



when it's

right



aria grace



WHEN IT'S RIGHT

When Shane Greenly left his home in Casper Mountain, Wy, he was leaving more than just the closet. He needed a fresh start to pursue his dream of running a dog training ranch without having to deny who he really is. Meeting Alex was one of the best things that could have happened to Shane. They were at the beginning of a wonderful relationship when the unthinkable happens and Shane has to leave. The consequences of his past mistakes could not be hidden any longer.

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Love Has No Boundaries

An M/M Romance series

WHEN IT'S RIGHT

By Aria Grace

Introduction

The story you are about to read celebrates love, sex and romance between men. It is a product of the *Love Has No Boundaries* promotion sponsored by the *Goodreads M/M Romance Group* and is published as a free gift to you.

What Is Love Has No Boundaries?

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 they 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 Has No Boundaries*.

Whether you are an avid M/M romance reader or new to the genre, you are in for a delicious treat.

Words of Caution

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

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

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WHEN IT'S RIGHT

By Aria Grace

Photo Description

A smiling dark-haired guy in his twenties or thirties is apparently driving a car. Another man, perhaps a little younger, also with short dark hair, is resting his head on the driver's shoulder, eyes closed, a faint smile on his face. Behind them on the backseat is a dog, and all we see of it is the dog's big head, eyes closed, its chin on the resting man's neck. All three look utterly contented.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

If it wasn't for this wonderful, sleeping animal, my love and I would have never found one another. We fell hard and fast, but a secret I'd hoped would never be exposed almost tore us apart forever.

Please describe our journey finding true love and overcoming obstacles with the unexpected help of the best four-legged friend a guy could have.

I'm looking for a story that has angst, but ultimately ends with a sweet HEA.

Sincerely,

MWI38

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: family drama, veterinarian, first time, coming out, men with pets

Word count: 33,481

WHEN IT'S RIGHT

By Aria Grace

CHAPTER ONE

Alex

Sometimes I wish she wasn't so damn cute. Those brown eyes beg for attention, and her droopy ears get to me every time. I really can't afford to take a puppy break, but we've both been cooped up in the house for hours and my mind is mush anyway. My presentation is as good as it's going to get and if I keep tweaking it, I'm just going to talk myself out of a client.

"Okay, Stormy. You win." She jumps up at her name and starts licking my face. I have to shove her off me so I can step into a pair of running shoes and find her leash. As soon as the leash is in hand, she bites the end and drags me to the door.

"We're going, we're going. Just chill for a second." When I picked her out of the litter of twelve chocolate Labs, I thought getting the hyper female was a good idea. I wanted to be able to take her running and to play Frisbee with her on occasion. I had no idea that meant she'd never settle down. At almost a year old, she is even more hyper now than she was at two months old.

As she bounds down the steps of my small bungalow, I consider my options. We could walk to the park about a mile away and play fetch for a while. She loves that, but it is part of her regular routine with Mandy, the lady who walks her every afternoon. So, feeling guilty about having to leave her over the weekend for a business trip, I decide to take her somewhere special.

"Load up, girl. We're going for a ride." She jumps right into the front of my Pathfinder and waits for us to take off. With her tail whacking me in the arm at an alarming rate, she settles in with her head out the window and enjoys the summer breeze.

It is only a thirty minute drive to the state park just outside of Denver, but by the time we drive into the parking lot, she is fit to be tied. The high-pitched

whines of excitement are enough to make passersby think I am skinning her. But once the car is in park and the door open, she bolts from its confinement. Always ready to explore. I don't usually let her off leash out here, but she's so amped up that I know leashing her will just end up pissing me off with all of her pulling and tugging, so I go against my better judgment and let her roam.

The trail that we usually take is blocked because of a fallen tree, so we veer left onto an access road. I know I'm going to spend the rest of the week locked up in conference rooms and hotels; I'm happy to take in the fresh air while I can. With P!nk blaring in my earbuds, we begin our run.

