller bedroom, which had crappy twin beds and no view.

As I watched him disappear down the hallway, I realized I wanted him to share the beach room with me. We'd always shared at the lake house—or when we slept over at each other's houses—and some of our best times together were after lights out. But we'd left high school life behind. Not to mention I was a

fucking marine and way past wanting to build blanket forts and stay up till three a.m. telling ghost stories. More to the point, though, I wasn't sure how to mention it without sounding like a nutcase or a twelve-year-old girl. So I stuck my bag in my room and kept my mouth shut, hoping I'd have a stroke of brilliance later.

Brilliance struck right around midnight, when we were both stuffed with the shrimp, corn, and little red potatoes we'd boiled ourselves—and half-lit from the beer I'd brought along. I'd cracked open a bottle of Jack after dinner, but he'd waved me off when I offered him the bottle.

Deacon finished off his fifth or sixth beer and got up from the couch where we'd crashed to watch year-end reviews, our feet on the coffee table and pillows from our beds behind our backs, trying to make the thing more comfortable. "I'm going to bed, man. If I sit on this couch any longer, I think my ass'll break."

"No fucking kidding. We need to haul this piece of shit down to the beach and set fire to it." My ass was as numb as my brain from all the Jack and Cokes I'd sucked down. This was the first time since the summer I'd had a chance to just let go without worrying I'd make an ass of myself in front of the wrong person, and I was making the most of it. I was ready to move someplace more comfortable too, but the only comfortable place in the whole condo was my bed. Tired as I was, I wasn't ready to say good night yet, and I hadn't yet figured out the right way to ask him to spend the night with me without sounding gay or brain damaged.

"Yeah, but your folks might not appreciate having no place to sit the next time they come down here," Deacon pointed out, stretching and twisting to get the kinks out of his back.

"Mom said they're getting a new one. They already got a new mattress for their bedroom, said the old one was lethal." I thought for a few seconds, then decided to make my play. If he didn't bite, oh well, at least I'd tried. "Oh yeah, and she said they've gotta get new beds for the other room, too, so they probably won't be any better than this."

I watched as he bent over to pick up some beer bottles off the floor, and his ass got stuck in my general direction. He was wearing old gray sweatpants, and they were curved over it tight. Even if he hadn't been working out any lately, the boy still had a nice ass. Even I—Mr. Hetero Marine—could admit that.

"Sucks to be me, I guess. I'll just have to take my chances." The bottles made a loud clank when he dropped them into the trash.

“Guess so.” I looked at the TV for a minute, everything foggy. “They put a king bed in the master. If it gets too bad, you can always bunk with me.”

He turned back and stared at me for about five seconds, then laughed. “Are you high?”

I lurched off the sunk-in sofa, the booze throwing me totally off balance. Luckily I caught myself before I toppled into the coffee table and broke it. “I just don’t want you to be all bent over and crippled tomorrow. We got a party to go to, and I was thinking maybe a run on the beach in the morning.” I floundered over to where he was gaping at me, grabbed his bicep, and gave it a hard squeeze. “Doesn’t look like you hit the gym any since last time I saw you, though, so if you wanna pussy out, guess I’ll understand.”

As the smile faded off his face, I realized I’d said the wrong thing. That hit too close to whatever had fucked him up so bad, which was the last thing I wanted to do. “I’m sorry, man. I shouldn’t have said that. I’m an ass.”

He glared at me for a few seconds, but then the tightness melted from around his eyes and he wasn’t pissed anymore, just annoyed. “You’re a *drunk* ass.”

“So very true.” I grinned, trying to be charming, something I hadn’t gotten a chance to do in months, since the Marine Corps had somehow managed to drain every social impulse out of me. “And I haven’t seen you in months, and pretty soon I won’t see you for probably fucking ever, so grab a couple more beers and come listen to the waves with me. We’ll sit out on the deck if the bed makes you nervous.” I flipped one hand behind my head and jutted my hip out in a not-very-sexy pose. “I am kinda irresistible, after all.”

He laughed in my face. “Not exactly! And you probably won’t even be conscious in five minutes.”

“Exactly! So hurry the fuck up, fucker,” I ordered, pointing one wobbly finger at the fridge, then turning toward my bedroom. “We gotta make every minute count!”

Chapter Eight

I lumbered through my room to the balcony, barely managing not to face-plant on the bed, and Deacon joined me outside a couple of minutes later with our beers.

“Just so you know, Tucker, if you die of alcohol poisoning and I end up in jail, I’m not gonna cry at your funeral,” he informed me as he plopped down in the deck chair next to mine. They were actually way more comfortable than the couch. The night was cold, though, so we probably wouldn’t be able to stay outside for long.

“Don’t blame you. Jail would suck for you.” I looked over at him and laughed. “More likely you’d suck for jail!”

“Dude!” he snapped, indignant but at least not mad like before. My drunk self apparently had no filters.

“Sorry,” I apologized through my giggles. “It’s just that you’re way too pretty for jail.” I snuck a look over at him. He looked better than he had when I’d shown up at his house on Tuesday. His dark beard was cut close and his thick hair was clean and spiky like he always wore it. Even after he’d had all the spirit beaten out of him, he was still fucking gorgeous. I wanted to go find whoever had done him wrong and rip out their spleen.

“Gee, thanks.” He snorted, twisting open his beer. “And by the way, wonder why I don’t wanna sleep in the same bed as you? When was the last time you got laid anyway?”

“August,” I admitted, turning up my own beer which tasted fresh after all the sticky Coke I’d been drinking with my whiskey.

“What, they don’t ever let you guys out of their sight?”

“Yeah, we get time off and stuff, but I’ve been busy, trying not to get behind or get in trouble. Girls’ll be there when I’m ready for them.”

“Damn, man... this is probably the longest you’ve gone without since I met you.”

I rolled my eyes at him. We were both stretched out in the chairs, him wearing my Marine Corps hoodie, which he must’ve swiped when he came through my room, and me in an old ’Bama sweatshirt I’d gotten when his folks

took us to my first college football game. “No, dipshit. The longest was when I first met you. You made me feel like such a pervert that I went without for almost a whole year!”

“Oh my God! Seriously? You didn’t get laid again till you were fourteen?” He bugged his eyes and tried to look offended on my behalf, but he wasn’t *that* good of an actor. Especially when he was so clearly laughing at me. “Damn, dude. I can’t believe you even stayed friends with me!”

“Fuck you. Almost fourteen. But I didn’t get *laid* laid until I was almost sixteen.”

“Oh, so all the other stuff you were doing didn’t count since you weren’t getting your dick wet?”

“Hey! I was too getting my dick wet. Your dick gets wet when you get a blow job,” I pointed out slyly, then remembering his letter telling me he wasn’t going to die a virgin, I added, “Which you oughta know, considering you pretty much said you were doing it too.”

We both had our feet up on the little glass-topped table, and he gave me a quick, sharp toe jab in the ankle. “I’m not a total moron when it comes to sex, Tucker. I get that if you stick your cock in somebody’s mouth, it’s gonna get wet. I don’t have to do it to understand the logistics.”

I’d never thought of logistics as being a part of sex. I’d never thought much about the mechanics of sex at all. It was just something I did because it felt good. I figured at some point I’d start thinking about the rest of life that went along with being an adult, like marriage and babies and mortgages, and probably—eventually—divorce and child support. But, hell, I was only nineteen. I was in no hurry to get started down the same mistake-filled path my mom had taken. I knew the odds were good I’d end up on that road eventually, but I at least wanted a chance to live a little first.

I rolled my head over to look at Deacon. I could barely see him in the darkness. There were no lights on in my room or anywhere close-by. The ocean was a soft roar in front of us, the beach quiet, deserted at that late hour.

“But did you do it?” I asked, much more interested in him than some far-off horror show starring futuristic me.

“That’s personal,” he said quickly, but without the shut-me-down tone he’d used on the drive down.

“Yeah, but you can tell me. I’m your best friend.” As I said that, I recalled our vow to keep our friendship alive—and how fast he’d let me down. Though I was pretty sure I hadn’t been replaced, I didn’t actually know for a fact. “I mean, I *guess* I’m still your best friend,” I tacked on hesitantly.

“I think there’s a sharp knife in the kitchen. You want me to go get it? We could do the blood brothers thing... like Tonto and the Lone Ranger...” He grinned and toasted his beer in my general direction, and it was my turn to do the toe jab. He was too far away for anything else, and I didn’t want to fall out of my chair trying.

“Fucker,” I said as I took a sip and then added, “I’ve got dibs on the Lone Ranger!”

“Fine, *Kemo Sabe*, I got no problem being your faithful little sidekick.”

I snorted. “Speaking of little,” I said, looking pointedly at his crotch, “did you get a blow job from that guy or not?”

“Dude. Seriously! Slamming my dick—which you know nothing about, by the way—is not the way to get secrets out of me.”

Out of nowhere, I fired back, “I’ve seen it in the shower.”

My eyes must’ve been getting adjusted to the darkness, because I saw the surprise on his face, which probably matched my own, followed immediately by an arch look toward my fly. “Yeah, well, I’ve seen yours too, asswipe, so don’t even front like you’re packing more than me, because you’re not!”

Hearing him cop to checking me out thrilled me for some inexplicable reason. “Ha! I knew you’d been looking!” I was way too jazzed by this news to care it was after midnight, and our sleeping neighbors didn’t want to hear our drunken stupidity.

“Shut up. *Jesus!*” he hissed, quickly glancing up and around, but no lights came on. We were safe for the moment. “And you just admitted to looking too,” he reminded me, his voice soft but clear. “So whatever. All guys look if they get the chance. If they say they don’t, they’re lying.”

This was probably the weirdest conversation we’d ever had. We’d talked about sex back when we were young and just starting to figure things out, of course, but not like this. It was almost like he was taunting me, and my dick was getting interested even though there wasn’t a girl in sight. And Deacon was not only a guy but also my *best friend*, so even if my cock had taken a sudden and unfathomable interest in boy-on-boy nookie, he wasn’t the person to be doing it with.

Not that it had...

I should've been smart and changed the subject, or even packed it in for the night, but I was well and truly drunk, which meant the opposite of smart. "Okay, I'll take a hit for looking. And fine, nobody's gonna kick you out of bed because of the size of your dick. Happy now? So spill it. Blow job or no?"

This had somehow become prized information for me, and I wasn't going to stop until he answered one way or the other—or told me to fuck off and die. I hadn't gotten that particular message yet, so I soldiered on.

"Dude. Seriously. Why do you even care? I mean, you've probably done every position in the *Kama Sutra*. Why do you care if I got a fucking blow job or not?"

He had a good point. I couldn't explain exactly *why* I wanted to know so badly. I just knew I did. But he was looking at me curiously, and I figured maybe he'd tell me what I wanted to know if I quit being such a dick. I thought back to the last letter I'd gotten from him, when he'd told me he was starting to get busy with some guys, and figured that was probably as good a reason for my nosiness as any.

"I guess because it feels like that's where we left off. We were writing letters back and forth. The last one I got, you told me you weren't gonna die a virgin, and I was waiting for the next letter to find out what happened and who with and how the party went, but you left me hanging. No more letters." I slumped back into my chair, my empty beer bottle dangling from my fingertips, and let my head fall sideways to stare at him. His face was in shadow, but I could see he was watching me. "It was like being hooked on a TV show, and just when shit got really good, it suddenly got cancelled."

"If me not dying a virgin is what counts for 'really good' for you, you have seriously oversold your own bedroom adventures, Tucker."

I growled at him. Honest-to-God growled. "Jesus, Deacon, what's the fucking big deal? It's not like I'm asking you if you screwed the whole chess club!"

"Well, don't even worry about that. Didn't happen."

"Thank God."

"The blow job was okay. Dicks are bigger than they look when you try to get one in your mouth," he said. I gaped at him as he got up, not even a little bit wobbly. "See you in the morning. Take some Advil, dude, or you're gonna be the one on life support, drunk ass!"

I was still sitting there with my mouth hanging open when the glass door *thunked* shut behind him. For some reason it had never occurred to me he might be the one doing the blowing. I thought about it for about thirty seconds, long enough for my brain to start putting together a really interesting picture of Deacon on his knees with some guy's dick in his mouth. At that point, I decided going to bed was a great idea, and I hoped maybe I would've forgotten all about the whole conversation by morning.

Chapter Nine

Morning dawned for me well after ten o'clock, when I finally woke up—or came to, if I'm being honest. My headache wasn't too bad, just a dull throb thanks to the pills Deacon had left on my nightstand, but my eyes were burning and gritty, and my mouth felt like I'd sucked on a roll of duct tape all night. I needed to pee, but my dick was hard because morning wood wasn't scared off by a little too much hooch. Since I was lying face down on the bed, I gave my hips a tentative flex to see if maybe I could just rub off right there on the mattress without even having to turn over or get lube or anything. It was the epitome of lazy, but I was down to two days of freedom left, so I felt deserving. It wasn't great but the mattress was firm and the sheets were smooth, and even if it wasn't enough to finish me off, it would definitely get me going. I flexed my hips again, getting into the spirit of things. After a few seconds it started to feel good and I moaned.

Suddenly a page turned loudly right beside my head and Deacon, sounding bored, said, "Dude. I thought the first thing they taught you guys was situational awareness skills. Did you sleep through that class or what?"

My hips stuttered to a halt, and I bit down hard on my bottom lip. My dick was not happy about getting its plans derailed, and somehow Deacon's close presence wasn't the bucket of cold water it should've been. Also, I wasn't completely awake or even completely sober yet, so none of my filters were in place.

"I knew you were there," I mumbled, my voice thick and crusty with sleep. "Just thought you might like a little free hot-guy porn to get your day started." I cocked my head just enough to get one eye clear to look at him. He was propped up on the pillows he must've brought from his bed, back in my hoodie and his old sweats, reading the spaceship book, and I was pretty sure he had a Bloody Mary on the bedside table.

"You should see yourself before you start bragging," he suggested, lips quirked enough for me to know he was fighting back a smile. That was a good sign.

"Just be glad I didn't wake up with gas."

He snorted and made a disgusted face at the thought. "Don't worry. I am."

My mouth was as dry as the pages of his book, and his drink was just sitting there, tempting me. Since I couldn't keep doing what I wanted to be doing, stealing his drink seemed like a decent alternative, especially since he didn't seem very interested in it. Of course, about the time I was halfway across his lap reaching for it and my erection was sliding into his leg, I realized the flaw in my plan.

He didn't freak out, which was nice. He just looked down his nose at me like I was an irritating six-year-old instead of a full-grown naked man lying across his body, half humping his leg. "I seriously hope they have some girls at this party tonight. You won't be safe to let loose on the public for much longer if you don't get laid soon, Tuck."

I'd never flirted with another guy in my life, not *ever*. But there was just something about being there with him, the person I loved most in the world, warm and safe and turned-on, that cut through all my heterosexual inhibitions. Honestly, if he'd slid down in the bed and pulled me down with him, I probably would've gone. And who knows what that would've been like? Maybe good, maybe disastrous, but he didn't make a move, so we'll never know.

What did happen was this: I winked at him and flexed my hips a couple more times, boldly stabbing the tip of my wet cock into his thigh, then grabbed his drink off the table. "Let's hope." I nodded as I took a sip. It was good and I decided to claim it as my spoils of war. "So anyway, I'm confiscating this, and I'm gonna go shower. See you in ten, okay?"

I added the "okay" just to make sure I hadn't freaked him out, because even though I was half-asleep and operating in some weird bubble of leftover-drunk and early-morning horniness, part of me was functional enough to realize I was treading on very thin ice. With anyone else, I would've been about ten feet under by then, but I'd always been safe with Deacon.

"Sure, just do something with that before I see you again," he said, giving my dick a firm thump on the head.

"Planning on it," I promised as I pulled away, giving him an unashamed eyeful since there really wasn't any way to avoid it without getting prissy, which wasn't in my repertoire. There was a mirror above the dresser across from the bed. To my satisfaction, I could see him watch me walk away, his gaze moving appreciatively up and down my body until I lost sight of him as I stepped into the bathroom.

It was the best solo sex I'd had in a very long time.

We spent the rest of the day ignoring the majorly inappropriate way the morning had begun. In fact, I wouldn't actually have my big gay freak-out until several weeks later. I guess I just buried it in the back of my brain under all the other fucked-up shit in my life, an ever-growing pile the military was constantly adding to with rules, regulations, and demands. Life as a marine was rigid, the exact opposite of the not-give-a-shit mode I'd operated in through high school. I'd had a clue what I was getting into when I signed up, of course, but the reality was way more intense than my media-inspired expectations.

So we just went on like nothing had happened. By the time I made it to the kitchen, there were bacon, eggs, and biscuits ready on the stove, and although another Bloody Mary was tempting, I went for the coffee instead since I didn't want to spend the whole weekend drunk off my ass. *Just most of it.* Deacon had made himself another one, and he sipped on it while we ate and talked about everything from Michael Vick's dog-fighting conviction to Brittany Spears's zombie comeback performance to the Harry Potter movies. He told me about the new series he was reading, and I told him about my dad's latest girlfriend.

Once we got the conversational flow going, it carried us through the day, and I felt like I really and truly had my best friend back. It was the greatest Christmas present I could've possibly gotten, and the happiest I'd been in a long time.

The New Year's Eve party we were going to was one I'd heard about back at the base. Lots of guys in my platoon were from the Gulf Coast, and there was an air force base in Pensacola, which is where I'd be going to school in the spring. Therefore, the military was out in full force that night, only in party mode instead of fight mode.

Deacon and I rolled in around eight thirty, and the place they'd rented was already rocking. We dropped two twenties in the jar on the way in and started making the rounds. I saw some people I knew, a couple of guys and one girl who immediately took a liking to Deacon. I left him to fend her off as best he could and went to get us beers. By the time I got back, he seemed completely hooked as she told him her life story or the secrets of the universe or some riveting thing, because he took the beer from me with barely a glance. I don't think she even stopped talking long enough to breathe. He handed her the beer and quickly took mine for himself. After a few seconds, I realized they didn't need me watching them share souls or whatever it was they were doing, so I went and got myself another beer and found some other folks to talk to.

Chapter Ten

And that's how the night went. The girl—her name was Ashley Peterson, for what it's worth—glued herself to Deacon like he was her heaven-sent wish. After the second time I strolled by with beers and got nothing more than an impatient thanks for my troubles, I decided to let that play out however they wanted.

As I watched their private twosome from the distant sidelines, it occurred to me that maybe whatever happened at school to fuck Deacon up also made him second-guess his sexuality. Maybe he was thinking about giving the girls' team another round at bat, and Ashley, who he never had to see again after tonight, would be the perfect test.

But then I remembered his eyes just hours earlier, following my naked stroll from the bed to the bathroom, and how he looked like he wanted to throw me down and taste every inch of me. Deacon hadn't looked confused at all then. Not to mention I'd rubbed my dick on him. He hadn't looked confused then either, and he hadn't pushed me away. He'd just watched, his lids low enough that I couldn't get a read on what he was thinking. He might've been giving me silent hell for being an idiot or kicking his own ass for being a coward and not going for what he wanted when it was right there on offer. I didn't know.

Wait... had I been on offer? My mind was stumbling over what I'd done that morning, tripping and falling over memories that made my heart pound and my palms sweat, but I was well into the booze, and my introspective skills wanted the night off more than they wanted to rip into my sexual psyche. Just when panic was really starting to set in, a pretty girl named Lauren bumped into me and spilled her beer down my leg, a good enough icebreaker for me. By the time twelve thirty rolled around, we were well acquainted with each other's tonsils, and I was thinking it was high time to end my dry spell. "Lips of an Angel" was pounding out of the speakers, and she was grinding on my leg—a sure sign she was on the same page with me about finding a bed—when I felt someone bump into me. There were Deacon and Ashley the Wondergirl.