Stormy takes off with me hot on her heels. She loves to smell the plants that have been marked by the various wildlife, so when she wanders a few hundred feet in front or behind me, I don't worry. The park is visited by hundreds of people each day, and despite the risk of possibly running into a coyote, this trail is generally pretty safe.

About a mile into the run, we see cattle in the distance. Fortunately, Stormy doesn't pay much attention to them so I don't either. I am zoning out to my music when Stormy turns a corner about fifty feet ahead of me. Just as I round the bend and look up, the world moves in slow motion. She is running full speed toward a large gap in a fence. Before I can get any words out of my mouth, she leaps onto a cattle grate and falls in. Her four legs slip through the steel bars at odd angles, leaving her hanging over the drainage ditch underneath. The silence of the park is pierced by her terrified yelp of pain and surprise.

"No," I scream as I run faster. I can see her struggling to get up, but each time a paw lands on a rail, it just slips again, causing even more damage to her already injured limbs.

"Hold, Stormy." I try to sound firm but I can hear the quiver in my voice as I sprint to reach her. She is too scared to listen, but I get to her before she can fully lift out. As I approach her from behind, I quickly assess her injuries. No compound breaks, thank god! She thinks she's in trouble, and her tail is curled between her legs. Maybe that means it isn't as bad as it could be. Hopefully,

she just slipped cleanly between the steel rails and is fine. “It’s okay, baby. Just hold for a sec.”

Reaching under her belly with one arm and around her neck with the other, I lift her straight up and carry her back down the trail. My nerves are frayed and I think I’m at least as freaked out as Stormy is.

Eventually, my adrenaline wanes, and after some reassuring licks across my sweaty shoulder, I attempt to let her down. I set her on a flat patch of dirt and attach the leash that was stupidly in my pocket instead of around her neck. Stupid, stupid, stupid.

She tries to walk but her right front leg is in bad shape. After a short whine when she puts it on the ground, she yanks her leg up and holds it out from her body. Clearly, there is a problem. I see a small cut on her elbow, but it’s not big enough to cause the pain she’s in. That means it’s internal. Dammit.

This is her first real injury since I brought her home at eight weeks old and it breaks my heart. Having been fairly spoiled, she seems scared and confused as she hobbles around. *My baby is hurt and it’s my fault.*

Scooping her up, I carry her the rest of the way back to the car.

“Don’t worry, girl. You’re gonna be fine. We get to go see Dr. Mills.”

She is the only dog I’ve ever seen that loves going to the vet. Between the treats they give her and the attention from the staff, she has almost as much fun there as at the dog park.

The ride to the vet seems to take forever. Rush hour traffic and her occasional yelps when she forgets she’s in pain and tries to stand on the seat, make me a ball of stress. As soon as we pull into the parking lot and she sees the office, she is up again and trying to jump out the window.

Carrying her in, her wiggling and squealing gets the attention of some kids in the waiting room. They have a Rottie that’s a little over-interested in Stormy, but when I explain to the receptionist what happened, we’re quickly directed to an empty room to wait for the doctor.

The room is familiar. To date, it has only had positive experiences. The faux-granite counter is lined with jars of treats and cotton balls. The worn vinyl bench is wide enough for me to sit on while holding her upper half on my lap. The large, stainless steel table in the middle of the room seems more like an operating table than just a place for well-puppy visits. It's currently lowered to the ground to act as a scale but I know this visit isn't going to go as well as the previous. This is when I have to admit that I've failed to keep her safe and now she's suffering. How do people survive having actual kids that get hurt? I can't even imagine.

While we're waiting, I gently press my finger down the length of her right leg and watch her breathing. She is panting happily until I touch a particularly tender point. Her breathing quickens so I know she feels it, but her tail is still wagging so that's a good sign. Probably not a serious break, if there's a break at all. Hopefully this is just a false alarm and she'll be good as new with a few days of rest.

After only a few minutes of trying to keep Stormy calm, the door opens and my jaw drops. The most gorgeous guy I've ever seen walks in. In all the months I've been coming to this office for routine shots and flea treatments, I've only seen women working. This guy must be new because I would have definitely remembered him. He gives me a shy smile as he puts down his clipboard and kneels in front of us.

"Well, hello, sweetheart. You must be Stormy." He grabs her around the ears and lets her lick his cheek. "What a pretty girl you are."

Just seeing him on his knees makes me almost forget about the dog. I have to sit on one hand to keep from reaching out and running my fingers through his silky brown hair. It's cropped short around the ears with just an inch at the top, almost military style, which makes him even more attractive. What would it feel like to be pumping into that mouth with my fingers tightly wound through it? *Okay, focus!* I try to compose myself so I can deal with the matter at hand.

Clearly remembering that we haven't met, he looks up at me and offers his hand. "Hi, there. I'm Shane. I just need to get some information before Dr. Mills comes in."

"Hi, Shane," I mumble while still staring at him. "I'm Alex. Are you new here?"

Without looking back at me, he pulls a Milk-Bone from the pocket of his scrubs and slips it to Stormy. She is already smitten so he doesn't need to coerce her onto the floor-height tabletop.

"Yeah, I'm interning for a few months," he responds while gently maneuvering Stormy onto the scale. Sixty-three pounds. No wonder my arms are tired from carrying her. "Let's see if we can get you all fixed up, pretty girl."

Okay, I get it. You like girls. Just let me have my little fantasy over here. I can't help the frustrated thoughts from entering my mind and in a ridiculous moment of immaturity, I'm actually jealous of my dog. What I wouldn't give to have him rubbing my back like that.

"I just need to take her temperature and then I'll bring in the doctor." As he raises the table to counter-height, I stand up to help hold her. She loves a good old-fashioned thermometer up the ass more than the average dog but she's so wiggly, I always worry she's going to break the damn thing while it's inside of her.

"I'll hold her front and try to keep her steady," I offer. While leaning her good leg against my chest, I wrap one arm under her chest and the other closer to her belly. My hand has a mind of its own and accidentally brushes against Shane's bicep. Just a few fingertips graze the skin below the edge of his shirt. But he notices. He quietly gasps and freezes. Shit. I've overstepped.

My eyes shoot up to his and he's staring at the spot on his arm where I touched him. Does he feel the same electricity that I do? My fingers are still tingling from where they met his skin. Maybe I'm coming down with something because I swear the heat in the room has gone up twenty degrees.

“Sorry. She doesn’t always understand the words ‘stand still.’ Probably why we’re in here now.” I’m trying to lighten the mood and ease the palpable tension in the room. I know what I’m feeling, but I can’t tell if he’s tense because he is new to the job, not used to touching patients, or just a homophobe that has heard about me. I have to remind myself that the world doesn’t revolve around me and there is basically zero chance he has heard about me prior to that moment. I’m sure it’s just his professionalism kicking in. Regardless, I don’t want to make it weird.

“No problem.” He quickly recovers and lifts her tail, standing at her back. “If she’s ready...” He doesn’t finish his sentence. He just slips the thermometer in and focuses intently on his watch. I try to keep my eyes on Stormy, but they keep drifting back to Shane. His lips are full and pink. They are shaped perfectly, even on the top and bottom. I can imagine that they would be soft and smooth. So kissable.

Not realizing I am staring, and not sure if I got caught, he clears his throat and pulls out the thermometer. “102. Perfect.” He quickly cleans up and excuses himself to get the doctor. With Shane out of the room, I can finally breathe.

“I’m sorry you got hurt, baby, but you’re getting steak tonight for introducing me to Shane. Yes, you are,” I coo into her ear. I will be fantasizing about those lips kneeling in front of me for weeks to come.