It was late and we needed to figure out what the plan was, so I herded all of us toward the edge of the dance floor. Deacon had his arm snaked around Ashley's waist like somebody was going to try to snatch her from him if he didn't hold on tight, and goddamn, she was pretty but I really didn't get how he'd gone from gay to in-hetero-love in four hours.

“So what’re we doing?” I asked, and I could hear I sounded more pissed off than impatient, which made no sense. I had a sure thing lined up with Lauren, which should have been all that mattered. Deacon would still be my friend tomorrow whether he fucked his girl or not. My possessiveness of him seriously needed to take a chill pill.

“I’m outta here. Ashley’s got a car. She’s gonna drop me off at the condo.”

“Wait, what?” was all I could think of to say in the face of his unexpected news. He made it sound like she wasn’t going to be staying with him, but surely that wasn’t the case?

“I’m beat, dude. Stay and do your thing, it’s fine, whatever... But my back’s still jacked up from the other day and I gotta get home and take something.”

All I knew about his back was ten seconds of bitching last night about the couch. I was pretty sure I hadn’t missed a major injury. “Uhh...” I said, looking down at Lauren, who was almost embedded in my side. “If you’re ready to split, I can go too.” He shook his head, but I started the complicated process of getting free from her anyway. “No man, for reals, if you’re ready to go, let’s book.”

Lauren made a protesting squeak but I barely heard her. All I cared about was getting out of there with Deacon and no girls in tow. My dick was probably plotting to have my brain committed, but for once, my little head wasn’t ruling the day.

Deacon looked at me like I was crazy, which made three of them, but again, I didn’t care. “I don’t need to be driving anyway. Let’s go,” I said, reaching for his arm. He had the grace to shoot an apologetic look at the girl who’d spent the last two hours winding me up just to get dropped on her ass for her troubles, but he didn’t say no.

“Jesus, dude, you must be wasted,” he muttered as we headed for the door. “She was all over you. What’s your damage, man?”

“Just wasn’t interested,” I said, which must’ve been true, seeing as how I was walking out with him and leaving her pissed off and horny.

“You sure looked interested ten minutes ago. Give me the keys.” He nudged my hip with his hand and I dug in my pocket for the keys. The part about me being too drunk to drive was definitely a true statement.

“Yeah, well, so did you. You quit being gay and forget to tell me?” If that was the case, my stupidity from the morning had just gotten multiplied.

“Asshat, I was trying to look straight for your military friends. Marines don’t take too kindly to fags, last I heard.”

We’d gotten to my truck. I shoved him, and he hit the door and spun around, hands palm-side up, no fists yet but ready to do business. He’d lost some bulk in the last few months but he wasn’t about to go down easy. Not that I *wanted* to fight, but it was good to know he was still in there, paying attention and prepared. I didn’t like to think about him being vulnerable.

“Don’t call yourself that! And you didn’t have to fake anything for me. Those guys don’t know me. Anyway, even if they did, my friends are none of their business.”

“Not till they figure out your best friend likes dick. Then they’ll get real interested, I promise.”

There was about three inches between us and adrenaline was coursing in my veins like electricity through a live wire. We’d never been so close to a fight before, although what we were fighting about I couldn’t have said. Truthfully, I was wired way too tight about a million different things, and whatever weirdness was going on between him and me was just a small part of it.

Deacon must’ve realized I was all over the place, because he put a firm hand on my shoulder and said, “Tuck, chill out, okay? Let’s just go home, take a couple beers down to the beach, hang out for a while... I don’t wanna fight with you tonight.”

I stepped back a pace, walked a couple of circles, and sucked in some deep breaths. “Yeah, man, me neither.” I shook my head, hoping my life might start making sense again if I rattled things around in there. I’d just walked out on a gorgeous girl who was a sure thing when I hadn’t gotten laid in months. I was pretty sure I’d be kicking myself come morning, but I had no urge to go back and see if I could find her. “The beach sounds good. Let’s go.”

So yeah, my big gay freak-out didn’t hit until late February. I was scheduled to go to Pensacola for air traffic control school in March, and till then I was just doing whatever they told me to do, studying, staying in shape, and practicing with my M16. I probably wouldn’t ever see any live combat, but it was a good skill to have regardless, and I wanted to stay sharp. Plus, if the shit really hit the fan, anything could happen, including me having to shoot people.

I knew when I signed my enlistment papers that after graduation I'd probably be shipped off to the desert. But everything had been a lifetime away back then, and what I'd cared about most was just getting the fuck out of Birmingham. Now it was time to pay the piper. School, then an assignment, and chances were good my assignment was going to be in Afghanistan. I wasn't scared of death, per se, but I wasn't at all excited about getting blown up or captured and tortured by some radical freaks who didn't give a shit about the Geneva Convention.

Meanwhile, Deacon was settling in at UNCC. We were both in North Carolina but he was five hours away, and I wasn't going to get to see him again before I left for Pensacola, which bugged me a little too much. When I was down to one week before I headed out, every day that went by without a letter or an e-mail from him chapped me just that much more.

There was no logical reason for me to wig out. Things were back to normal between us. I'd gotten an e-mail from him the previous Thursday, and he'd mentioned possibly meeting a guy the next night for pizza. By the following Wednesday I'd had too many days to think about his date and nothing to tell me how it had gone—if the guy had turned out to be a jerk or if they were going to get gay married or if maybe he was in the middle of another meltdown and blowing me off for good. Not knowing was making me nuts, and that afternoon during a basic drill when I came way too close to popping off to my platoon sergeant, I suddenly realized I had a serious problem—and his name was Deacon Michael James.

That night I lay in my bunk, pissed with myself and even angrier at Deacon, although I realized he hadn't done anything wrong. He'd just been along for the ride on my crazy train. The only thing he'd done was stay on when things got weird instead of bailing out and running for cover.

No contact for a week wasn't a good enough reason for me to get my ass in a crack with The Man. Deacon was busy. He had tests to study for and papers to write and maybe even a new boyfriend. I was paranoid because of what had happened the last time he wrote a letter saying he'd met a boy, although I had no idea if that guy'd had any part in Deacon's meltdown or not.

It could've been that he hadn't gotten invited to pledge the fraternity he liked, or maybe the place hadn't been as open-minded about gays as he'd hoped. Or maybe he'd just gotten off on a bad foot and needed a fresh start. Regardless, I had no reason to go diving off into the scary deep end just

because he'd skipped writing for a few days. It was probably nothing. He was a guy. I was lucky to have as many letters and e-mails as I did.

Once I got that worked out, it was time to figure out why I was obsessing about him like a teenage girl over her favorite movie star. That gay crap I'd pulled at the beach was not me, and letting my worries about him make me reckless on the job was *absolutely* not me. But the more I thought about it, the more I realized I really wasn't that far off the mark with my analogy. Going to Pensacola was one step closer to shipping out, and once I was overseas, I was on my own. A letter really would be my only connection to my former life and everyone I was leaving behind.

And when I thought about the people I was going to miss, he was in every memory. Things had gotten better with my parents, but we were never going to be the modern-day *Brady Bunch*. We just had too much bad history, and yeah, some of it was my fault, but I was a fucking kid with no control when the big stuff happened. So although I'd made peace with the past—mostly—and was on pretty good terms with everybody, I wasn't going to be calling my mom and dad every time I got a chance to use a telephone.

Deacon, though, he'd been there when my life hit rock bottom, and he'd reached down and pulled me up without even realizing it. Offering me friendship when I had no one, offering me a place to run to when I couldn't stand the sight of the adults in my life... that had made all the difference in the world to me. And if somebody doped me up with truth serum and asked, "Who do you love the most?" the answer would be Deacon.

No girl had ever mattered to me even a fraction as much as he did, and my folks sure couldn't compete. That was the sad truth of the matter, and I decided my future, with all the potential dangers hidden in the mix, was bearing down on me and making me a little bit crazy. All my emotional eggs were in Deacon's basket, and in the heat of the moment, for those few days back at the beach, I had gotten confused about the limits. Just because I loved him most didn't mean I was queer. It didn't have to mean anything; it just was the truth of my life at that moment in time.

I couldn't rewind my relationships with my family and make them better, but someday I'd find someone to love who'd fill the space Deacon was filling. In the same way, he'd find some guy to take my place. Getting replaced was what I'd been afraid of the summer we'd said good-bye at the lake house, and obviously those fears were still giving me hell. But like he said, that was just

the way life worked. He couldn't be all mine forever. And one day, when I finally met the girl of my dreams, I wouldn't care anymore. It was hard to see that ever happening, but lying in my cold bed that lonely night, it was hard to see much of anything good.

Chapter Eleven

I was well into my air traffic training at the air force base in Pensacola when UNCC let out for spring break. Deacon sent me an e-mail the week before saying he was coming down and wanted to meet up with me when he got to town. I had pretty much gotten over whatever it was that had made me get so weird with Deacon at New Year's. After my existential breakdown in February, I'd stuffed all my inappropriate man love for him into a neat little box in the back of my mind, shoved under a giant pile of things to worry about later, possibly when I was eighty and didn't have anything else to do.

With my issues safely buried, I was pumped to see him, already thinking about beach volleyball, beer, and possibly a round of golf at one of the thousands of courses along the coast. When he texted me on the day of his arrival, I told him to meet me at Bamboo Willie's, a tourist trap for sure, but the beer was cold and they were pretty liberal with I.D. checks. We could get our party started off right.

I don't know what I expected, but he hadn't actually mentioned other people, so I was more than a little surprised when he climbed out of the backseat of a car full of guys. I was pretty sure they were all gay, which meant he was probably fucking one of them. And that wasn't *supposed* to matter, but it did, bumping and clanking around in my mind like a loose bottle in the back of my truck. On top of *that* aggravation, one of the guys was a total flamer. I was trying to be open-minded and cool and not a possessive jerk, but so much unanticipated gayness at one time was a little overwhelming.

He introduced them as friends—Greg, Charlie, and Todd—and everyone shook my hand and looked me up and down like I was on the menu. I squared my shoulders as well as my jaw and let them check me out, glad I was wearing a T-shirt which showed off all my hours in the gym. If they were going to look, I wanted them to have something to see.

Deacon noticed my posturing, of course, and rolled his eyes. "Calm down, *Kemo Sabe*. Nobody's confused about which side of the bed you get up on."

I hadn't been thinking that, but since they all laughed, I forced a grin and let it go.

"You're not gonna start wearing polyester or whatever the fuck that is, are you?" I asked Deacon a few minutes later as we followed along behind his

friends, glaring pointedly at the lime-green pants sashaying up the sidewalk a few steps ahead of us.

Deacon arched one heavy eyebrow at me and shrugged. “I don’t know... Why? You don’t think it’d be a good look for me?”

His comment was a clear invitation to look, at least as far as I was concerned, and since I hadn’t seen him in months, I let my eyes run over him freely. I wasn’t completely convinced he was okay after whatever colossal fuckup had almost taken him out last fall, but to my relief, he looked really good and really healthy. In fact, it seemed like he got hotter every time I saw him. He was hitting the gym again. His blue Abercrombie T-shirt was stretched tight across his shoulders, and his calf muscles were round and firm. His skin was clear, and already had a hint of tan though spring had barely begun back in North Carolina. His dark stubble was cut close and smooth, and his hair was the usual perfect mess.

I was checking him out because I was concerned about him. There wasn’t supposed to be anything sexual about it, yet my whole body tingled in all the wrong places, and I realized I wasn’t far off from popping wood. I flushed guiltily, which he noticed of course, because he could always read my face like a pro. I could see the questions forming in his eyes—he was about two seconds from asking me what was wrong—when we got interrupted. It was Candice, a girl I’d started dating a couple of weeks ago. She could dump me on my head tomorrow and I wouldn’t care, but I was thrilled out of my mind to see her at that particular moment.

“Hey you!” she gushed up at me, all happy and smiling, wrapping one of her arms around mine. “I got your message that you guys were getting lunch here, and I was in the area. Mind if I join you? I want to meet the famous Deacon!”

She beamed at Deacon. He flashed a big smile, and they hugged like long-lost best friends. Deacon was apparently the greatest faker this side of the Mississippi, because although she’d heard a lot about him in a relatively short amount of time, he hadn’t even known she existed until that very instant.

They did the get-to-know-you chitchat till we got inside the restaurant. Once we were seated and had a bucket of Coronas on the way, Deacon introduced Candice to his friends. She did a good job of acting like she had lunch with a tableful of gay guys every day, but I was pretty sure this was her virgin run, and since I hadn’t mentioned Deacon’s sexuality, it had to be all kinds of surprising for her.

Thankfully, Deacon's friends were cool, Mr. Lime-Green Polyester Pants notwithstanding, and they monopolized Candice, flirting with her and asking her about where to go for good food and nightlife. While she basked in the glow of their attention, Deacon leaned in and whispered, "Nice, Tuck. You coulda given me a little fucking warning!" He shot a look at Candice, who was telling her new best friends about her favorite place to go bikini shopping. I hoped they weren't in the market for thongs, but honestly, nothing would've surprise me.

"Yeah, whatever. We've just been going out a couple of weeks," I said, much more carelessly than she deserved. "And it's not like you haven't been keeping secrets too. Which one of these guys are you banging?"

"None." He shook his head when I looked doubtful. "Not my type, dude. They're just friends."

They seemed nice enough, and although I wasn't an expert judge of fuck-worthy guys, they were all pretty good-looking, which meant either his type was ugly assholes, or he was lying. However, I hadn't seen him in months, and I wasn't in the mood to argue. "Fine. Whatever you say, man."

He frowned at me again, but I bumped my leg against his under the table and whispered, "Seriously. I believe you." He finally seemed to relax, and the rest of the lunch was smooth and easy, which made the lie totally worth it.

Later, when I thought about what happened next—and I did think about it a lot, though I never admitted it to him—I blamed the whole thing on the booze, just like I blamed the weirdness at New Year's on my freak out about getting blown away in the desert.

It was his last night in town. We'd met up a couple more times after that first lunch, but there'd always been other people around. We'd gotten in a couple hours of volleyball, but no golf, and definitely no chance to just hang out and be us. Jonesing pretty bad for some one-on-one time, I got a little overeager, banging on the door of their hotel room like an angry dad looking for his daughter. One of Deacon's friends, I think it was Greg, jerked the door open and rolled his eyes when he saw me.

"Chill your engines, Romeo. We'll be outta here in ten and he'll be all yours," he said, then sang out, "Deacon, your date's here!" which earned him a few laughs from the peanut gallery.

I expected Deacon to deny it or defend me, but instead he just looked up from his book and smiled, and I smiled back in spite of wanting to punch pretty much everyone else in the room. “Great. You ready?”

We couldn’t go back to my place since I lived on the base, so I took him to a cool spot on the beach far enough out of town to not be overrun with college kids. We left our flip-flops at the steps and headed west into the breeze and the sunset. He was already nut-brown after only a week in the sun, and his teeth flashed that much brighter when he smiled. He’d smiled a lot over the past few days, and I was thankful. It still irked me that he hadn’t told me what happened, and I couldn’t help but wonder if he’d told his new friends. In the end, though, I pushed the thought to the side. He’d chosen to spend his last night in town with me, and I wasn’t going to ruin it being jealous of some guys he’d only known a few months.

Chapter Twelve

We walked for almost two miles, then turned back, talking the whole time. Deacon told me about his classes, some funny stories about the guys he was traveling with, and how he was thinking about taking some creative writing classes just for fun. I had my own funny stories—life after boot camp left a lot more room for pranks and general fuckery. We kept it light and easy for most of the night, but after dinner we ended up back in his room with our traditional bottle of Jack. This time I skipped the Coke and we both sipped it straight from the bottle, sitting on the little balcony off his room, listening to the waves whisper in the dark.

I hadn't been in their room before that night, so whatever I'd *thought* about the sleeping arrangements had only been guessing on my part. However, the combination of two queen beds, two small chairs, and very little floor space made it pretty obvious what was going on. The beers we'd had with dinner were working on me, and about halfway down the bottle, I heard myself ask for the second time that week, "So. Which one of them are you banging?"

Deacon tipped the bottle up to his mouth, and I watched his lips twist into a Cheshire cat-like smile before he took his sip. As he passed it back, he looked at me, but didn't answer.

I snagged the bottle roughly. "Seriously man, which one?" I took a bigger swig than normal and barely managed not to choke.

He cut his eyes at me. "I knew you were lying."

"Whatever. It wasn't the time or place to talk about it. Now is."

"So what makes you so sure I'm fucking any of them?"

I didn't want to waste time debating it, so I cut right to the chase. "Uhhh... because you're all fucking gay? If I spent a week in a hotel room with three hot chicks, don't you think I'd be getting some?"

He kept smiling, totally relaxed, while I was tense and could feel the first stirrings of anger. I had really hoped to be cool and not do the whole jealous caveman routine, but I wasn't succeeding.

"So you think they're hot, huh?" he asked, like that was a normal next step in the conversation. He'd totally ignored my actual question.

I took another small pull off the bottle, then passed it back to him. “I don’t know. I guess. Charlie dresses like a teenager, but whatever. They’ll do.”

“Which one do you think I’m fucking?” He watched me as he spoke, his eyes warm with amusement and fondness, a look I’d spent years basking in. It settled me just a little, though the thought of him fucking any of them swam around in my gut like a virus.

“I don’t know, which is why I asked. How come it’s such a big secret?”

He shrugged, gazing into the darkness toward the sea. “You know me... I always want to know what you’re thinking,” he said, and after a few seconds, took a drink. “That’s way more interesting than who I happen to be fucking.”

I settled back in my too-small chair and tried to figure out what it was he wanted to hear, but I was a little too drunk to sort it all out, and the chair was way too uncomfortable for deep thinking. After a minute I stood up. “Come on. These chairs are the pits. Worse than the fucking couch at Mom’s condo. Let’s go inside.”

“Good call.” He followed me inside, leaving the door open. It was dark out, but we could hear the ocean, which was all we really cared about.

He sat down on one of the beds. I flopped down next to him and reached for the bottle. “So, where were we? You wanna know which one I think you’re fucking?”

“Yeah.”

I felt like there was a catch somewhere, and I searched my mind trying to find it, but finally I gave up. “Greg, I guess.”

“Greg, huh?” He pressed his lips together and nodded thoughtfully. “Why him? Do you think he’s the hottest?”

Greg was tall like me and pretty buff—but his hair was blonder and he had a northern accent. I couldn’t see Deacon hooking up with Todd the Flamer, even if he did have an ass like an Olympic speed skater. The other guy, Charlie, was cute like Justin Bieber, and didn’t seem like Deacon’s type either. Not that I had any idea what Deacon’s type was, which is why I was asking in the first place.

“I guess,” I answered, when Deacon nudged my ankle with his toe.

“Which one would you fuck?”

I was still lost in my odd contemplation of Deacon's toes, and his question caught me totally off guard. "Uhhh... none of them?"

"What if you had to?"

"Why the fuck would I ever *have* to?" I glared at him over the rim of the bottle, wondering if maybe he wasn't as okay as I'd thought.

"I don't know. What difference does it make? Just assume you have to pick a guy to fuck. Who would you pick?" He took the bottle back. It was well below half, and we were both feeling it.

I shook my head. "No way. I'm not picking any guy to fuck without knowing why first."

He rolled his eyes and sighed, then leaned his head back and thought it out. "Okay. A terrorist sends you a letter and says he's planning to blow up a pediatric hospital in Akron, Ohio, if you don't fuck a guy in the next three days. Don't go to the police, and don't try to bluff your way out of it because he'll know."

"What kind of fucked-up terrorist is this?" I asked, stalling, but also playing along because this was the Deacon I loved, making up stupid stories and scenarios and dragging me down the rabbit hole with him.

"Uh, the regular kind?" he said, one eyebrow cocked. "Like sending a kid wearing a backpack loaded with bombs into a crowded market is normal?"

"Yeah, okay... I see your point." I thought over the situation he'd outlined. The Marine Corps was big on considering all the crucial available information before taking action. "Why Akron?"

"Because there's absolutely nothing bad to say about people from Akron. No way for you to weasel out of it because you don't like them."

"Dude. It's a pediatric hospital," I snapped, glowering at him. "What kind of fucked-up soldier do you think I am?"

He smirked, reminding me of my mission, which was to pick a guy to fuck for his weird *fictional* scenario. "Do I only get to choose between these three guys?"

"Nope. You can pick anybody. Celebs, professional athletes, the president... as long as he's a guy, he's on the table."

"George Bush is *never* gonna be on *my* fucking table," I said with a shudder.

“Cool. One down, only a few thousand left to go.”

“Do I get to top or do I have to bottom?”

He grinned. “You get to pick.”

“Well that’s a no-brainer,” I muttered, then set myself to the task of picking a dude. I toyed with visions of me with Wentworth Miller or Jake Gyllenhaal, two guys that I—even in my most hetero state—could tell were good-looking. In my impromptu scene with Miller, he kept slamming me down on the bed and calling me his bitch, and Gyllenhaal showed up in his marine uniform from *Jarhead*, another huge no-go. Finally I gave up on them and moved on to some athletes I knew were hot—Tom Brady and David Beckham, but still nothing. They were drowning in women and not even a little bit interested in me.

“Ticktock, Tuck,” Deacon said. I flipped my head sideways to look up at him and suddenly I had my man.

“You, obviously,” I announced. While he stared at me with his mouth open, which only made me think of a blow job a little bit, I snagged the whiskey back and toasted him with the bottle before downing the last of it.

“Me? Seriously?” He sounded surprised, but not in a bad way, probably because it was *his* stupid mind-fuck game in the first place. He had to have guessed he might be my choice, since he was on the guy table too.

“Of course *you*.” I stuck the empty bottle in my crotch so my hands would be free to list off my points. I stuck up one finger and said, “A: You’re already gay, so it’ll only be freakishly weird for one of us.” My second finger went up. “B: You’re my best friend, so if I have to do something insane to stop a major disaster from happening, you’re the person I’d pick to help me.” I raised finger number three. “And, C: You’re good-looking—for a guy—and you’re my best friend, which gets you points yet again. If I’ve got to have butt sex, I might as well enjoy it, and I figure my best chance would be with you.”

He got a good laugh out of my reasoning, then patted me on the chest. “Aw, honey, you say the sweetest things when you’re drunk off your ass.”

“Yeah, I know. You’re lucky to have me.” I pulled the bottle from between my legs and tilted it up to my mouth, but it was empty. He took it from me and stood up.

“I think there’s some beer in the cooler if you want one. You’re staying here tonight, right?”

“No place for me to sleep,” I mumbled, all the booze suddenly catching up with me.

“They won’t be home till morning. It’s our last night here. I’m driving. They’re planning to sleep all the way home.”

“So your boyfriend’s out fucking around on you?” Talking about sleeping arrangements reminded me I still didn’t know which guy he was fucking. It also stirred up my irrational annoyance about the whole situation, and I was way too drunk to keep my feelings out of my voice.

“Chill out, man. Jesus,” he said as he came back from the bathroom with two dripping bottles of Corona. “I’m not fucking any of those guys, which I told you on day one. They’re just friends. Why’s that so hard for you to believe?”

He opened my beer and handed it to me, then flopped back into his spot beside me. I took a drink and tried to unscramble my brain. “I don’t know. I guess just because I don’t get how you could be this close with somebody—” I flailed my hand over the bed and the little bit of room between us, “sleeping in the same bed and all—and not be fucking them.”

“I’ve slept with you lots of times, and we never fucked.”

“Yeah, because we didn’t *want* to,” I pointed out forcefully.

Deacon answered with a shrug, which I took to mean he got my point but wasn’t totally convinced, and let his head drop back on the headboard. We remained quiet for a minute. The sound of the waves filled up our silence; my eyes drifted shut. It was well after midnight, and I was way wasted, so sleep was quickly becoming my first priority.

“Did you know sexuality is actually spectral? I learned that in Intro to Human Sexuality.”

I cracked open one eye and peered up at him. All I could see was his chin. “Uhh... actually I’ve got no fucking idea what you’re talking about.”

He slid down till we were even in the bed. I sat my beer on the nightstand, then rolled over so I could look at him while he told me this new information he’d learned. We were so close our knees were touching.

“For most people, sexuality isn’t absolute. It’s like colors. There’s pure white and pure black, but there’s also a million shades of gray in-between.”

“Hmmm... Okay. But I still don’t get it.”

“Some people are absolutely straight, and some are absolutely gay, but most are actually somewhere in-between.”

“Then how come more people aren’t gayer?”

“Because they feel pressured by society—family, religion, bosses, whatever—to follow the norm and date the opposite sex. Whenever they feel the urge to get with someone of the same sex, they suppress it because it’s too dangerous to their way of life.”

I yawned and he scrunched up his face at my breath, which was fair. “And why are you telling me this?” I grinned evilly and scooted a little closer. He looked vaguely horrified but soldiered on with my unwanted lesson in human sexuality.

“Well, in case you ever do end up having to fuck some dude in order to save a kids’ hospital or an old folks’ home or whatever, and I’m not available, I just want you to know it might not be so bad. Maybe you’re a little more gay than you think you are.”

I tried to think about that, but my brain was going down for the last time. Evaluating my level of gayness was going to have to wait for another day. “Nah, I don’t think so, man.” I mumbled, reaching back and dragging the sheet over me. “But anyway, I’m not taking any chances with some jerk I don’t even know if the future of the world’s at stake. You make sure your ass is available.”

I couldn’t see him anymore but I could hear him smile. “Yeah. Okay, Tuck, I’ll be ready.”

I woke up at some point later and could hear voices talking softly on the other side of the room. I tensed up, but Deacon whispered, “It’s cool. They’re back early but they’ll figure it out. Go back to sleep.” And I did, with his arm wrapped snug around my waist and our bodies pressed tight together all the way down to our feet.

Chapter Thirteen

I didn't see Deacon again for nearly eight months—until the end of the year. I wasn't avoiding him. We were just both busy and our schedules didn't line up. We talked about doing a golf trip on his fall break, but the military had other ideas for me that week, sending me out to Oklahoma City for special weapons training. That would've actually been fun except I knew it meant I'd be shipping out soon. No matter how much I tried to be cool about it, on the inside I was freaking the fuck out.

We e-mailed each other every few days and talked on the phone every couple of weeks. We talked about the classes we were taking and baseball and football and our parents and politics and the shit they were passing off as food in our respective cafeterias.

What we did not talk about was that night in his hotel, or the next morning, when my alarm buzzed in my pocket at five and I woke up to his arms still around me. I wasn't drunk anymore, and there was no way I had him confused with Candice, since she never had morning wood, yet I just lay there for a minute, taking it all in. Being close to him like that definitely felt *different*, but not creepy or disgusting. I didn't feel the need to rub all his cooties off me with sandpaper or take a shower in bleach or go fuck ten women to prove my manhood. When he groaned and hugged me to him just a little bit tighter, I still didn't wig out, even though his boner was pressed tight against my ass. Who knows? I might've even gone back to sleep, but my alarm buzzed again, and since we were practically welded together, he felt it too.

“Fuck” was all he said once he came to enough to figure out what was going on.

“If you're serious, I'm watching. Otherwise, shut up,” came a grumpy voice from just on the other side of him. I flinched and reared up to see who was in bed with us.

“It's okay. It's just Todd.” Deacon squinted up at my scowl. “I promise nobody debauched you last night but me.” He shot a quick look down at where my ass remained jammed into his crotch. “Sorry.”

“Jesus.” I wasn't sure if I was praying for mercy or forgiveness or deliverance.

I had to get back to base in time to get ready for work, so whatever freak-out I needed to have about spooning all night with my gay best friend had to wait. He helped me find my flip-flops, wallet, and keys and walked me to the door. When he made to hug me, I actually wasn't sure if he was going to kiss me or not.

"It was good seeing you, Tuck." He gave me a hard squeeze and a couple of pats on the back, then stepped away. "Thanks for hanging out this week."

I felt awkward and confused, not much different from when I slept with a girl I had no intention of ever seeing again. Only this was Deacon, and I did want to see him again, and all we did was sleep. I didn't even touch him with my dick this time. He touched me with his...

"Yeah, no problem." I scratched my elbow, realized I needed to pee something awful, and wanted out of there like the place was on fire. "Listen, I've got to run. I'll see you this fall or something, okay?"

"Yeah, man, sounds good." He twitched his lips into a half smile and gave me a fake salute, then stepped back into his room. That was my cue to leave, and I didn't run to my truck, but it was a near thing.

So yeah, we didn't talk about that *at all*, and after a while, I got my shit together yet *again*, and quit worrying about where I fell on the color wheel of gayness versus straightness. Deacon was the exception to all my normal rules of engagement because of how important he was in my life. One night in bed with him didn't make the other guys in my platoon look any hotter or more fuckable than they had before, which was not at all. If my sexuality turned a darker shade of gray when he was around, I'd just have to live with it.

I went home for Thanksgiving but he didn't. He had a project due the first day after break and said he was spending the holiday with his study partner. I didn't ask any questions, and he didn't volunteer anything, which had become the norm with us about relationship stuff. It just seemed easier that way.

I got my orders in early December. I was going to Afghanistan in February. Knowing for sure I was going—as opposed to just knowing someday I'd probably go—put a knot in my gut the size of a bowling ball. I think more than anything else, it was the fear of the unknown. Plus a few hundred nightmare

stories I'd heard from guys who'd been over there. Some of them were made up just to scare us, but a lot of them were true. They all mixed together to make a pretty nasty cocktail of fear and anxiety, and all I could do was close my eyes and slam it back and hope for the best.

I didn't tell him about my deployment until New Year's Eve. We were at the lake house, just the two of us. We had to leave by noon the next day so I could get home and pack. I was flying back to base, but leaving my truck at my folks' house while I was overseas. He didn't know about any of that yet. I needed desperately to talk to him but I kept putting the moment off, because until I put it out there, everything would be normal and sane. There'd be no talk about me possibly dying or coming home missing an arm or a leg or even my mind. Once that particular conversation got rolling, I had things I wanted to say, and some of them weren't pretty.

We were outside on the deck in his grandfather's handmade Adirondack chairs. It was cold and he was wearing my Marine Corps hoodie he'd walked off with last New Year's. He'd never made a habit of taking my things, but he must've wanted my sweatshirt, and I must've wanted him to have it, because neither of us ever said a word about it. He'd repaid me earlier in the day by giving me a hoodie from his school—dark green with the university emblem, a mining pick, on the front—and I was wearing it. We each had a bottle of cheap champagne we sipped as we watched the last of the fireworks explode over the water.

“How much longer will you be at Cherry Point?” he asked randomly. I'd been wanting to tell him. This was my opening.

“Umm... two weeks.”

He looked over at me, and we locked eyes for a minute. I think he knew what I was going to say next, but he asked anyway. “Where're you going?”

“Afghanistan.”

“Motherfucker,” he whispered.

“Yeah.” I took a long pull off my bottle and he just sat there staring at me, waiting for me to say something to make it all okay, I guess. No words could do that, but I tried anyway. “I won't be fighting, though. I'll be in a tower on the base. Probably safest place to be in the whole goddamned country.”

He shook his head slowly. “You don’t have to make up lies to make me feel better, Tuck. I’m not stupid.”

“I know you’re not.” I blew out a hard breath. “I am, though. God, I feel like the biggest ass in the world right now.”

“Jesus, Tucker, why?”

“Because I’m scared.” I hated saying it, hadn’t told anyone else how I really felt, but Deacon was the one person I trusted with this truth. “I’m not gonna be on the front lines. Yeah, it’s dangerous over there, but hell, people get killed all the time right fucking here. I’m losing my shit and I’ve got no right. I feel like such a goddamned coward. The guys who’ll be driving tanks and doing raids, those are the guys who need to be shaking in their boots. Not me.”

“That doesn’t change what’s happening to you, man. You’re going over there, and anything could happen and you know it. You’ve got as much right to be scared as anybody.”

I didn’t agree, and hearing those words from him didn’t change how I felt. But I didn’t want to spend any more time debating, so I tried to blow it off. “I’ll be good once I get there. It’s just the waiting that’s killing me. And so much change, you know... It’s a whole different world over there.”

“You’ll be fine, dude. You’re smart. You’re a survivor.” He forced a grin and punched my arm. “Hell, you survived your parents being married for ten years. If you can live through that, you can live through anything.”

“Yeah, no kidding.” I laughed, trying to go along, but he wasn’t buying it.

“You don’t have to be brave for me, you know. I’m not gonna think less of you, no matter what you say.”

So I opened up, running through the thoughts that had been rotting in my brain since I first signed up, about life and death and the awful place in between where lots of soldiers ended up. We sat out there for another hour, until our champagne was gone and the cold was too much to stand and we had to go back in. We didn’t figure out a way to end the war or even make it any less horrible, but somehow he helped me find a little bit of peace, and for that I was grateful.

Chapter Fourteen

It was after two when I finished brushing my teeth, well past bedtime for me. My alarm was set to go off in less than six hours, and tomorrow was going to be a long day. But Deacon's bedroom light was on and his door was cracked, and I found myself reaching for the knob instead of turning back to my room. I was on my own since his grandmother had gotten rid of our bunk beds, a discovery we made when we piled into our old room earlier, only to find one very sturdy-looking queen-size bed with a note that read "Surprise! I finally got you a big-boy bed. Tucker can use the room next door. Happy New Year! Love, Grams."

I don't think either of us was very happy about the change, and I didn't take much comfort when he said, "Well, I guess Grams really believes me when I say you're not my secret boyfriend."

Honestly, I wasn't even sure I believed it myself anymore, considering my very first thoughts as I eyed the heavy-duty headboard were of Deacon—holding on, ass up, getting fucked, and wondering just how much pounding he and the new bed could take. I shook the images out of my mind almost as quickly as they appeared, but not before the now-familiar finger of desire tickled me behind the balls, reminding me once again how seriously fucked up I was when it came to Deacon and my sexuality.

But by that night, I wasn't feeling overly conflicted, and I wanted to be with him for a few more minutes before our downtime was over. I pushed open his door, stuck my head in, and found him sitting up in bed. The lamp on his bedside table was shining on the textbook open on his lap. When he saw me, he smiled and flipped the book closed. "Come. Sit," he said, patting the spot next to him.

In the small room the bed was pushed up against the wall where our bunk beds had been, so I climbed over him and flopped into my old, familiar spot, shoulders against the wall, legs sprawled out across the bed and him.

"This is nice," I said, giving the bed a little jounce.

"Yeah." He dropped his book on the floor, and it made a loud *clunk* in the silence.

I felt a sudden shiver of weirdness crawl over me, making me wish I'd gone to my room after all. I didn't want to talk about me anymore, and I wasn't sure

what safe topics that left us with. The headboard loomed big and solid behind him. I knew it wouldn't take much to knock me out of my unconflicted state, and I didn't want yet another visit with him to end with me questioning myself. I had enough real-life drama coming up. I didn't need to go fishing for more.

But before I could think up a reason to go, he said, "There's something I need to tell you." The hollowed-out look on his face and the hoarseness in his voice that hadn't been there five seconds earlier guaranteed I wasn't going anywhere.

"Okay. Shoot," I said, keeping my own voice steady and serious because I could tell it was his turn for confession.

"You remember when everything got all fucked up for me back in Knoxville?"

"Uh... yeah. Like I could ever forget that. And you never told me what the fuck happened, which, you know... *not cool*," I reminded him.

"I know. I never told anybody," he said. He had his head down and his arms crossed tight over his middle, and I didn't need to be an expert in body language to know he was suffering. "Well, except for this one counselor, but he wasn't any help." He looked up, his dark eyes so full of sadness they took my breath away. "I'm sorry. I know you were worried. I wanted to tell you, but I couldn't. I just couldn't get the words out, you know?"

"What the fuck, Deacon?" I said, leaning forward and clamping my hand over his shin, the only thing I could reach without flopping around on the bed like a fish. "You can tell me anything. You *know* that."

"Yeah." He rolled his head back on the headboard, and I wondered what could be so extreme he had to build himself up to say it. Then he said the words, and I understood.

"I got raped at that party I went to, the one I told you about in my last letter."

His voice was soft and quiet, a perfect counterpoint to the explosions that immediately started going off in my head.

"Who?" I demanded, already getting up off the bed. I had two weeks before I had to leave, and vacation time to burn. I could fuck somebody up pretty bad and still make my flight out to hell.

"I don't know," he said, reaching out and bearing down on my shoulder to push me back down on my ass.

I wasn't ready to be subdued yet and resisted him. "Was it Elliston? Swear to God, Deacon, if he fucked you up, I will end his ass!"

"Jesus, would you calm down!" he shouted, and the tone of his voice and the look of anger on his face got my attention. "Seriously, Tucker, I don't know who it was. I was drunk, he was just some guy, we went to his room, it was fine for a while, then it wasn't. I never knew his name, or if I did, I don't remember it."

I felt like my heart was going to explode. I wanted to punch every guy at that school till I found the right one, then grind his face into the ground until there was nothing left but gore. "You know what frat house you went to, Deacon. You could pick him out if you wanted to," I spat furiously.

He sighed. "Dude. You have to chill out. There's nothing you can do about it now." When I made to contradict him, he shook his head. "Uh-uh. Stop. I just want you to know what happened, so you can understand why I bailed out on you when you were at boot camp. Leave him out of this, okay? This is just about you and me."

"How the fuck am I supposed to do that when this asswipe nearly fucking killed you?"

"He fucked me, Tuck. That's not quite the same thing."

"And raping somebody isn't the same thing as fucking them either." He stared at me, but didn't bite. I tried a different tack, hitting on the part where I came in and found him looking like death in the making. "Are you telling me you weren't thinking about offing yourself when I got to your house last Christmas?" I asked, still too loud but trying to get myself onto a smoother plane. "Because it sure looked like you were to me."

He stared straight ahead for a minute, not looking at me or really at anything, letting his mind go back in time a year, I suppose. Finally he said, "Yeah, I was thinking about it, but then you were there and you wanted to go to the beach. I decided that'd be better than eating the bottle of pills I had under my mattress."

"Do you still have them?"

He shook his head. "Nope. I flushed them after spring break."

I thought about spring break, his trip with his friends, us spending that last night together, sharing not just his bed but his pillow too. I wondered if I had helped him somehow, but wasn't sure how to ask. I also wanted to know how

many times he'd reached for the bottle and thought about taking them, but I didn't ask that either. Instead, I took a calming breath and went back to the rape itself.

"Will you tell me what happened?" I asked in the harsh, take-no-prisoners voice I normally only used in uniform.

"Can you keep your shit together?" he shot back, eyebrows high on his forehead. "It's not like I didn't want to kill him too, you know. That's why I never tried to find out who he was. I figured it was the surest way to keep us both out of jail."

I liked his use of the word *us*. I was glad that even then—though he couldn't tell me about the rape—he knew it would make me want to murder people. "I'll try." I leaned back against my wall, pulled my knees up, and crossed my arms over them. I was as restrained as I could get.

He watched me for a minute, then must've decided I was under control. "I told you about a guy I'd been fooling around with."

I nodded, just a bob of my head since I didn't want to do anything to disrupt his story.

"I went to his room and we had a couple of beers, for courage I guess, then we went over to the frat house. He drove. It was off campus." He glanced over at the bedside table. If I had to guess, I'd say he was hoping there was a beer-for-courage sitting there, but we were on our own.

"They had kegs and Jell-O shots. Half the people were already loaded when we got there. Cody was wasted too, of course, but he introduced me around. Everybody was drinking. I'm not using booze as an excuse, I'm just telling you everybody was fucked up, and I guess I thought I needed to get fucked up too." He hung his head and picked at the bedspread over his knees for a minute, but I kept quiet, not a word.