After reliving our ordeal to Dr. Mills, and getting a much shorter lecture than I expected about letting a puppy run off-leash in an unfamiliar place, she takes Stormy to the back for an x-ray. Between berating myself for being so careless and imagining how I can ask Shane out without seeming like a creepy old man, I email the team to let them know I’ll be offline for the next few hours. Thankfully, my piece of the presentation is basically done so I’m not the bottleneck for anyone else.

The x-ray reveals a hairline fracture of her right radius bone. It’s slight, but still makes me feel queasy as the doctor walks me through the film. The good news is that it isn’t completely broken and would likely be fully healed within

six weeks. The bad news is that she'd be in a cast for at least four of those weeks.

“She needs to stay off her feet as much as possible, and that means keeping her crated when you're not home. No jumping around, and don't let her chew on her cast.” The doctor gave me final instructions while Shane stood in the corner taking notes. I try to keep my focus on the printouts she is handing me about proper care of a cast, but I'm distracted by the way he chews his lower lip while he writes. The way his perfectly white teeth roll over that beautiful lip has my mouth watering. He has a childlike innocence that makes me want to hug him. Well, preferably a naked hug, but a hug nonetheless.

“Uh-hunh. No problem.” I absentmindedly follow along with her directions.

“No getting wet, and no jumping into the car or on the couch. You have to be strong if you want her to heal.”

“Yeah, of course. She'll be on bed rest, I promise.”

Dr. Mills laughs. “Easier said than done. I've never met a Lab that could handle bed rest. I hope you don't have a social life planned for the next few weeks, because she's gonna be a handful.” With that, she walks out of the room and leaves Shane to fit an Elizabethan collar around Stormy's neck to keep her from chewing her cast.

“Do you have any questions before you go?” Shane asks, finally looking me in the eye.

“Um, no. I think I have everything I need. I can work at home tomorrow and then...” Shit. My trip. “Oh, actually, I forgot—I have to leave on a business trip on Friday morning. Do you think I can have her kenneled here for the weekend while I'm gone?”

“Of course. We can keep her here, but she'll have to be in the crate pretty much the entire time since she can't walk around in the yard. We'll just let her out to do her business and stretch. She won't be too happy about it.” He kneels down again to pet Stormy. She is already annoyed by the collar and keeps trying to catch it with her teeth. It's going to be a long four weeks.

“The whole time? I hate to do that to her, but I really can’t miss this meeting in San Diego. Um, do you know of any dog-sitters that can stay at my place? I’ll pay well if they are willing to keep her entertained while off her feet.” In my head, I quickly run through the list of friends that might be able to keep her, except none would want to deal with a whiny pup that was supposed to stay still.

“Well, actually, I could do it. My family runs a kennel and training center in Wyoming, and that’s actually why I’m doing this internship with my aunt. I’m planning to open my own dog ranch out here someday.”

“Seriously? That’s awesome. I leave on Friday morning so if you want to come by tomorrow after work, I’ll show you around and give you a key to my place.” Getting him to my place was easier than I expected. Of course, it was for Stormy, not for me. I could work with that. My charm was legendary and could turn a straight man bi... well, it hadn’t in the past, but there’s a first for everything.

“Cool. And you don’t even have to pay me. She’ll be easy, and I could use a break from my cousins. I love them but teenage girls are... loud.” He laughs quietly and I lean closer. I don’t even realize I’m doing it. It’s totally instinctive and totally natural. He has a pull on me that is almost magnetic. I want to be closer to him but I remind myself to stay in control.

“No, I’ll pay you. This is a huge help for me.” He’s got to be at least five years younger than me, even so, I can’t help staring at his lips when he talks. Obviously, he’s only interested in a professional relationship and I can respect that boundary. I need his help with Stormy so I can keep from freaking him out. Besides, if he’s from Wyoming, he’s probably a Bible-toting Republican that will beat me with the barrel of his shotgun if I seem overly friendly. *Gotta stay cool, Alex.*

After exchanging numbers and giving him my address, Stormy and I head home. I have some serious cleaning to do before he comes over tomorrow.