"Anyway, after a while I met this guy and he was all up in my space, talking to me and touching me and whatever, and finally I decided he was hitting on me. He was pretty hot so when he asked me up to his room I said yes."

This time when he stopped talking, he looked straight into my eyes, like he wanted to know what I was thinking. Since I wanted to murder the hot guy with my bayonet, I tried to keep my face clear of what was in my head. I simply said "Okay," and he kept going.

“We got up to his room—he was a senior so he had a room by himself on the top floor. He got me something else to drink and showed me some plaques or some shit, then we started making out.” He closed his eyes. “He unzipped my shorts, and I thought maybe he was going to give me a hand job or something, but then he pushed them all the way off and shoved me down on the bed. I landed on my back and he flipped me over like I was nothing. I couldn’t fight him off and I couldn’t get away. I was too drunk, and he was bigger and he had all the advantage.”

I just sat there for a minute, waiting to see if he was going to say more. After a little while he opened his eyes and we stared at each other. His eyes were pools of darkness, barely even visible in the dim lamplight, but I could see tiny glints I knew were tears. I didn’t want him to hurt any more over this. He’d hurt way too much already.

“I’m so sorry. All you gotta do is say the word, Deak, and I’ll help you kill him, or do anything else you need to help you get better.”

He smiled and my gut eased up the tiniest bit. “Thanks, man. I’ll keep that in mind.”

Chapter Fifteen

Time flies whether you're having fun or not. That's what I've always heard anyway, and for me, that's the way the next four years went. My first tour in Afghanistan lasted a year, and I ended up going for two more six-month stints after that. It wasn't great. It wasn't awful. My job kept me out of the limelight, both good and bad, and that suited me just fine. I had good assignments when I was stateside, and I moved up the ladder on schedule, got out with my sergeant's stripes when my six years were up, and was happy to get on with my life.

Me and Deacon stayed tight for the rest of my enlistment. We took a vacation together at least once every year, sometimes twice if we could work it out. We spent New Year's together whenever I could get free, usually at the beach or the lake house. I made it to his college graduation, and we spent a week in Maine to celebrate his master's. Two things remained true for us during those years: we never ran out of things to talk about, but if relationships happened to come up, the topic got changed really fast.

Since my relationships had the life span of a fly, there wasn't much to talk about anyway. But I was pretty sure that wasn't the case with Deacon. He just wasn't involved in any relationships. Getting raped had done a total number on him. He couldn't move on, and he did *not* want to talk about it. He'd given counseling one failed stab, and his backup plan was to man up and deal on his own. I didn't have a lot of confidence in that approach, since it didn't seem to be working, but I totally got why he didn't want to bring anybody else into his misery.

For the most part, I tried to be patient and respect his privacy. Early on, about three months after my first deployment, I asked him in a letter if he was seeing anyone yet. He answered:

I'm not dating anybody, and I don't know when I will. It's almost like PTSD or something, I guess... Guys my age don't want to wait around for me to get comfortable with them, and I'm not gonna jump into bed with some dude I barely know. Just going into a new guy's bedroom gives me the major creeps. Don't sweat it, though. I'll survive.

Every so often afterward, I mentioned something offhand about guys, dates, social life, whatever, and he always fluffed it off, then changed the subject. I

went along with him for a long time, but eventually his monkish existence started to wear on me. Not that I was dying for him to hook up with anybody. As long as he was single, I didn't have to worry about anyone taking my place, but even *my* selfishness had its bounds. It just didn't seem right for him to miss his whole sexual prime because of that asshole.

So, when he kept ignoring my efforts to bring it up and *start a dialogue*—a term I'd learned in one of my human resource management courses—I decided to be more direct. We'd managed to get together for a long weekend and were hiking in the Blue Ridge Mountains. It was a gorgeous spring day and we'd stopped to catch our breath and look at a waterfall. We were the only ones anywhere for miles, at least as far as we knew. It was a good time to get serious.

“So, what's the deal, man? You plan on *ever* dating again?” I asked conversationally, though we hadn't spoken a word for the last thirty minutes, so me hitting on this topic was beyond random.

“Why are you so hung up on this, Tuck?” he shot back, on the defensive immediately. He looked me straight in the eyes, shoulders square, dark eyes unwavering, and I considered letting it go, but his sterile existence was bugging me too much, and I couldn't.

“Because *you're* hung up on what happened, and it's time to move on. That guy hosed you over—I get that—but fucking hell, Deacon, it happened years ago. He shouldn't get to fuck you up for the rest of your goddamn life!”

Deacon took a step toward me, and for a few seconds I was afraid we were about to have our first real fight, but he stopped a few inches away and stared me down. “I know it goes against the Guy Creed of the Universe, but maybe I don't *want* to fuck every fuckable person I meet. Did you ever think about that? Just because you're trying to fuck your way through the entire female population on two continents doesn't mean everyone else has to.”

That was probably the ugliest thing he'd ever said to me, and I just stood there staring at him with my mouth hanging open for a minute, too shocked to think of anything smart to say back to him. A bug landing on my lip finally kick-started my brain, but all I ended up saying was, “Fine, man. That's just great. I hope you and your hand have a long and happy life together.”

It was a less-than-stunning comeback, and I stalked off down the trail fuming, mad at him and myself too. At some point, he caught up with me, and

we sulked for a while, then pretended like the whole conversation had never happened, but afterward I didn't mention his romantic life, or lack thereof, for a very long time.

My postmilitary plan was to get hired by the Federal Aviation Administration. I'd liked being a controller in the military and figured I'd like it even more as a civilian, where the pay was better and the chances of getting blown up were miniscule. Barring any major fuckups on my part, I was pretty much a shoo-in, but getting hired was a process, and just like any other government process, it took time.

I got my walking papers from the Marine Corps in August, 2014, and by Thanksgiving I was going stir-crazy. I was driving a forklift in the warehouse at my stepfather's trucking company and living in an efficiency apartment in downtown Birmingham. True to Deacon's earlier assessment of my life, my dick had already made a name for itself in several of the lowlife beer joints around town, and my old truck had gotten keyed more than its fair share of times as a result.

I needed to find a better job or better hobbies or both to tide me over till I got my official class date with the FAA. Biding time wasn't something I was any good at. The one thing in life I was looking forward to was Deacon coming home for Thanksgiving, so when I sent him a text to ask and he said he wasn't going to make it, I was epically crushed.

I tried to be cool, though, because I'd been hearing and reading the name Gus a lot lately, and if he was finally getting serious with someone, I didn't want to get in the way of progress. Or that was my official line, anyway, and I was determined to stick to it and encourage Deacon, without putting my foot in my mouth.

So I texted him back.

Bet your folks are bummed. Are you spending it with Gus?

It was Thursday night, the week before Thanksgiving, and I'd decided to skip Buffalo Wild Wings with the guys. I was watching football and drinking beer alone in my apartment instead. My phone buzzed and I read his response.

Yeah, but I'm coming at Christmas. No Gus.

Why no Gus?

He's going to his fam in Chicago.

Oh. So what you doing?

Going to a friend's house. You wanna come?

To your friend's house?

Yeah, doof, by way of my place. Spend thxgvg here.

His invitation was unexpected for some reason, but not out of the question. Planes flew both ways. If he wasn't coming south, there was no reason I couldn't go north. My mom would probably give me some hell for missing her dinner, but I'd make it up to her by eating twice as much turkey at Christmas.

Deacon had taken a job near Washington D.C. last year and moved to Leesburg, Virginia. I'd spent a couple of nights there on his couch when I first got my walking papers, and would've stayed longer, maybe even looked for a job there. But when Bob's forklift driver quit suddenly, one thing led to another, and I somehow got my ass stuck back in Birmingham.

Guess you're going to your mom's tho.

I'd spent a little too long thinking about my response, and he was already backpedaling.

I was, but rather come there if it's okay.

Course it is he shot back right away.

I let the game play on without me while I got busy booking a majorly overpriced ticket and renting a car, happier than I'd been since I got home.

Chapter Sixteen

I got to Deacon's place on Wednesday night around eight thirty, shivering from cold and slightly out of breath after running up two flights of stairs. He opened the door and smiled, and my heart picked up its already hurried pace. When he went to hug me, I grabbed him up and yanked him in hard, so happy to see him I couldn't help myself. I buried my face in his collar, breathed him in deeply, and felt like I was home.

"See. I told you Deak was in love with him. Look at them." A man's voice speaking from inside the apartment was my first clue we weren't alone.

"I know. Sucks to be Gus," a deeper voice agreed.

Deacon pulled away and handed me his beer in exchange for my bag. "Guys. Cork it."

I stepped inside, trying to get myself under control, and Deacon pointed at his friends on the sofa as he headed back toward his bedroom with my bag. "Josh and Dustin, this is Tucker. He's straight," he said, then muttered under his breath, "like I already mentioned a thousand times." He turned back to me and rolled his eyes as he motioned for me to follow him. "Come back here a second. I need to show you something."

Josh and Dustin smirked and made a big show of turning up the TV. Deacon just rolled his eyes and kept walking. I went along, wondering what he needed to show me the very second I arrived. By the time we got to his room, I'd decided it must be a puppy, but when he shut the door behind us and dropped my bag on his bed, all I could see on the floor was a towel and some dark gray boxer briefs.

Deacon saw me looking and nudged the laundry with his foot but didn't bother to pick it up. "We've got a slight issue."

"What's up?" I asked, taking a drink of his beer since it was in my hand. Nobody seemed tense or upset, so I couldn't imagine it being anything awful, and selfishly, I was really hoping I was right. I just wanted to hang out and chill with zero drama.

"Josh and Dustin have a seven a.m. flight out of Dulles, and they live two hours away. They wanna spend the night here."

“Where will they sleep?” I asked, thinking of the couch I’d slept on in the living room. It was great for one person, but there was no way two people could sleep there.

“On the couch. It pulls out into a bed.”

“Oh.” Suddenly he seemed really tense, which I couldn’t figure out. Of course, I was exhausted and not in the mindset to solve the complex travel arrangements of a nosy gay couple I didn’t even know. I flopped onto his bed and toasted him with the beer. “Cool. Problem solved.”

“Yeah, except for how—if they stay here—then *that’s* where you’ll be sleeping,” he said, looking pointedly at me on his bed. “Unless you want to get a hotel room, which, I don’t know... maybe you could still get one.”

One other thing that had stayed the same with us over the years: since that first time in Pensacola, whenever we slept together, which happened on random occasions for various reasons, we always ended up in each other’s arms. Once Deacon had even put pillows down the middle of the bed, and we still woke up smashed together. I usually ended up being the little spoon, but sometimes it was my arms wrapped around him. It was one of those things I’d given up worrying about. It was happening in our sleep; it wasn’t like we were dry-humping each other at four o’clock in the afternoon. It was obviously bothering him, though, if he was suggesting I get a hotel room.

“Do you want me to get one?” I offered with a wicked grin. “I mean, I know how irresistible I am and all.”

“Jesus, it’s not that!” he said with an embarrassed laugh. “I’m just a needy freak when I sleep and I can’t help it.”

I wanted to ask him if he did it with Gus, but he was in a good mood in spite of our sleeping dilemma, and I didn’t want to take a chance on ruining it. Instead I said, “You’re blushing,” just to wind him up a little more. He growled and flipped me off, which made me smile. “Dude. I don’t care. I’m not dead from your cooties yet. A few more won’t kill me.”

“Are you sure?”

“Pretty sure.”

He sighed and looked relieved. For some reason, I felt relieved too, but that wasn’t something I wanted to think about, so I didn’t. I used the john, then went back into the living room to drink wine and make small talk with his friends.

“I’m sorry,” he whispered several hours later, pulling away from me and sliding back to his side of the bed.

I turned over to face him, although it was pitch-dark in his bedroom and I couldn’t even see a bump where he was. “I told you it doesn’t bother me.”

“Yeah, you say that but I know it *has* to creep you out. It creeps *me* out. Not to even mention, how can I be so fucking unaware of what I’m doing when I’m sleeping?”

“Do you do it with everybody you sleep with?” I was fishing because, after the fiasco in the woods, I had stayed out of his personal life. He could’ve had ten lovers since then, and I might not’ve known. Just because I knew about Gus didn’t mean he was the only one.

But he snorted softly, and when he spoke his voice was heavy with defeat. “Nothing’s changed, Tucker. I never sleep with anybody but you.”

“Seriously?” I asked, not quite able to mask my surprise.

“Not something I’d lie about.”

“What about Gus?” From all the things he’d said, I had been convinced he and Gus were an item, and he was past at least some of his fear.

“Good question.”

“Uhh... what are you saying? I suck at mind reading even on a good day.”

“It means I’m screwed up, Tucker, just like you said. I’m never gonna get past what happened, and nobody wants a boyfriend who won’t go to bed with them. Gus is a nice guy, but even nice guys have their limits, and I’m pushing his with no hope of things ever getting any better.”

“Have you talked to him about what happened? Told him what’s wrong?”

“Fuck no,” he said in an angry whisper. “The last thing I want is somebody else feeling sorry for me.”

“If that’s your subtle way of saying you think I feel sorry for you, then you’re way off base, dude. Yeah, I’m sorry it happened, but it’s not like I think you’re some pitiful shell of a person who has to be babied and taken care of. And I’m pretty sure I’ve never acted like that.”

He huffed and mumbled, “Yeah, whatever,” in the least convincing tone ever. I couldn’t stand not seeing him while we had this conversation, so I twisted around to flip on the lamp. He blinked at me in the sudden light, his pupils huge, eyelashes spiky with sleep.

“No, man, seriously, I just want you to get over it. There’s got to be something you can do to get through this phobia or whatever the fuck it is that’s got you so locked up. You’re a great guy, and even I can see you’re shit hot. This is no way for you to live, Deak.”

“Yeah, well, I don’t have an answer for you. The way to cure your fears is to confront them. In my case, that takes somebody else confronting them with me, and my whole mess is way too weird to drag another person into.”

It was the first time he’d ever mentioned actually trying to fix himself, and I wasn’t about to let the idea go without a fight. “Like, what would the other person have to do exactly?” I asked, wanting to know the specifics of what we were talking about before I made any suggestions. Maybe if it hadn’t been two thirty in the morning, I wouldn’t have needed so much explanation, but I wasn’t at my sharpest.

He slanted his eyes over at me. “Uhh... they’d have to have sex with me, dipshit. That’s what my phobia is, so that’s what I’d have to do to get over it.”

“Oh.” I looked at him stretched out long and sleek on the bed, muscular arms and shoulders dark against the sheets. He looked like the ultimate gay wet dream/boy-next-door. This shouldn’t be a hard sell. “Well, you’ve got two gay guys sleeping on your couch. Couldn’t one of them help?”

He rolled his eyes and shook his head. “They’re sleeping *together*, in case you missed the wedding rings.”

“Oh. Gotcha.” I thought for a minute. “And why’s Gus out again? I thought you liked him.”

“I do. But not enough for this.”

“Hmmm.” I rolled over onto my stomach. He had one hand tucked behind his head, and my new position put my face in close proximity to his arm pit. I could smell sweat along with something tangy—bodywash or deodorant. I stuffed my hands under my pillow. My elbow grazed his ribcage and I left it there.

“Well, I know they’re not your only gay friends. Don’t you know any single people?”

“Dude. I am not going to go asking my friends to volunteer for a few therapy fucks. Can you not see how awkward that would make my life? For one thing, whoever ended up doing it would probably need their own therapy afterward. Or they’d want to keep fucking me after it was over, and I don’t

have any gay friends I *wanna* have a relationship with. And they'd definitely tell somebody, and that's the last thing I want—for everybody to know." He shook his head dismissively, making my elbow rub against his side. "It's just not worth it."

"Huh," I said, mulling over all his objections and hang-ups until my mind creaked around to the only person left he could trust—me.

Chapter Seventeen

I caught my breath, trapped there on my belly just inches from him, as the knowledge of what I had to do took hold of me. Deacon was naked except for some boxer briefs beneath the covers, which left nothing to the imagination when he'd molded his body to mine. Only a few minutes ago, I'd woken up to the bulge of his cock pushed up against my buttock, his knee slotted between mine, and his arm snug around my waist. He'd done all of that in his sleep, when his defenses were down, as if he were reaching out for what he knew he wanted. If anyone stood a chance at helping him work through this, it was me.

The fact that I never felt the need to run away when he wrapped me up was something to worry about another day. Apparently the trust went both ways. Before I panicked completely, I cleared my throat and said, as convincingly as I could, "I guess I'll have to do it then."

He gaped at me, eyes wide and lips parted, like I'd lost my mind, then laughed his head off for at least a full minute. Once he got himself under control, he lunged over me and clicked off the light. "You are one seriously damaged individual, Tucker Reed," he said, turning his back to me and snuggling back under the covers. "You should've told me you got knocked in the head while you were over there."

I didn't turn the light back on, figuring I'd have a better chance of not losing my shit if I couldn't see. I could sure feel, though, and I pressed my argument by moving up close behind him. As I slid my arm over his waist, my body pinged with confusion.

"Shut up. I'm perfect for the job and you know it." I ignored the meltdown brewing in my brain and jammed my legs up behind his, holding him tight. He didn't struggle, which put me one point ahead before I even got started.

"Actually no, I don't. You're my straight best friend, so the *opposite* of what I'm looking for," he grumbled. His body was rigid in my arms. I knew he was fighting me by saying no, but he wasn't pulling away. I was on the right track, and for his sake, I needed to win out against both our fears and reservations.

"Actually, yes. It's exactly what makes me the best option." I pressed my mouth against his ear, kept my voice soft but sure. "I'm your best friend, so you already trust me with your body and your secrets." I tapped my finger against

his chest as I made my points. “I’m straight, so there won’t be any of that awkward ‘hanging around trying to get in your pants again’ business once we get you cured.” I tapped again, and when the pad of my finger brushed his nipple, he hissed, giving me courage. I toyed with it as I continued. “Since I’m already brain damaged, which you so kindly pointed out, if I need therapy afterward, it won’t necessarily be your fault. I probably need some therapy anyway. You can walk away with a clean conscience.”

He was tense in my arms from the snuggling and the nipple-touching. Deciding to go for broke on my last point, I slid my hand down his flat belly, my fingers skimming straight down his treasure trail and skating easily beneath the waistband of his underwear. He caught my wrist just before I got to his dick. “All I care about is helping you get your life back, Deak, and I can do it. I’m not seeing any other options.”

He breathed in deeply, his body heaving harshly in my arms, then let it out in a long exhale. I slid my fingertips over the thick hair around his cock. “That all sounds great, Tuck, but come Monday morning you’ll be running out the door like the fucking Taliban is on your ass. I’ve already lost a whole part of my life to that motherfucker. I don’t wanna lose you too.”

“Yeah, but that won’t happen,” I vowed, sticking to my plan, though my whole psyche was jumping up and down, waving red flags and pushing panic buttons.

“How can you say that, Tuck?” he asked harshly. “You’ve got no idea how you’ll feel till it’s too late. Once it’s done, we can’t exactly unfuck and pretend it never happened.”

Just hearing him say the word “fuck” in relation to us made my stomach clench up nervously, but I slid my fingers back and forth in his soft pubic hair and nothing awful happened. Fucking him would be weird, for sure, but it wasn’t going to be lethal.

And he needed my help more than I feared giving it to him. “No, but I know how I feel watching you miss out on your life. It can’t be any worse than this.”

“Don’t count on it.”

“Jesus, Deak, give me some credit. I’m a goddamned marine. I’m not some fucking lightweight.”

“Even *semper fi* has its limits, man.”

“Uh-uh. Not when it comes to you,” I whispered intently. “Remember that time when you asked me who I’d pick if I had to fuck a dude in order to stop the end of the world?” I rubbed my nose on the back of his neck and let my fingers slip a little further south. He’d forgotten he wasn’t letting me touch him down there, or maybe he wanted to see how I’d react. Either way, I didn’t stop till I felt the jut of his cock graze my fingertips.

His sudden laugh kicked against my chest. “It was to stop a children’s hospital from getting blown up.”

“Whatever... anyway, I said ‘you.’ If I’d fuck you to save a bunch of people I don’t even know, of course I’d fuck you to save *you*.”

“Never getting laid isn’t the same as getting blown up, Tuck.”

I thought about that for a half second, idly moving my fingertips against him. “It’s way worse, if you ask me.”

He laughed again, then groaned into his pillow. “Maybe, but this is still a really bad idea.”

“Yeah, whatever. You’ll owe me forever. It’ll be worth it.” I pulled my hand out of his underwear and let it rest against his belly, then brushed a kiss across his neck and settled my head on his pillow, hoping desperately that I hadn’t just signed a death warrant for my own sanity in exchange for his.

Half-conscious, I heard a door *snick* open, then a soft giggle. Light spilled in so that I could see Deacon’s hand resting on the sheet in front of me, and his body was flush up against mine. We must’ve rolled over in our sleep.

“Check this out! I knew Deacon was blowing smoke when he said nothing was going on with this dude.”

“For real. And who can blame him? If all the straight guys were as hot and cuddly as this one, nobody’d be gay.”

The first dude, I think it was Josh, chuckled. “Or everybody would be. Where’d Deacon say he found him anyway?”

“Middle school. How sweet is that?”

“Jesus, we can hear you!” Deacon finally groaned, to my relief. I didn’t want to have to fight my way out of his arms *and* the covers in order to kick his friends’ asses right there in his bedroom.

“Sorry. Thought we were whispering.” I felt the mattress press down... seriously, were they going to get in bed with us? Did all gay guys come with no sense of personal space? “Just wanted to say thanks for the bed and happy turkey day. You boys look so cute. Want me to send you a pic?”

I tensed up at that, and again Deacon came to my rescue. “Not if you ever want to use your phone again.”

They snickered at that and said, “Okay, your loss. We’ll lock up behind us.”

“Good call. Five minutes ago would be great.”

I listened to the bedroom door shut. A minute later the front door closed too, and we were alone in the dark. Remembering what I’d promised him just a few hours earlier, I forced myself to relax against him. He responded by rubbing his three-day beard on my shoulder, which gave me goose bumps. “Getting too weird for you yet?” he asked lightly as I shivered in his arms.

I swallowed away the dryness and doubt as best I could. “Mmm... not even close, man. I’m solid.” One of my many useful Marine Corps life lessons: never show fear, even when you’re quaking in your Jockeys like a seven-year-old in the principal’s office.

“Huh. So no second thoughts?”

“Nope.” He was my best friend. He needed this. There was no walking away for me even if I wanted to, so I slammed the lid down on the panic brewing inside me and did my best to let it go.

“What about now?” he asked as he shifted his hips just enough for me to feel his dick, thick and hard against my thigh.

I pushed back into it like I knew what I was doing, and he groaned and his hand clamped down on my hip to hold me still. “Tucker?” He breathed my name more than said it, but years of pent-up need were there for me to hear all the same.

“I’m good, man, swear to God.” I gritted the words out between my teeth, stuck somewhere between terrified and turned on, because there was touching and closeness and morning wood times *two*. I’d expected to have to force myself, but that wasn’t exactly the case.

Either I sounded convincing or he was just too horny to care. “Dammit! All right... if you’re sure.” My last-minute panic attack took a hard hit when he slipped his hand under the elastic of my shorts. “Can I?”

He brushed his fingers across the tip of my cock and I was sold. “Goddammit. Yes.”

“Lose these,” he ordered, tugging on the waistband of my underwear, and I hiked my hip so he could shove them out of the way. As soon as they got past my knees, I kicked them off, then hissed as his hand closed around my cock.

His touch was sure and strong, nothing tentative left now that we’d both decided to go for it. His palm was calloused from weights and golf, and his fingers were long and capable, totally different from any girl I’d ever been with but not nearly as wrong as I would’ve expected. Years of doing himself were paying off because he knew just how to touch me, working my cock with a strong, steady rhythm that had me rock hard and leaking in no time. Deacon slipped his fingers down to cup my balls and tug at them. I panted and squirmed as he played with me, and he rocked his own cock against my thigh while winding me up with his hand. It felt so good that even knowing his dick was just inches away from my ass didn’t get in the way of my pleasure. In fact, it wasn’t long at all before he had me riding the edge, almost ready to come, and it was way too soon for that.

“Deacon, shit, I’m getting close already,” I gasped, grabbing his wrist to slow him down. What kind of sex therapist was I turning out to be? Not a good one.

“Really?” To my surprise, he didn’t sound disappointed at all. More like pleased.

“Yeah, guess it’s been a while.”

“That’s hard to believe,” he said, but he quit jacking me and pulled back just far enough to get me flat on the bed, then climbed between my legs. A security light must’ve gotten triggered outside his window, because the room wasn’t pitch dark anymore. I could see just enough to make out his dick stretching the front of his underwear, with a wet spot at the tip where he was leaking. A thrill of pride went through me that Deacon was so eager for me, seeing as how I didn’t know the first thing about turning another guy on.

Of course I was turned on too, my swollen cock curved up against my belly, leaving no question that I was equally invested in what we were doing. He stared at my dick for what felt like an hour, but was probably just a few seconds, before finally touching it again, taking me in a firm grip and working me slowly, watching beneath his thick, dark lashes. I was so hungry for release by then that I couldn’t stop moving, and when the need to come was more than

I could bear, I started fucking hard up into his hand, shamelessly begging for more.

His lips twitched. “No patience, huh?”

“Not this time. Sorry.”

“It’s okay. I’m ready too.” With that, he settled himself on top of me, lined our cocks up just right and began to grind. Unexpected heat shot straight to my balls, and I gasped and bucked against him, desperate for more friction. He shoved my legs farther apart, and once he got his knees on the mattress it got really good. The hard, smooth slide of stretched-tight cotton over my bare skin sent me flying. His elbows came down on either side of my head and he stared into my face as he humped me, breathing hard, a light sheen of sweat glowing on his skin.

“Jesus Christ, Deak,” I groaned, totally helpless to do anything but take it as out-of-control pleasure built inside of me. Pretty soon he had me back on the edge again. When I couldn’t stand it another second, I dug my heels into the mattress, sank my fingers into his hips, and pumped hard, biting down on my lip to keep from waking up the neighbors as my orgasm ripped through me. He swore softly, letting me use him till I was done. Then he raised up, swiped his hand through the mess on my belly, and reached for his shorts. Yanking them out of his way, I watched as he finished himself off with a few quick strokes, his cum arcing out in hot, white lines across my chest.

When he was done, he flopped over onto his side of the bed. I lay where he’d left me, ready for the postorgasmic panic to set in, but all my alarm bells stayed quiet. I realized my biggest complaint about the whole experience was that my midsection was basted in cooling cum.

Chapter Eighteen

Deacon lay motionless, quiet except for the sound of his breathing, and the only place we were touching was where his foot rested against my shin. Maybe he was the one having the freak out.

“So. Looks like everything works,” I commented, just to get things going.

“You’re surprised?” he asked between breaths. “My dick was never the problem.”

“I was talking about me, not you.”

“Why would it be a problem for you? You’ve fucked girls *way* uglier than me.” His voice was light but his words weren’t, moving close to that zone I didn’t like, where he was basically calling me a whore. Given our current situation, that should have been his favorite thing about me.

“Yeah, but I never fucked one with a dick before.”

“Hmmm... True, but one of them had underarm hair thicker than mine.”

I vaguely remembered the girl he was talking about. We’d been hiking the Appalachian Trail and she’d been in the camp next to ours. Normally I didn’t pick up girls when I was with him. I’d made an exception for her because Deacon had gotten sucked into helping one of the rangers do a nature presentation, and I’d ended up bored back at our camp. I’d forgotten all about her, and it seemed strange to me that he hadn’t. This odd conversation needed better lighting, so I stretched over him to turn his lamp on, smearing him with some of our mess in the process.

“Dude. Gross.” He glared down at his ribcage, then up at me like I’d slimed him with frog guts. “Go big or go home” seemed to be my best plan of attack, so I grinned and used him like a couch, lying across his thighs and propping my head up on my fist, not planning to go anywhere till he made me.

“Yeah, well blame yourself for that. Party host is supposed to get the clean-up towel.”

“Jesus. Here!” He reached down and snagged his T-shirt off the floor, gave it a pass over his middle, and then dropped it onto mine. Beggars can’t be choosers, so I rubbed the goo off as best I could, then tossed it. I kept my spot on his lap, though, and we stared at each. He was totally naked, except for his

underwear, which was trapped underneath me, down near his knees. Since everything we'd done had been in the near dark, I hadn't gotten a chance to really check him out yet, and although I'd seen him naked plenty of times before, it was all different now.

He was movie-star handsome, even with his crazy bedhead and the sleep creases on his face. His jaw was dark with stubble, and his lips were wide and plush. I wondered if we would kiss or if that was out of bounds. I thought about what it might be like and realized I wanted to find out for myself. I flicked my tongue across my lips, not even caring if he knew what I was thinking, then let my eyes trail further south. His pecs were well developed, hard muscle covered in smooth, tan skin, with dusky-pink nipples showing through a smattering of brownish-black hair, and not one bit of him was a turn-off for me. The hair on his chest narrowed as it covered his flat belly, then spread to frame his cock, which was soft but still plump, hanging to the right along his thigh. Even it looked good, a thought I'd never expected to find myself thinking about another guy's cock, and I realized I wanted to touch it. Since he wasn't making any move to push me away, I decided to go for it.

"You don't have to do this, Tuck," he whispered hoarsely as I moved my hand slowly across his hip.

"We already had that conversation," I answered as I drew my finger down his length, testing out the experience of putting my hand on someone else's dick for the very first time.

"Yeah, but maybe we need to have it again. I'm still not so sure this is a good idea."

He sounded strained, so I stopped the track of my finger and looked up into his face. "You got any better ones?"

His eyes were full of reservations, but his face was flushed and I could feel his dick already firming up beneath my touch. He was caught up in every man's ultimate battle: his big brain against his little one. "No," he breathed. He lowered his gaze to his chest for a few seconds, then lifted his eyes back to me. "But I'll hate myself if this ruins us."

"Me too, so don't let that happen, okay?" When he bugged his eyes at me, I tried to explain. "Just don't overthink it, man. It's just sex. Take what you need to fix yourself and don't worry about anything else." I wrapped my fingers around his cock and gave him a firm squeeze. "I'm not freaking out, so don't you either."

He didn't have anything to say to that, at least nothing he wanted to share, and then I leaned down and licked his dick and the conversation pretty much died a natural death after that.

He was definitely right about one thing: Dicks really *are* bigger than they look when you try to put one in your mouth. Lucky for me, I got to start on his before it got fully hard, so I had kind of a head start. *Ha ha ha*. And he just lay there like he'd been riveted to the bed, so I didn't have to worry about him shoving it down my throat. At least not at first.

My nervousness from before was dead quiet this time. I kept waiting for the sane, heterosexual voice in my head to wake up and start yelling at me, but that didn't happen. Of course, I'd always been a tremendous fan of sex. The fact that my own dick was getting happy because I was about to suck his was a major clue that my body wasn't even as discriminating as *I'd* given it credit for, and that had never been much.

I rubbed my nose on the tip, got a drip of slick on me, then licked him up and down, starting out slow. I could hear him breathing above me, whispering words too low for me to discern, but he didn't move. He let me take my time and test it all out... the smell of him, the earthy taste of his cum mixed with mine along his shaft, the hard, silky texture as his cock hardened, and finally, the inconceivable intimacy of opening my mouth to slide his tip inside.

The angle was bad and after a couple of awkward attempts at head bobs, I pulled off and twisted around till I was stretched out between his thighs. He went along with me, kicking his underwear off and spreading his legs to make room. I settled in like I knew what the fuck I was doing—a *huge* lie—although I'd been on the receiving end way more times than I could possibly count, so I wasn't completely clueless.

His cock wasn't porn-star huge, thank God, but he was big enough that I couldn't take him all the way in. After only a few tries, my virgin jaw felt like it was being cracked open by a sledgehammer. I switched tactics pretty quickly and ended up concentrating mostly on the tip, tracing the plump roundness with my tongue and teasing his slit before sucking the whole head into my mouth. That move earned me a desperate-sounding "Oh fuck, Jesus Christ, Tucker," that I had no trouble understanding, and it spurred me on. Sucking harder, I used my hand to stroke the base of his shaft, and all my spit mixed with his come gave me plenty of lube to make it smooth. Although I definitely wouldn't

be winning any blow job contests anytime soon, I could jack off with the best of them. His dick continued to swell, and his hips started to rock in time with my rhythm. It wasn't long before I felt his fingers brushing against my short hair in quick, anxious touches that told me he was close.

I peeked up at him through my lashes, seeing unguarded lust in his face as he stared down at me. When he said, "I'm gonna come," his voice was tight and strained like I'd never heard before, and it stirred something deep inside of me. In that moment I wanted everything he had to give, and I pulled off just long enough to say, "Do it." Then I took him back into my mouth greedily, bobbing my head and jacking him harder. He rubbed his thumb over my top lip and groaned, "Oh God," then held my head and pumped my mouth full of cum.

When he was done, I didn't wait for him to get a towel, I went for one. The bed was wet, he was wet, and my face was covered in... lots of stuff. My toothbrush was on the sink and I used it, happy to trade the ick taste in my mouth for spearmint. Once the water got hot, I doused one end of a towel, then went back to bed, wiping my face as I walked. When I finished, I handed it to him, keeping the dry end back to dry off with.

"Thanks." He started cleaning himself up, and I went around to my side of the bed, found my underwear and pulled it on. I didn't want to think or talk or acknowledge in any way what we'd just done. I just wanted to get back to sleep before the bubble burst, and I would have no choice but to face what we'd done and how much I hadn't hated it.

"Ugh. Wet spot," I heard him grumble as he dropped the towel on the floor and pulled his boxer briefs back on.

"Why do you care? You never sleep over there anyway."

"Bullshit. I always *start out* over here."

"Well, skip it this time. Get over here and let's go back to sleep," I said, pulling the covers up to my chin. "I am not getting up at fucking six o'clock in the morning on Thanksgiving Day!"

"Jesus. Fine. Chill out." The lamp clicked off, and then I felt him ease up behind me and tentatively slip his arm over my waist. I scooted back till we were snug together, which I'd found was how I liked sleeping with him, then lined my arm up over his and laced our fingers together.

“What time are we going to your friends’ house?” I asked. I wanted to know, but even more importantly, I wanted to hear his voice, make sure he was okay. Or at least as okay as I was.

“Around four. They’re doing dinner.” He was quiet, but he didn’t sound like he was about to take a header off a tall building. I figured we were both in the same avoidance/denial boat, which was fine. We could deal with the fallout later. He shimmied his hips a bit till we were lined up just right, then gave my bulge a quick squeeze. “That gives me plenty of time to practice on you before we have to go.”

Or maybe we were just tired and had already done all the talking we needed to do. I smiled into my pillow and whispered, “Damn straight it does,” before closing my eyes and falling back to sleep.

Chapter Nineteen

When I opened my eyes again, it was after nine. My dick had recovered and was ready for the next round, but my back wasn't plastered with Deacon so I figured he was up. The smell of bacon was another good clue.

I took a quick shower, ignoring my morning wood since I planned on needing it later, then got dressed in my jeans from yesterday and the Henley Deacon had been wearing last night. He was in the kitchen, laying bacon strips on a paper towel. I could see a head of lettuce on the counter, a food that didn't really go with any breakfast I'd ever had.

I skipped "good morning" and went straight to the important stuff. "What're you making?"

He glanced over his shoulder at me, looked me up and down for a second, then turned back to the counter. "BLTs. Is that okay with you? It's too late for eggs."

I didn't realize eggs had a time limit on them, but BLTs sounded good too. "Sure." I walked over to the small breakfast bar and propped myself against it. A little bit of awkwardness was setting in, probably because we were up and dressed, which made what we were doing real, no chance left that it was all just some bizarro dream.

"Feels like you're thinking pretty hard back there, Tuck. I thought you said we weren't gonna do that." He was slicing the tomato, head bent down exposing his neck, and my whole body prickled with the almost uncontrollable urge to touch him.

"Sorry. It's not that kind of thinking."

"What kind then? 'Cause I'm pretty sure you're not working on your Christmas list." He was wearing gray sweatpants that hung low on his hips and a long-sleeved blue T-shirt that rode up when he reached for the bread, showing off more skin.

"Just not sure what I'm supposed to do. Not sure what's allowed."

He glanced over his shoulder, eyes wide with surprise. "Do whatever you want, doof. Change the TV channel, fix some coffee, get a beer, whatever. You know your way around." He nodded toward the refrigerator. "There's Bloody Mary mix too if you wanna pour some up."

“Maybe later,” I said, pushing myself off the bar and closing in on him slowly, giving him time to read my face and my body language. “Right now, it’s not the remote I wanna touch,” I confessed as I got close.

His face went blank for a second, then he blushed and flashed me a small embarrassed grin. “Oh. Well, yeah, that’s okay too,” he said, then went back to making our sandwiches while I wrapped my arms around his waist and buried my face in his neck. Touching him that way felt good, not about sex but just affection. For the moment it was like a balm to soothe the confusion and uncertainty stored inside me somewhere, hidden for now but there all the same.

We ate our sandwiches on the couch, then I made the Bloody Marys and we spent an hour flipping between the Macy’s Thanksgiving Day Parade and SportsCenter. His mom called, prompting me to call my folks, which ended up being a long ordeal with all my separate families. By the time I was off the phone, he was in the shower. We had some time left before we needed to start getting ready. Definitely long enough for another round. My dick perked up as soon as the thought hit me, and I headed into the bedroom to make myself available in case that’s what he had in mind. Or to convince him if need be.

The bathroom door was open, and when I got there he was just coming out of the shower. I watched, unashamed, as he stood on the mat, eyes closed and head down, letting the water run off of him. During my six years in the military, I’d taken thousands of showers with hundreds of different guys, some of them extremely good-looking, and not one of them had ever caught my eye. Something about Deacon changed all the rules for me, though, and since I was committed to a weekend of sex with him, I didn’t even try to stop my body’s immediate response. By the time he looked up and saw me standing there, I could feel the hot flush of want spreading over me and my cock was filling up, ready to go.

“Hey” was all he said, but the heat in his eyes said the rest as I walked toward him.

“Hey.” I didn’t stop until I was standing on the mat with him, our toes touching and my hands reaching out for him like this was the way it had always been, not something new. I drew my fingers up his arms, staring at his mouth the whole time. His mouth was wide, his lips soft and full, the same dark pink as his nipples, and I wanted very badly to taste them. I hoped he wasn’t going to make that the one thing we couldn’t do.

“Ready for my next session?” he asked, his mouth tilting into a crooked smile as he reached for my fly.

“Yeah, but we’ve got time, right?” I slid my hands down to his wrists, not pulling his hands away but slowing him down, getting his attention. He drew back, still unsure and gun-shy, and I held firm to his wrists. “I just wanna make out some first. Is that okay?”

His eyebrows shot up at that. “You wanna *make out*? With me?”

“Uhh... yeah. If that’s okay.” Maybe it wasn’t just a coincidence that we hadn’t kissed yet. “Unless you don’t want to, if you think it’d be too weird or something.”

Suddenly I was the one gun-shy, embarrassed that I’d asked for too much. This was supposed to be about him, after all, not me, but he twisted his hand and caught mine, pulling me back in. “No way, dude. I’m fixing to suck your dick. Of course kissing’s not too weird for me.” Proving his point, he leaned in and touched our mouths together softly, then flicked my lips with his tongue. “This is one game of gay chicken I do *not* plan to lose.”

“Okay” was all I could manage as his mouth opened over mine and the kiss went from teasing to real in a heartbeat. His lips felt as soft as they looked, and for about one second, it could’ve been a girl I was kissing. But then his tongue pushed boldly into my mouth and his stubble caught on my chin, and there was nothing remotely feminine about his large hands digging into my biceps.

None of that mattered, though, because he tasted so sweet and his body felt just right in my arms as I pulled him in close, skimming my hands down his back. I knew his ass was probably a trigger point because of what had happened, but I could no more stop myself from touching it than I could stop my dick from getting hard. His back was wet and warm and I glided my hands down his smooth skin. His ass felt so fucking good in my hands; his firm, round cheeks made my blood boil and my dick pulse. I opened my eyes and saw our reflection in the bathroom mirror, his long bare back and my big hands cupped possessively over his butt. I watched myself squeeze him, then draw my fingers over his crack. I couldn’t resist slotting one finger down and in, pressing until I found his hole, then working it with gentle, rhythmic touches that fired my need for more.

We kept kissing through it all, and he didn’t flinch away, even widened his stance to give me room to play for a while. After a minute, though, he pulled back to stare at me. “What’re you doing back there, ass bandit?”

“Just checking out the equipment.” I tried to make out like it was nothing, but I don’t think either one of us believed me.

“Check it out later. Come on, I wanna blow you now.”

“Oh. Okay,” I said, and as far as distractions went, that worked like a charm.

He gave a little shove to get me going, then back-walked me to his bed. I went without question, needing to get off more than I needed to breathe. He got me naked and stretched out on his bed, then spent a few torturous minutes nibbling his way down my body while I writhed like a worm on hot pavement, trying to rub my dick wherever I could find some friction. Deacon was good with his mouth and his hands—maybe it was intuitive for him. Wherever he got his skills from, I was grateful.

By the time he got to my dick, my hips were straining off the bed and I was leaking jizz shamelessly, so that anyone watching would’ve thought I was the one getting his very first blow job. Deacon, on the other hand, sucked dick like a fucking pro, and there was nothing the least little bit unsure about the way he took me all the way in. When my cockhead hit the back of his throat, I started cursing like the soldier I’d been. He never let up for a second, bobbing up and down on me ruthlessly while I gripped the sheets to keep from grabbing his head and choking him on my dick. He sucked me right to the edge and kept me there; all I could do was pant and moan as I stared down in awe at the perverse perfection of his mouth so hot and tight around my cock. When my groans turned to desperate whines, he rubbed his knuckles firmly behind my balls, setting off yet another string of explosions in my body. “Fuck me, Deacon, what the hell?” I babbled stupidly. He looked up and winked, then slipped one wet finger right up my ass and touched me *there*. That did it... one little finger curl and I was gone.

“Jesus God!” I shouted as I surged up on my heels, slamming my dick deeper into the back of his throat and probably drowning him in jizz. But at the moment, I couldn’t have cared less. White-hot pleasure surged through me like a rogue wave out of nowhere, and all I could do was ride it out and come.

Chapter Twenty

When I opened my eyes, Deacon lay beside me, a lazy smile on his face even though he was hard and playing with himself. I knew it was just intermission.

That had been, without a doubt, one of the top three blow jobs of my life, and I'd paid for the other two. It was just too much for me to deal with on zero brain power. "Where *the fuck* did you learn to do that?" I gasped when I could finally form words.

"Practice, dude," he answered with a smart-assed grin.

I raised up and glared at him. "With fucking *who*?" I demanded, sounding spitefully cruel, eerily similar to my dad back when he and my mom spent all their waking hours fighting. I hated myself as soon as the bitter words left my mouth but it was too late. They were out there and I couldn't get them back.

His smile melted away and he let go of his dick instantly. I felt like the biggest jerkwad ever. "*Nobody*, ass! YouTube and a dildo."

I took a minute to process his comment, and by the time I figured it out and started apologizing, he was off the bed and heading for the bathroom. I couldn't even try to follow because I wasn't sure my legs would work yet.

"Deacon, seriously, I'm sorry. That was an idiotic thing to say."

"No fucking kidding. What the hell, man? Do you seriously think I'd drag you into this shit if I could do *that* with some other guy?" he barked as he pulled his sweats back on. "Do you really think I'm that terrible a person?" He propped himself against the bathroom door-facing and scowled. "Or that fucking desperate?"

"Fuck no, I wasn't thinking any of that," I muttered, feeling totally out of my depth for the first time since we started this whole thing.

"No?" He clearly didn't believe me. "Sure sounded like it to me."

I had to fix my fuckup somehow, and I couldn't do it from across the room. Touching him had gone from a rarity to a necessity in just a few short hours. I pushed myself off the bed and walked over to him. "No, man, nothing like any of that." He glared at me when his head popped out of his T-shirt. "I'm just a jealous fuck. I've got no right to be and I know that. It's my problem, my stupid thing, but it's why I popped off and I'm really sorry."

The anger on his face changed to confusion and his eyebrows scrunched together in disbelief. “Jealous? Of *what?*”

I linked my fingers behind my head and stalked around the room, unconsciously baring my whole naked self to him as I struggled to find an answer that made even a little bit of sense. “You, I guess. You’re my best friend and you’ve always been *mine*, and I guess there’s some throwback caveman part of me that doesn’t like to think about you getting with other guys.” He gaped at me like I’d started speaking in tongues. I felt just about that insane. “Or something. Jesus, Deacon, I don’t know. I’m out of my comfort zone here, okay? Give me a fucking break!” Frustrated, I stomped back to the bed and dropped down on the edge.

“I haven’t been with any other guys, you doof. That’s how come we’re doing this, remember? So maybe someday I *can* be.” He didn’t sound mad anymore, just confused. And wary. “That *was* the plan, right?”

One of the main reasons he hadn’t wanted to do this with any of his gay friends was because he didn’t want complications. I was supposed to be complication free. I had *promised* to be complication free, but we were only a few hours into his recovery weekend and already I was getting weird. That wasn’t acceptable on any level. I had to get it together.

“Yeah. Yes. Definitely,” I nodded, trying to sound positive, and he hiked his eyebrows, not even a little bit convinced.

I searched around in my head for something, *anything*, to redirect his thoughts from my irrational behavior. What I came up with was “I guess maybe I’m feeling a little bit inadequate because you’re so much better at it than me.” I nodded down toward his crotch.

“At giving a blow job?” he asked, incredulous.

For some reason, after everything we’d done, that was the thing that made me blush—him saying it out loud. My face flooded with heat and I ducked my head, feeling like a total moron. “Yeah.”

“Dude, you’re not *supposed* to be any good at it. You’ll never do it again after this weekend.” He tipped my chin up with two fingers. “If you’re seriously freaking out about this, then your competitive streak is even more out of hand than your jealousy issues.”

“Yeah, I know.” I reared my head back from his touch and shrugged. “Another one of those character traits that’s great in uniform, but not so much fun back in civilian life.”

“I see.”

He stood in front of me, his dick almost level with my mouth, and I could see the outline of it jutting against his sweatpants. He was still hard, and I was smart enough to know it was my fastest way out of an awkward conversation. Plus, I wanted another chance. “Nobody told me they had dick-sucking tutorials on YouTube,” I said, reaching out and drawing him between my knees. “I could’ve been studying. Maybe I should go watch one right now...”

He smirked down at me. “Maybe.”

“I might even want to borrow your dildo.”

“You could.” He glanced at the drawer by his bed. “But it’s kinda nasty, tastes like...” He paused and made a face like he tasted something disgusting. My brain had just enough time to go off in a very gross direction before he added, “Plastic. Blech!”

“Ass,” I said, but then ran my fingers over the very obvious dildo substitute between us. “So. You got any other suggestions?”

He gave me a shove back onto the bed. “I bet we can figure something out.” As soon as my back hit the sheets he was over me, staring down into my face as he rocked his hips slowly, working his hard dick on my soft one. “I can hook you up with the real deal if you promise to quit acting like a nutcase.”

“I can be nice,” I swore. He grinned and leaned down to kiss me. And just like that the storm was over and we were good again. I let him rut on me till I was hard again and couldn’t stand it another second. Then I flipped us over and shimmied down his body, pushing his sweats off his hips and watching in wonder as his cock sprang out right in front of my nose.

It was still too big to fit in my mouth so I licked him up and down till he was soaked with spit, then jacked him while I sucked on his head. It probably wasn’t that much better than the first time, but five minutes of sincere and heartfelt mouth and hand action got him where he needed to be all the same. When he was done I spit his jizz into my hand and jerked myself off, shooting all over his belly and his softening cock, liking how that looked way too much for a guy who wouldn’t be getting any more of this ever again come Sunday morning.

Deacon’s friends ran a bed-and-breakfast out in the country, a thirty-minute drive from his apartment. They raised goats, chickens, and alpacas, most of

which trotted out to meet us when we drove up. His friends came out as well, followed by another couple and I got on-the-spot introductions to everyone, including the animals. Deacon introduced me as his best friend from high school, but I could tell from their faces that no one believed the relationship stopped at just friends and it made me a little bit nervous.

Jessie, our hostess, pointed us to a tub full of beer on ice and told us to make ourselves at home while she finished the cabbage rolls. I cocked one eye at Deacon and he said quietly, “Oh yeah. I might’ve forgotten to mention: Jessie and Hank are vegetarians.”

“Wow. So no turkey, huh?” I wasn’t a huge fan of turkey anyway, but I’d been programmed to eat it on Thanksgiving Day, and it was surprising to discover I wasn’t going to get any.

“Nope.” He gave me a nudge toward the back door where Hank was firing up the grill. “Think you’ll survive?”

“They all think we’re fucking. If I can survive that, I can survive a plate of vegetables.”

We were passing through a small utility room, and he spun around, quick and unexpected, and trapped me against the dryer. “We *are* fucking, Tucker,” he said, staring straight into my eyes.

The dryer was hard against my back, and he was tall and intense against my front. As I stared back at him, I let my eyes wander down his face to his mouth. I was struck by how much I wanted to kiss him, right there in the open where anyone could walk in on us. I had to force myself to resist the impulse.

“Not yet,” I qualified stupidly.

“Are you backing out?”

“No.” I wasn’t. There wasn’t the slightest chance.

“Then by this time tomorrow we will be. Didn’t know you were such a hairsplitter, Tuck.”

“I’m not. I guess I just wasn’t expecting other people to know.”

He laughed, and I could hear a touch of sadness there in the background. “People have always known, Tucker. You were the only one who didn’t know.” He pushed himself off me and headed outside. I followed him, trying but failing to figure out exactly what that meant.

We shot the shit with Hank and the other guy, Mike, while Hank grilled corn on the cob and kebabs loaded down with vegetables. Then everyone gathered round the old farm table, and we stuffed ourselves on all kinds of things I only ate once or twice a year—or never. It was all good, though. His friends were nice, and no one looked at us like we were freaks or monsters. Not that I cared so much about the opinions of strangers, but I was tense about them knowing, and getting no judgmental feedback was a huge relief. We spent the afternoon walking around the property, communing with nature and getting some exercise. It wasn't until we left that I remembered I'd been really interested in the afternoon football game. Luckily Deacon had it on TiVo and we ended the evening in front of the TV. When I said something about going to bed, he waved me on, said he had a few things to do before he turned in, and so I went alone. I eventually drifted off, but I didn't really relax until later, when I felt his arms wrap around me, and he kissed my neck and whispered, "Night, Tucker."

The bed moving woke me up. The room was dark, and it took me a minute to orient myself to where I was. I was in bed alone, which was the norm for me, but it didn't feel right. After scanning the shadows, I put it together. I was at Deacon's. I'd gone to bed alone. But that didn't feel right either, and when I slid my hand across the sheet behind me, it was warm. I remembered him joining me at some point and a good-night kiss. He must've just gotten up to go to the bathroom.

After a minute, the toilet flushed and I heard his near-silent footsteps on the carpet. Seconds later, he eased under the covers, trying not to wake me but it was too late. Though I could've easily gone right back to sleep, I didn't want to. When he got settled on his side of the bed, I scooted closer and nudged my hand up against his arm.

"Hey. Sorry I woke you," he whispered.

"It's okay. I'll go back to sleep in a minute, no problem."

"Lucky you," he said, sounding envious.

"You can't?"

"Mmm... not always. But if I can't, I've usually got something to read, so it's no big deal." He shifted under the covers, getting comfortable on his back. Once he stopped moving I slid my hand under the sheet to rest on his belly. I

wasn't trying to start anything—sex wasn't really on my mind at all—but I wanted to be close to him, kind of like yesterday morning in the kitchen.

“Is this a new problem?” I asked, pinching at the hairs around his belly button. He'd always been a bedtime reader, but I didn't remember him ever being an insomniac.

“Since college, I guess.”

“Because of what happened?”

“That's when it started, but then all the stress of everything... moving to Charlotte, changing majors, trying to get my shit together. And then meeting people, dating and trying not to out myself as a total whack job every time a guy touched me. I think at some point I just forgot how to sleep through the night.”

“Huh. Makes boot camp seem not so bad after all,” I said.

“Uhh... I doubt that.”

“You've been sleeping pretty good since I've been here, haven't you?” I liked to think of myself as a reasonably alert person, even asleep, and I was pretty sure he'd been right there with me most of the time.

“Yeah dude, but how could I not? You've been wearing me out.”

I could hear the satisfaction behind the teasing in his voice. It was encouraging, but it also reminded me of the whole point of all the sex we were having. We'd pretty much stuck to our agreement not to talk about it. That was working great as far as *I* was concerned, but we were doing this for him, not me, and I had no idea if our plan was actually helping him or not. I wanted to know, and there in the darkness seemed like the best time to ask.

“So yeah, about that actually...”

He sighed—the heavy “I so don't want to talk about this” sigh guys have been perfecting for ages—but I totally ignored it. I wasn't going to hold him down and force him to spill his guts, but this was important and I wasn't going to give up on the basis of one sigh either.

“Dude. Seriously, I just want to know if this is even helping. I'm not asking you to write a love poem to my dick or anything.”

He laughed. “Too late. I already started one. It's gonna be epic.”

“It would have to be if it’s about my dick,” I joked. “Finish it and I’ll frame it and hang it on my bedroom wall. Right by my perfect attendance plaque from tenth grade.” I slid my hand down and gave his package a squeeze and wasn’t terribly surprised to find him half-hard. I was too. So much for not wanting to get laid. However, I wasn’t letting either one of us distract me from my fact-gathering mission. “But let’s get back to my question. Is this working any kind of healing magic on you at all, or are we just having a hella kinky weekend?”

My need to touch had somehow superseded my good judgment, so even as I tried to get some answers, I was also tracing the outline of his dick through his tight boxer briefs. It didn’t take a rocket scientist to figure out this conversation had a very short shelf life.

“I don’t know, man. I’m sorry.” He shifted his hips, pushing up into the pressure of my hand. I flattened my palm and rubbed up and down his dick.

“Don’t take this the wrong way, but you seem fine to me.” I rolled onto my belly and began working myself on the mattress, needing some friction of my own.

“Yeah, I know. I wasn’t expecting it to be this easy, but it’s *you*, you know. You’re different from other guys.”

I pushed myself up on my arms and hovered over him, thrusting against his thigh, letting him feel how hard I was. “How?” I asked, my breaths coming shorter as the good feelings pooled hot and shimmery in my belly. “Other than my epic dick, of course.”

“You’re not a threat to me,” he said, slipping his hands up my arms to pull me down on top of him. I went with it, settling between his legs and staring down into the darkness where I could see the shadowy outline of his face. “I know I’m safe, so I can do whatever I want without worrying. I *hope* what we’re doing carries forward, but I won’t *know* till I try with somebody else.”

That was the whole point, and one part of my brain was totally on board with his plan. But he was mine for the moment and suddenly the last thing I wanted to do was think about sharing him, so I said, “Gotcha,” and let it go. I flexed my hips and rubbed our cocks together, and the zing of pleasure that sizzled up my spine was electric. “So, you wanna get in one more session before I pass out?”

“You don’t feel like you’re about to pass out to me,” he commented wryly, then pulled my face down and kissed me, a hard press of lips that ended just as I was about to force his mouth open with my tongue. “But no pressure. I know

how you military guys get about your routines. I don't wanna keep you up past bedtime."

"Fuck some routine. Right now, I want this," I groaned, my lips moving on his as I spoke.

"Me too," he whispered, and I took advantage of his words, licking into his open mouth hungrily, like it had been weeks instead of hours since I'd gotten off. He made me crazy in a way no one ever had before, and I couldn't get enough. Sizzling sparks of need danced down my spine as I rubbed our dicks together. When he grabbed my ass and upped the friction, my balls sucked up tight, and I knew I wasn't going to last much longer.

"Jesus, Deak, I'm fixing to come already. What the fucking fuck?" I wasn't expecting an answer, but it was definitely a legitimate question. I hadn't been this out-of-control horny in years.

He loosened his grip on my hips, giving me back control. "Slow down then."

I slowed down my thrusting, tried to rein myself in, and for about ten seconds I could breathe again. But then I felt his fingers skim across my ass, and when he pressed one of them between my cheeks to massage my hole, we were right back on the fast track to being done.

"Christ, that feels so damn good," I moaned and dragged my mouth off his to bite my way down his neck. I shamelessly pushed back into his touch for more, not even trying to fake like he wasn't driving me out of my mind.

"It's supposed to," he assured me, his voice raspy, his words coming on fractured breaths. He rubbed me harder, sliding his fingertip in, and that tripped my very last trigger. "Go for it, Tuck. It's okay, I promise."

"Hope so, 'cause I got no choice." The old feeling of inevitability slid over me, sucking me in, and I picked up the pace, drilling him into the bed and cursing into his salt-tainted skin as my orgasm exploded and I shot my wad in my shorts like a teenager.

Chapter Twenty-One

I woke up first the next morning. The room was mostly dark, which I thought meant it was early until I realized the static-like noise I was hearing was actually rain. I eased away from Deacon to look at my phone and saw that it was almost nine o'clock. Time to get up, but I was feeling lazy so I lay there for a few minutes, reading texts from my folks and a couple of girls back in Birmingham who'd apparently decided to give me another chance. I didn't respond to any of them, though. I wasn't interested in anyone but him that morning.

I slid out of bed, spent a few minutes in the bathroom getting ready, and when I slid back into bed, my spot was still warm. He was asleep right where I'd left him. I eased back into the curve of his body and pulled his arm over me, then scooted my bare ass back into his crotch and let myself feel him back there. He wasn't totally hard, but his dick was plumped up enough that I could get the general idea.

Other than his finger, I'd never before had anything stuck up my butt in the name of sex. It wasn't that I was terrified of the idea, but it wasn't something I'd craved and none of the girls I'd fucked around with had been into that kind of play. His touch yesterday and again last night had gotten my attention in a whole new way, though, and I wanted more.

As his dick hardened, I pulled his hand down to touch my cock. I felt it when he woke up, the jerk of surprise, the swift intake of breath. "Jesus, Tuck, what're you doing?" he slurred into my back even as he took over touching me, fisting me as his hips began moving to the rhythm I'd set.

"Thought you wanted to fuck." My early-morning voice was thick and rough, full of want-to and sex.

He groaned against my shoulder and slotted his cock in the crack of my ass and I rocked back against it like the horndog I was. He huffed and pushed harder, his hand jacking me slow and steady the whole time. My body fizzed and hummed with pleasure. I was about to get fucked and I couldn't have been happier.

"Are you sure you're good with this?"

"Pretty sure this is what I signed up for," I answered.

“Actually, you signed up to fuck me. You don’t have to do this if it weirds you out.”

“I know what I want, Deak. I’m not that much of a martyr.” I glanced back over my shoulder as I squeezed his hand on my cock.

“No?”

“Not hardly.” I ground my butt against his dick in case he needed more convincing.

He grunted, shoved his hips hard against me, and then suddenly stopped. He was breathing hot, rapid puffs on the back of my neck, and I could feel wetness leaking out of him, running down my crack. I knew he was trying to pull back, had gotten too close to the edge way too soon. It was a feeling I’d become all too familiar with lately, so I quit moving and let him find his peace. After a minute he pulled away, whispered into my neck, “I’ll be right back,” and climbed out of bed.

“I’ll be right here,” I answered peacefully, then sprawled on my belly to wait.

I’d thought he was just going to get supplies or maybe brush his teeth, but he went into the bathroom and closed the door, so I shut my eyes and drifted, content in a way I’d never been before. My whole sex life up to that weekend had been based on the chase and then the act itself. This was different. For once I didn’t have to do anything but just breathe and let it happen, and I found myself liking it. I heard the shower start up and humped the bed slowly just to keep my dick in the game, even reached back and touched my hole curiously. I thought about finding some lube and touching myself with intent. But that was Deacon’s job, I decided, and I let the idea go. I heard the water kick off and the bathroom door open. A minute later the drawer by the bed rattled.

“We doing this?” he asked as he moved over me on the bed.

I rolled onto my back, letting him see that I was fully on board. “I am if you are,” I said, gazing up into his perfect face, watching the uncertainty change to relief as he leaned down to kiss me.

If anyone had ever asked me what I thought would be the main difference between sex with a woman and sex with another man, I would’ve most likely said the intimacy factor, but the opposite was proving true with Deacon. Everything was more intimate with him. Though we’d never fucked around *at*

all, we knew each other so well that it felt like just another part of our established life unfolding. It never felt odd or awkward or wrong, not when he held my face in his hands and kissed me for what seemed like hours, stroking his tongue over every surface of my mouth, tugging at my lips with his teeth, teasing me and owning me like no one ever had before... Not when he kissed his way down my body, a move which already felt blissfully familiar after only one day... Not when he nuzzled and licked at my dick, all the way from the tip down to my balls, then pulled them into his mouth and sucked them and made me want to scream—and maybe I did a little... Not even when his fingers spread me open and his mouth ghosted over my hole, his tongue wet and eager to please me. Then I felt his fingers—wet too—pushing, twisting, and spreading me. He plunged them deep into me till I was arching off the bed and begging, “Jesus God, Deacon, do something!” And who would’ve ever thought I’d be dying to get fucked, but there it was.

“Yeah, okay, I’m getting there. Hang on.” He pushed me back down and filled me up with two fingers. “Here. Get me ready.”

A condom landed on my chest, and he lifted his hips, putting his dick right there for me to suit up. I opened the package and worked the rubber on while he hissed and strained above me. The bottle of lube had rolled up against my ribs and I squeezed some on him and slicked him good, both for my own benefit and for the pleasure of watching him squirm. I wasn’t the only one who was ready.

After a few strokes he grabbed my wrist and pulled my hand away. “Enough of that.” He drew his fingers out of me and wiped his hand on the towel he’d dropped on the bed after his shower. “How do you want to do this?” he asked, his voice tense.

“You’re the one who studied for this, not me. I don’t know.”

He blinked, and I was pretty sure I saw the quickest shadow of disappointment flash across his face. But then it was gone, and his hands were on my hips. “Flip over.”

I did as he instructed me, got my knees under me and my butt up, spreading my legs when he kneed them apart. It wasn’t a position I was used to, and for half a second or so I felt vulnerable and exposed. But then he started playing with me again, sliding his fingertips back and forth across my prostate, and all my reservations flew right out the window. I arched my back and whined for more and he gave it, thrusting two fingers deep inside me, then three, twisting

and curling them, leaving no part of me untouched. He seemed to know just how to light me up, a skill I imagined he'd developed from practicing on himself. The vision of that in my head—combined with the reality of his cock nudging into my thigh and his mouth hot and wet on my back—was pure sensory overload. Right when I thought I might shoot just from all the touching and the mental porn, he pulled his fingers out, spread me wide with his thumbs and pushed in with his dick.

When it was over, we both fell on the bed like beached whales breathing our last, him on his back and me collapsed on my belly in a puddle of cum. He was close and there was incidental touching all the way down from our arms to our toes. It made me feel like things were okay, or as okay as they could be under the circumstances. I drifted off into a hazy half sleep because he'd used me up, and I had to refuel before I could do anything else. I felt him move away a few minutes later but I was too far gone to do anything about it. A minute after that he was back, curling up behind me, nudging me up with his hand so that he could deal with the wet spot. Afterward, he draped a blanket over us and we napped for about an hour. It was the best postsex nap I'd ever had.

Chapter Twenty-Two

We spent the rest of the day like any other. There was more football to watch and lunch to make and he even did a load of laundry. We didn't talk about the fact that we were lovers, although it was there between us, coloring everything we did with a new shade of meaning neither of us seemed willing to pop the lid on.

Deacon got some texts from Gus and I got some from yet another girl who was willing to give me yet another chance, and this time I responded although I didn't make a date. We didn't talk about Gus or the girl, and I wondered if the day would ever come when we'd be normal about significant others. I was pretty sure—at least as far as I was concerned—the answer to that was no.

He took me to a gay bar that night and we drank beer and shot tequila and danced, which meant we basically humped each other to techno music until I was unbearably hard and grabbing for his fly right there in the middle of the crowded dance floor. Laughing, he dragged me back to a restroom stall, opened up my jeans and kissed me stupid while he jacked me off to the rhythm of the music pumping in the background and some other dudes fucking loudly on the opposite side of the flimsy wall.

We slept in on Saturday morning, hung over and lazy after our late night out on the town. I woke up when he slapped me on my ass and said, "Get up. Jesus, it's almost noon. We stink and I'm starving. Let's take a shower."

I grunted something and kicked one leg out from under the covers. He nipped me on the shoulder, and then I felt the bed jostle as he left me. I was half-asleep but waking up fast, and although food hadn't been much of a draw, the idea of him in the shower was appealing enough to get me on my feet and moving. I pulled back the shower curtain and looked him up and down. He was sleek like a seal, dark hair slicked back off his forehead, muscles gleaming under the water and the bright bathroom light. I stepped in behind him and reached for him, a move that had already become automatic, one arm curling around his narrow waist, the other dipping lower. His cock hung soft in his dark nest of hair, water running off in a steady stream. I ran my hand over it gently before cupping his balls, then rested my chin on his shoulder, and we both

watched as he got hard in my hands. He leaned back into me as I started tugging on his dick, slow at first, faster when his hips began to buck, letting me know it was getting good. I was hard too, of course, and my cock was wedged firmly in the crack of his ass. The rocking motion of his body and the needy noises he made added fuel to the fire building in my balls. I was fully on board with finishing us both off right then and there, but he put a hand on my wrist to stop me.

“Let’s go back to bed, Tuck. You’ve got one more session to do.”

A thousand thoughts and feelings flashed through me right then, most of them centered around the realization that I’d lost sight yet again of *why* we were fucking, that there was any actual purpose to it beyond pleasure. I hadn’t been being careful with him. I hadn’t been tiptoeing around his fears or issues. I’d just been having a great weekend full of a ton of sex with my favorite person in the whole world. And now it was about to be over. We had one more session and then we were done. I’d go back to Birmingham and back to my life, and Deacon would call up Gus and get on with his.

It was almost enough to make me bail, but my dick was aching and he was asking me to fuck him. It wasn’t like one more time was going to make it any harder to walk away, so all I ended up saying was, “Yeah.”

By the time I dried off and made it to the bed, he was already on his knees, reaching awkwardly behind himself. He had a bottle of lube in his left hand, and it didn’t take a genius on gay sex to figure out what he was doing with his right.

“I thought that was my job.” I took the lube from him as I crawled onto the bed.

“It’s okay, I don’t mind doing it,” he said as he continued to work his hole. He didn’t look like he was getting any pleasure out of it, and his dick, which had been fully hard when he left the shower, was barely at half-mast. It made me wonder if he even liked getting touched back there or if maybe that douchebag had totally ruined the experience for him and I wouldn’t be able to fix it.

“You don’t look like you’re enjoying yourself.”

“I’m just lubing up, Tuck. I’m not trying to enjoy it.”

“Seems like a waste of a good fingering to me.” I reached for his arm to stop him. “Can I?”

“Uhh... you want to?” He seemed unsure; like after everything else we’d done I was suddenly going to get squeamish about touching his ass. *As if.*

“Yeah, dude, I do.” I gave his chest a little shove, and he fell back into the pillows. I followed him down, settling between his legs, more like the lover I wanted to be than the therapist I was pretending to be. “But I’m not ready for that yet. Why’re you always rushing things? We’ve got time, right?”

He grinned and slid his hands up over my ass cheeks, pulling me into him and rubbing us together. “When’s your flight out?”

“Six a.m.”

“Then you’ve got eighteen hours. Make ’em count.”

“I plan to,” I vowed.

We made out for a long time, me on top, kissing him and humping lazily, stirring up a little buzz of pleasure in my balls that felt just right, like I could go for a long time just like that if I wanted to. He got hard again pretty quickly—I felt his cock stiffening up against my hip—but he didn’t seem in any hurry either, happy with the kissing, playing with my ass. At first he just rubbed me and squeezed my cheeks, but his fingers kept moving farther and farther in till finally he was rubbing my hole, which upped the buzzing in my balls quite a bit, had me humping him harder and growling between kisses.

“You like that?” He sounded uncertain, which made no sense since I’d been pretty vocally appreciative when he fucked me yesterday.

“Yeah,” I breathed into his mouth, hissed sharply when he poked his fingertip inside me.

“Hurt?”

I pushed down on it. “Nope.”

“You’re not sore from yesterday?”

“Not really.” I shook my head, brushing our noses together. “Yesterday was great, by the way, in case I forgot to mention it,” I said, then went right back to kissing him again.

I felt his hand move away, then heard the *snick* of the lube cap opening. I was pretty sure we were changing up the plan midmission, but I didn’t care. I had a few hours left with him, and then I had the rest of my life. It was a no-

brainer. Without breaking our kiss I hiked one leg up over his thigh to give him easy access, and he sucked in a breath as his slick fingers found me, slipping in.

“I wanna fuck you again, Tucker,” he whispered urgently.

“I kinda noticed.” He’d changed the angle, coming in from the front, and he had two fingers stuck solidly up my ass. I liked it. A lot. I raised up on my hands and knees, and pushed down on him, shoving his fingers in deeper. He worked me from the inside, watching my face for when he found the spot that made me fucking crazy.

“Jesus, Deak...” I groaned, shivering with pleasure. “I can’t believe how much I love that.”

“Me either,” he said. My cock was swinging in the air between us, hard as nails, dribbling precum all over his dick and his belly. “You really never did this with anybody before?”

“Who the fuck would I do it with?” I asked, locking gazes with him. “You’re the only gay guy I even know.”

“Liar. You know Cody Elliston,” he reminded me with an evil smirk. Then, as a bonus, he added another finger to my ass and started tugging on my cock. My brain almost couldn’t take all that stimulation at once.

“And there’s your answer,” I groaned. The third finger hurt a little, but not enough for me to want him to stop. Mostly, I just wanted him to drive his fingers into me harder. I gritted my teeth and pushed down on his hand, straining to get them all the way in.

“Girl’s’ll do it for you too, you know. Some of them really get into it.” He was sounding strained himself, his face tense and flushed. I really wasn’t interested in my distant future sex life with some unknown girl wearing a strap-on. All I cared about was the next three minutes with him and the real deal.

“Wish *you’d* really get into it,” I hinted, glancing down pointedly at his rock-hard cock.

“Uhh... my hands are full.”

He rolled his head to one side and I noticed a condom lying on the sheet. I snatched up the rubber, ripping open the package and rolling it down his cock like a pro, then slicked him up good. Once I had him ready, he pulled his fingers out. I groaned at the weird, empty feeling. He wiped his hand on the sheet, then wrapped his fingers around the base of his dick, holding it steady for me.

“You wanna do it like this?”

I was pretty sure he was too big for my almost virgin asshole to take this way, but I nodded yes anyway. I wanted to give it a try and it wouldn't matter if I was sore the next day because I'd be on a plane back to reality. At least I'd have something to remember him by. I braced my hands on his shoulders and eased my butt into position. He sucked in a breath as I began a slow slide down, inch by careful inch, until I was stuffed full of his dick and we were both about to hyperventilate.

We held that way for a minute, just staring at each other while I struggled to get adjusted to his thick cock so deep inside of me. Once again, I was in a position I'd never expected to be in, and as I looked down into his eyes, it really began to sink in that I wasn't going to walk away from this the same person as I was before. He blinked and whispered, “Can I move?” I could hear the desperation in his voice, and I nodded yes. I had a whole plane ride home to worry about him making me gay. We both needed this now.

He found a slow, gentle rhythm that was easy for me to follow. We fucked and kissed, touching each other everywhere within reach. I ran my fingers through his chest hair, then played with his nipples, twisting and tugging on them till they were dark and rosy red. He tweaked mine back, which I liked, but my cock was dying to be touched and it wasn't long before I pushed his hand down there. He toyed with me, tracing his fingers around the head, smearing me with my own slick. We kept it slow for a long time—lazy like we had forever—but eventually the buzzing in my balls got crazy loud, and I couldn't wait any longer. “I'm ready,” I whispered into his lips, squeezing him tight inside of me, making his hips buck.

“Yeah, me too.”

I raised up on my haunches just enough to give him room, then stared down into his face as I jacked myself off, watching the flash of pleasure in his eyes as he pounded up into me, loving the sound of my name on his lips when he came.

Chapter Twenty-Three

We'd just detangled ourselves and were still sprawled out on his bed, breathing hard, when my phone dinged. It was the airline, reminding me to check in and assuring me that my flight was going to depart on schedule. I checked the time, saw it was well after noon. My stomach rumbled. I needed to go to the bathroom. No matter how much I wanted to lie there with him and play make-believe, reality wasn't going to let me.

"Jesus, I'm gonna be feeling that for a while," I grumbled as I stood up carefully.

"Sorry," he said, a hugely blatant lie.

"I'm so sure." I walked gingerly to the bathroom, exaggerating my situation since he was watching. I could see him in the mirror, stretched out naked on the bed, looking way too smug. "Go make me some food, bitch."

"You sure you don't want me to call nine one one first? You know those guys live for near-deaths by ass fucking."

"Why don't you wait'll I do you, hotshot, then we can take a ride in the whambulance together!" Laughing, I slammed the door shut just as the lube bottled crashed into the spot where my ass had been.

He made spaghetti for lunch and we ate at the breakfast bar, chatting and drinking cheap wine from the big jug leftover from Wednesday night. We talked about work—his fancy job in industrial psychology, my boring existence as Bob's head forklift driver. He told me his lease was running out in a few months and he was thinking about looking for a house; he wanted to get a dog and plant some vegetables, plus he was tired of white walls and beige carpet. My whole life was on hold until I passed air traffic school in Oklahoma City, and I said as much.

"Do you know where you'll be assigned yet?" he asked.

"Nope. Gotta pass the academy first."

"Gotcha." He finished off his glass of wine and stood up. "I'm gonna shower. Wanna get out of here for a while, maybe go up to Red Rock and hike out to the overlook?"

“Sure, if you want to,” I said, though I didn’t really care about leaving the apartment. He must not’ve either, because when he came out after his shower and found me engrossed in one of the Matrix movies, he flopped down beside me on the couch and we spent the afternoon vegging in front of the TV.

Not another word was spoken about hiking—or house hunting or job assignments. But my future weighed heavily on my mind, seeing as how my number one pick for facilities was only five miles down the road from where Deacon lived. We’d talked about my choices when I first got discharged, back when nothing with the new job was official. Back when we were just friends and I didn’t know what it felt like to have his dick in my ass. Everything was different now, though, and I couldn’t find the right way to bring the future up. Other than that one small exchange, he didn’t mention anything else about his plans either. I wasn’t sure if he felt weird about it too—or if he just didn’t care about where I ended up.

I didn’t wait for him to ask me for sex again.

It was getting dark outside. My time was slipping away and I didn’t want to rush, for my sake as much as his. When he stood up, saying something about dinner, I followed him off the couch and snagged his wrist. “Hold up a sec. Why don’t we eat after, maybe go out and get something.”

“After?”

I knew he knew what I was talking about, but I didn’t call him on it, just said, “Yeah. *After.*” I moved in close, watching his mouth till I was close enough to kiss the corner of his lips. “Come on, Deacon, let’s go back to bed.”

He hiked his eyebrows, looking doubtful. I wasn’t sure if he was covering up nerves or not. “You sure you’re up for another round? Thought you were done.”

“My *ass* is done, but my dick is absolutely ready to go.” I kissed him again, licked into his mouth to let him know I was on board for one last ride. Being that close to him, I couldn’t quite stop myself, and besides, we were fixing to fuck, so I felt okay about kissing him. I had a few more hours. I planned to make the most of them.

Once we got to his room, we took our time undressing each other, kissing and touching wherever we wanted, falling onto the bed and doing it some more

till our dicks were hard, smearing trails of slick all over our bellies and thighs. He pushed me down and kissed me deeply. As he pinned my wrists to the bed and rocked against me, I let him have his way, knowing whatever he wanted to do, I would say yes to. He felt so good, strong and heavy on top of me. I was dying to get my dick inside of him, but I felt an empty yearning for his in me as well, and wondered if I would soon be the one at home alone with a plastic toy and Internet porn. The idea made me angry, and I dug my heels in and humped him back, pissed that he'd lost so much, pissed at what I was about to lose.

He rode the storm with me until we were both close; then he pulled back, wild-eyed and breathing hard. I wanted more than anything to fuck him bare, to feel his slick, hot skin tight around me, but I'd fucked way too many strangers to take that chance, no matter how careful I'd been. Leaning down, Deacon rolled the condom down my cock, then took my hand and drizzled some lube on my fingers.

Deacon was still on top of me, but when I nudged him he flopped down beside me on his back. His legs splayed wide so I could play, and I did, taking my time to get him ready, fingering him slowly while I sucked the head of his cock and worked it with my tongue. He ran his hands over my hair, rimmed my ears and jaw with his fingertips, touched my eyelashes and my lips, and when he couldn't take any more of my teasing, he pulled me back up and we kissed as I sank into his body like I belonged there.

He cried out and arched against me, and I shushed him with more kisses. I moved slowly, waking him up as best I could to all the joy he'd been missing out on for years, listening as his "Oh fucks" turned to "Fuck me, Tucker." Then I rode him hard and steady till I felt him clench tight around me, and the stars in my head exploded one last time as I came apart inside of him.

We ended up ordering pizza. I showered and packed, and when our food got there we parked our asses back on the couch for our favorite college rivalry, Auburn against Alabama. It could've been any fall weekend in the last eleven years of our lives—except my body ached in ways it never had before, and every time I looked at him my eyes went straight to his mouth and I wanted to kiss him. If he noticed, he pretended not to, and I hoped I'd have my shit somewhat together by Christmas, or things were going to get real awkward real fast.

My alarm went off at four the next morning, silent vibrations beneath my pillow because I didn't want to wake him up, too, since I was basically ready to go. All I had to do was get dressed and leave. I was lying on my back and he was on his stomach, his face pressed into my side, all hot breath and itchy stubble, and he'd draped his arm across my middle. Sleeping with him was just one more of a hundred things I would miss when I went back home to my empty apartment, my empty life. I let myself lie there for a minute, soaking in his warmth and closeness one last time, but when he groaned and stirred, I shifted away from him and eased out of bed. Ten minutes later I was gone.

Chapter Twenty-Four

I'm not really sure what I expected to happen between us once the weekend was done. The plan had been all about helping Deacon get back into the swing of life, not about starting something new between us. Therefore, the obvious answer was, we'd go back to being friends without benefits. He'd start fucking guys like a normal homosexual dude in his midtwenties, and I'd go back to fucking whatever woman ended up sitting next to me at the bar on Friday night. That was the unspoken but very clearly implied plan he'd been hinting at every time he made me promise nothing would change between us.

Unfortunately, I wasn't able to abide completely by the rules of engagement we'd laid out. I tried. That very afternoon when I got home, I crashed on my couch with my phone and a beer, planning to just watch the game and chill and not think about anything, but the very first thing I saw when I opened Facebook was him and Gus, checked into some fancy-schmancy bistro café what-the-fuck-ever place, drinking mimosas and looking like the Big Gay Couple of the Year.

Maybe it was a little unrealistic of me, but I just figured he'd give it a day or two before he jumped in the sack with the next guy. He'd waited twenty-four goddamn years. He couldn't give it another twenty-four hours before he hooked up with somebody else? Of course, the whole point of us fucking in the first place was so he could hook up with somebody else, namely Gus, but it still chapped my ass that he couldn't even wait till he washed my DNA off his sheets to do it.

That evening my phone dinged with a text from him.

Trip okay?

I stewed on it for a half hour or so before I answered.

Yeah.

I got no reply and after some more stewing, I sent another message.

Brunch okay?

Not surprisingly, I got a very curt *yeah* in response, and I stewed on my own and left it alone for several days, until I got the call from the FAA I'd been waiting for, offering me a job and a class date in mid-January. Finally life was picking up for me. I sent Deacon a text before I even remembered things were

off between us. He was the first person I thought of when I got the news, and I hit send before my brain kicked in.

He answered right away, though, like nothing was wrong.

Cool. Congrats!

And that was it. Otherwise, I had no news to share. He knew all about the process because I'd already told him. The only issues left to talk about were hopes and wishes and ideas, and texting was no good for that. If he were there with me, I'd have a thousand more things to say, but if he were there with me I'd want to fuck him, too, so it was just as well he wasn't anywhere around.

My message about the job did break the ice on our texting weirdness at least, and we got back into the habit of sending random comments and observations about work, sports, the weather, the holidays, Netflix vs. Redbox, and the potential use of Christmas carols as a form of torture in war camps. What we did not text about was our sex weekend together or anything relationship related at all. I saw pictures of him on Facebook, sometimes with Gus, sometimes with other guys I knew or suspected were gay—and who might or might not be fucking him. I didn't ask any more questions and he didn't volunteer anything.

As for me, there wasn't much to say. Since I would be leaving Birmingham in six weeks and hopefully never going back for more than a long weekend, I decided to give the bar scene a break. I wasn't in the market to meet anybody for more than a one-nighter, and a random hookup just for the sake of getting laid had lost its appeal. Besides, I had other shit to do, like pack up my apartment and do my Christmas shopping and go to the gym. I'd put on almost ten pounds since I'd gotten out of the marines in August, and it was all thanks to beer, pizza, and chicken wings. That shit needed to go.

Some mornings when I woke up, I'd reach out for him, sweep my hand across the cold sheet behind me and wonder why he was already up, not in bed, drooling on my shoulder and giving me razor burn. And every time, it was like a kick in my gut—the moment I realized he wasn't there and he wasn't ever going to be there like that again. We hadn't said the words outright, but after what we'd done together, I couldn't imagine a future time when we'd share a bed just for the sake of convenience.

And sometimes when I jacked off, and nothing else could get me where I needed to be, I'd think back on that weekend. I'd come to images of his mouth

on my cock or the memory of how his dick felt drilling me into the mattress. Afterward, I'd feel like the sleaziest kind of perv, like I was taking advantage of Deacon by using what we'd done to help him for my own crude pleasure, and I'd swear to myself I'd never do it again. And I wouldn't... till the next time.

He didn't come home at Christmas. His folks had always wanted to go to New York City for the holidays, and they'd decided that was the year to make it happen. Everyone was going, even his grandparents. I went back and forth in my head about asking if Gus was going, finally deciding to ask, seeing as how our whole sex weekend had been for Gus's benefit. I deserved to know if we'd been successful.

But when I asked *Gus going too?* all I got in response was *Dunno*. I considered throwing my phone against the wall, but it was new and fucking expensive, so I stuffed it in my gym locker instead and took my frustrations out on the free weights. When I looked at Facebook, I saw pictures of his mom and Gram ice-skating, and him and his dad carrying about a dozen shopping bags each, but Gus was nowhere in sight.

I began to wonder if maybe we'd failed and he was too ashamed to tell me.

I lifted my own personal moratorium on dating when a nice girl in accounting asked me to go with her to the company Christmas party. She'd been divorced about six months, something I knew all about because it was a family-owned business with about fifty employees, and you couldn't fart anywhere in the county without everyone else knowing by the next day. She knew I was leaving in two weeks and never coming back, which made me the perfect date for a woman just trying to make it through the holidays. She asked me out again for New Year's. I took her to a club downtown, told her she could drink all she wanted, and I'd make sure she got home safe, which I did. We made out on her couch for a while, but when she reached for my fly I told her I had to go home. I think she was a little relieved.

A few weeks into classes at the air traffic control academy, I met another nice girl who I went out with a few times. She was from some small nowhere town in Iowa, and she missed her family and her cat. We made out a few times in the cab of my truck, but when she invited me into her apartment, I made up

some excuse to leave. After the second time that happened, I think she got the message. A few days later I saw her having lunch with a new guy and we were done.

It wasn't that I *couldn't* get it up—that wasn't the issue with either one of those girls. But my drive to close the deal had taken a vacation. Deacon was the last person I'd fucked, and although that was still a very vivid memory, it didn't do a damn thing for me on a day-to-day basis. I was only twenty-five years old. I wasn't ready for my sex life to be over yet.

I wasn't exactly desperate to get laid yet, but I was confused and horny and pissed off that, for unknown reasons, I'd turned into my own personal cockblock. After all, it was one thing to lay off random hookups for a while, but it was another thing to suddenly realize you hadn't gotten any in months. So, when I found myself on a barstool one weekend, sitting next to a guy who wanted to buy me beers and listen to my life story, I decided to let it play out. Everything I'd read on the Internet assured me one weekend of gay sex couldn't turn me gay, but I was beginning to have my doubts. When the guy started staring at my mouth and pressing his thigh against mine under the bar, all those alarm bells that had stayed quiet with Deacon went off like there was a full-on missile strike in progress. I got the hell out of there as fast as I could fake an emergency and dig a twenty out of my pocket.

When I got back to my apartment, I sent Deacon a text.

a DUDE just tried to pick me up at f'n Chili's.

I'm not sure why I wanted to share that piece of information with him, but I did. Maybe I was hoping for shock, or even perversely, jealousy.

How was it?

His nonchalance, however, was *not* the right answer. I glared at my phone but he didn't indicate he was joking or yanking my chain in any way, so after a minute, I responded.

I dunno. I left.

Deacon's next comment yanked my chain hard, whether he meant to or not.

You're missing out. Lots more peeps to fuck if you go both ways.

I typed out about five different replies, including *I haven't fucked anyone since you*, which I erased as soon as I read it because A: that was turning into a very disturbing issue for me, and B: things were already awkward enough between us, and that information could only make it worse. I finally settled on *Thanks for the tip* and we left it at that.

Chapter Twenty-Five

I had two weeks left at the academy when I got my facility assignment; I was going to Washington Center, conveniently located in Leesburg, Virginia, about five miles from Deacon's apartment. It had been my top pick when I filled out my paperwork months ago, precisely because it was close to Deacon, and he was the only person in my life I could see myself wanting to hang out with on a regular basis.

Nothing had changed. If anything, I actually wanted to spend more time with him. I could easily see us spending every weekend together... taking in a Redskins game, playing golf, going camping in the mountains. Even going to some of those froufrou restaurants his crowd seemed to squat in every Sunday, drinking champagne for breakfast and listening to jazz bands all afternoon.

But I could also see us spending the whole day in bed, thanks to my big gay Thanksgiving, and I had *no* idea where to go with that in my brain or my life plan. My plan had never involved diving headfirst into an alternative lifestyle, and *his* plan was all about dating guys *other than me*, who were actually gay and knew how to have a relationship. Even if *I* was up for the challenge, and that was a big, hairy *if*, Deacon was way too smart to let himself get emotionally invested in me.

All things considered, moving to Leesburg seemed like a really good way to pull the final plug on the most important relationship in my life, yet I never put in a request to amend my paperwork, and by the time they handed out the final assignments, it was way too late to ask to go someplace else. Even my stellar excuse of *I spent a weekend fucking my best friend and now I'm scared to face him because I'm afraid I'll do something insane, like propose* probably wouldn't impress them. The FAA didn't really care who you fucked, as long as you did it on your own time and didn't run the airplanes together on theirs.

Of course, there was always the possibility of a swap. I wasn't the only person who was having second thoughts about where they wanted to spend the next twenty-five years of their life. They'd even hung a big bulletin board on the wall right outside the personnel office for that purpose, and it stayed plastered with requests.

I walked by it every day, but I never stopped to read it even once.

It was a twenty-hour drive from Oklahoma City to Leesburg. I got there at four o'clock on a Friday evening. He got home at five thirty and woke me up on his doorstep.

"Dude. What the fuck? Why didn't you tell me you were coming? I would've left you a key."

I rubbed the gritty sleep out of my eyes, swiped my hand over my hair. He was squatting down in front of me, a worried frown creasing his face. I knew I looked like total hell, smelled like it too. "I wasn't sure when I'd get here" was my only excuse.

"We've gotta work on your texting skills" was all he said. Then he stood up and offered me his hand. "Come on, you need a shower."

The last time I was there, we took showers together, and I wanted that back so badly I could taste it, but I didn't say. I just followed him into the apartment and dropped my bag by the couch. If he noticed, he didn't comment, and why should he? I was the one whose life had gotten turned upside down by that weekend, not him.

"Here, take this. Go shower," he said, handing me a beer. "You want some food or just sleep?"

I drank the beer greedily, downing half of it in one swallow. "Both," I said. I wanted to say more but I still had a little bit of self-control, so I headed into his room where the bathroom was.

The water was hot and it perked me up and numbed me at the same time. I hadn't had sex in five months and the guy I wanted—the only person in the world I seemed to want anymore—was three feet away from me, talking to me while I washed my dick. "I ordered a pizza. Here's a towel, and I got some clothes out of your bag for you."

"Okay," I said, wondering how wrong it would be if I jerked off while we were talking. Considering all the fucked up things I'd done in my life, it probably wouldn't even make the top five hundred.

"What time did you get in town?" he asked, and I tried to think and play with my dick at the same time.

"Maybe a couple of hours ago?"

"Did you drive straight through?"

"Yeah," I said, my voice even more slurred as I jacked myself.

“Are you okay?” he asked, and I swallowed and tried to make myself sound normal.

“Yeah, dude, just tired.”

“Okay,” he said. I heard the bathroom door shut behind him and I played a little longer, but it wasn’t the same without him. I turned off the water when I heard the doorbell ring.

We ate pizza in front of the TV. He’d changed out of his work clothes and into a pair of old jeans and a dark gray sweatshirt. I was wearing what he’d laid out for me, sweatpants and a navy blue hoodie. He didn’t leave me any underwear and I didn’t feel like hunting any down, so I wasn’t wearing any. I wasn’t sure if he’d done it on purpose or not.

We talked a little while we ate. He asked me a few questions—about the drive and my parents and when I had to start work. I answered as best I could, but I’d been up for over thirty-six hours by then and my brain was pretty much fuzz. After three beers and a couple slices of pizza, I was done.

“Come on,” I heard him say through the fog of my stupor. “Time for bed.”

He gave my arm a tug and I lurched up off the sofa and stumbled along beside him into the bedroom. When I saw the bed, I remembered I’d been planning to sleep on the couch. “You sure you don’t want me to sleep out there?” I offered, peering at him, trying to pierce through the confusion of my horniness and tiredness to see what he was thinking.

“Do you want to?” he countered, and we were stuck. I couldn’t even read his mind on a good day, which this definitely was not.

“What about Gus?” I heard myself ask, and that question pretty much swept all the extraneous bullshit off the table and laid me bare. I wouldn’t have had the courage to ask if I hadn’t been so brain-dead. Maybe that was why I’d driven all the way there without stopping to sleep. So I’d have an excuse to be reckless.

He cocked his head. “Gus? What about him?”

“Did it work? Are you fucking him?” We were standing two feet from his bed, and memories and regrets were swirling in me, a volatile mix of all the things I wanted desperately but didn’t know if I could have. Maybe I hadn’t even realized exactly what it was I wanted till right then. He’d break me wide open if he said the wrong thing.

He didn't ask what I was talking about or get indignant or even laugh at me for being a tool. "It worked," he said evenly. "But no, I'm not fucking him."

I breathed, and it felt like my first fresh air in months. "Then how do you know it worked?"

"I went home with him and when I realized I could, I also realized I didn't want to. So I didn't," he explained, like it was all so simple.

"I saw a picture of you two at a bar last weekend," I said, one last jab at my fears, one last chance for him to hurt me.

"You see pictures of me with people I'm not fucking all the time. He's just one of many."

"So you're not fucking any of those guys?"

He smiled. "No dude, I'm not."

"Are *you* going to sleep on the couch?" My brain was all over the place, dancing from one topic to the next. He didn't seem to mind the gaps, but he wasn't giving away the farm either.

"Do you want me to? It's okay if you say yes." He took a step back, stuck his hands in his back pockets. "I don't want you to feel weird around me, or pressured. I'm not fucking anyone else because I don't want to be. You're not still on the hook for anything."

He took another step away, which was the last thing I wanted. I closed my fingers around his wrist and squeezed, pulling him back to me. "What if I wanna be?"

"What's that mean?" he asked, cocking his head. His tongue flicked out, just a tiny tip of pink at the corner of his mouth, and I squeezed his wrist harder.

"I'm not fucking anyone else either," I confessed. As far as answers went, it wasn't one, but his eyes went wide all the same. He got the implications.

"Why not?"

"I don't want to." I looked from him to the bed and back. "I don't know what the fuck I'm doing, Deak, but this is where I want to be."

I opened my mouth to say more, but I yawned hugely instead, bringing us back to reality. "Tell me that again when you're conscious, okay?" he said.

“I will, I promise.” I slipped a finger through his belt loop and pulled him closer, ghosting a dry kiss across his cheekbone. “Sleep with me.”

He drew back and stared at me for another minute, reading my face, probably my heart too because he always saw so much more than anyone else. Finally he nodded, and relief settled inside me. “Okay. Just let me lock up.”

He pulled the covers back while I got undressed, and as I was slipping off my sweats, I remembered I was naked underneath, but I didn’t care. He tucked me in and clicked off the lamp, and I was asleep before the door closed behind him.

I opened my eyes several hours later, found myself staring straight into his solemn gaze. The room was dim with early-morning light, and he had his head propped up on one hand, watching me. It was the first time we’d woken up in the same bed but on separate pillows in years.

“What are you doing way over there?” I asked, saying the very first thing that popped into my head. I slid my hand across the sheet as I spoke, reaching for him on instinct even as I wondered if maybe I’d dreamed my last few minutes of consciousness.

He caught my hand and held it still between us. “Not taking anything for granted.”

“What? I didn’t make myself clear?”

He shook his head slowly. “You were barely lucid, Tuck. I’m not holding you to any of that.”

“I drove twenty hours on no sleep because I couldn’t wait to see you. That doesn’t tell you anything?”

“Dude. You bailed out of here last November like the Taliban was on your ass, just like I said you would. I’ve barely even talked to you since. Five minutes of incoherent ramblings doesn’t make up for five months of nothing.” He let a tiny smile lift the corners of his mouth, but his eyes were determined. “I don’t care how sincere they were.”

I scooted closer, twisting my hand free of his to slide it up his hip. Even under the thick comforter I could feel the solid curve of it, and although I had no idea what he was wearing under the covers, we both knew I was naked. I had important things I needed to say and deliciously obscene things I was dying to do. I needed to get my words right the very first time out of the box.

“You remember on Thanksgiving Day, when we were at your friends’ house, and I was flipping out a little because they all knew we were fucking.”

“Almost fucking,” he corrected me.

I nodded. “Yeah. Almost fucking.”

“Yeah, I remember.”

“You said, people have always known, and I was the only one who didn’t.” I squeezed his hip through the fluff, inched a little bit closer. “What were you talking about?”

“Uh-uh. I’m not making it that easy for you, man,” he said, shaking his head. “What do *you think* I was talking about?”

I took a moment to let my gaze wander over his perfect face. I took in the joy sparkling in his dark eyes—because he already knew how this story was going to end—and the sly smile playing at the corners of his lush lips. I wanted to kiss those lips. I wanted to kiss him everywhere. I swallowed the last of my nerves and asked, “So tell me, exactly how long have we been in love with each other?”

His smile deepened and his teeth flashed white. “Since we were sixteen.”

I thought back to that year. It only took me a second to locate the memory. “You were in a wreck. I was on a date, and you were out with some other guys, and y’all got T-boned at a red light.”

“Yeah. I was in the emergency room getting treated for a concussion when you busted through the doors and came running back there, yelling my name, at least three cops on your ass trying to stop you.”

“I recognized the car. There were people everywhere and half the girls were crying and one of them said she thought you were dead.”

“You were crying too when you finally found me.” He ran one finger down my cheek, like he was tracing the memory of my tears. “I thought you were going to kiss me.” He drew his finger over my lips. “That’s when I realized what was going on with us, why we were so close.”

“Why didn’t you tell me?”

“I was pretty sure I was gay by then, but you...” He rolled his eyes. “Not so much.”

I winced as I thought back to all the girls who'd been in and out of my life over the years. None of them had lasted very long, but they had to have hurt him all the same. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay," he said. "We were so young. Even if you would've been open to the idea of fooling around with me, we would've probably destroyed ourselves trying to stay monogamous. I didn't want to take that chance, since I had no idea how long our feelings would last. I didn't want to fuck up our friendship for something that would burn out by prom."

"But we didn't burn out by prom," I said, remembering that year's dance... me, him and a bunch of other kids in a limo, a few contraband bottles of booze on board but no nookie because we all went as friends.

"No." He looked down at the comforter, spent a few seconds drawing invisible shapes on the dark gray cotton. "I thought about telling you that weekend at the lake, when I came out to you, but you were wiggling out so bad about *me*, I decided not to."

"I didn't wig out *that* bad," I protested. I dragged my hand down from his hip to play with his on the comforter.

"Bad enough. I didn't want to blow your mind right before you headed off to boot camp. You already had enough shit to worry about. Plus, I figured by the time you got out, we'd be back to just regular friends anyway." He flipped my hand over and traced the lines on my palm. "And maybe we would've been, but then I got raped, and everything stopped for me."

"I'm sorry. I still wanna pound that motherfucker into the ground."

"I'm over it now."

"Are you?"

"Yeah. I am." He smirked. "I haven't fucked any of those guys, but I've fooled around enough to know I'm healed."

A hot flame of jealousy flickered to life in me. I knew I had to douse it, but I scowled anyway, just so he'd know I cared. "Not just Gus, huh?"

"Nope."

I ran my hand up his arm and let it rest on his shoulder. "So what you're saying is, if air traffic doesn't work out for me, maybe I've got a future as a sex therapist after all?"

"Not exactly," he answered, amused.

Thinking about sex reminded me that I hadn't had any in a long time. I scooted closer, till there was nothing but a couple of inches left between us. My knee slid easily between his thighs. "So what *are* you saying, Deacon?" I asked as I leaned in for our first happy-ever-after kiss. "That you love me too?"

He smiled against my lips. "I've always loved you, Tucker," he whispered softly. "I guess what I'm saying now is, I love you more."

The End

Author Bio

Sienna lives in the heart of the good ol' boy South, and most of her peeps think she's a bit odd for her love of male/male romance. She's always been a writer of sorts, but Brokeback Mountain really got the ball rolling. After years of writing stories about Jack and Ennis, she's finally broken free and begun to enjoy playing with her own characters. She wrote this story with the full and loving support of her eight dogs and four cats, and the very grudging "permission" of her wonderful husband.

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