CHAPTER TWO

Shane

Offering to dog sit seemed like a good idea when I said it. Now that they're gone, I'm having second thoughts. Aunt Karen didn't have a problem with me taking the business from her, though she did remind me that I'll be representing her practice and have to be professional in all respects. Obviously, I know that, but it still adds some pressure. I probably should call and say I'm not available after all... but I know I'm not going to.

He reminds me of Brandon and it's too tempting. As much as moving to Denver was to start a new life where I could be honest about myself, I still miss my home. Brandon was the only person that knew the truth about me and was willing to indulge me in my drunken confessions.

Not only was he my best friend, he was my first kiss, my first blow job and my first love. If only he felt the same way for me, I might have stayed. I might have been willing to face being disowned by my family and ridiculed by everyone else I cared about. But he never could. Never would.

I know he cares about me but he could never love me. Outside of occasionally fooling around after a late party or a fight with Missy, he is determined to be the ladies' man that his father raised him to be.

I can't do that again. I will get through this weekend at Alex's and then probably never see him again. Stormy was just too sweet to confine in a crate for three days straight. I can be strong and not let my past feelings cloud a professional relationship. He is my aunt's customer and I am just a new guy in town watching his dog.

Arriving at exactly six thirty on Thursday night, I'm nervous as I knock on the door. I can hear rustling around inside as Alex is obviously trying to calm Stormy down. Like most dogs, she is probably used to running to the door to greet all visitors. I hope she didn't pull anything when I knocked. I should

have texted him that I was here so he could hold her. Duh, I was already fucking up my first solo gig.

When he answers the door, I can't help but catch my breath. Alex is dressed in a pair of low-slung jeans that have a few strategic holes down his legs. His bare feet peek out from the hem and make me smile. His feet are perfect. I've never considered myself a foot guy, but his look is exceptionally nice. And soft. A navy V-neck sweater fits snugly across his chest, not in an overt way, just very fashionable. I am suddenly self-conscious in my Wranglers and Ropers. I'll need a new wardrobe if I'm going to fit in around here.

"Hey, Shane, glad you could make it. Please, come in," he says, opening the door wide to let me in.

Stormy was sitting in a hold position with her tail thumping vigorously on the wood floor. It's obvious that she wants to attack me with affection but she is well trained. The bright pink cast looks awkward as she holds it slightly away from her body, but she stays in place with only her lower half wiggling until I get to her.

As soon as I kneel down in front of her, Alex says, "okay," and she bursts into my arms. I lose my balance and fall on my ass, grabbing her by the chest to keep her hurt leg off the ground. I am laughing at my lack of grace while she cleans every inch of my face with her slobbery tongue. Alex is laughing too, so this must be her standard greeting.

"Hey, beautiful. I'm happy to see you too," I say, trying to regain my footing while still holding up her front half.

"Sorry about that. We've been working on her door greetings and she is usually pretty good, but I think she recognizes you as the treat man so she couldn't hold back." Alex walks her to her bed and tells her to settle.

"No problem. I'm used to it. Actually, I'm impressed at how well she obeys. You've done a good job with training her." He obviously knows how to assert his dominance as the leader of the pack. It's kind of hot.

“She has her moments, but I’ve finally gained the upper hand. She knows who’s boss and is usually good. Well, at home anyway. Once we get in the car, all bets are off.” He gestures for me to follow him to the kitchen. “Can I get you a drink or anything? Water, beer, Coke?”

“No, thanks. I’m fine.” I could really use a beer, but that wouldn’t be professional. I need to get his instructions for the weekend and then get out. He probably has plans tonight that I’m interrupting.

“Okay, well, this is the kitchen. Help yourself to anything. I’ve tried to stock it for you but I’ll leave some cash, too. If there is anything you need, feel free to pick it up.” He points out where to find glasses and plates and shows me Stormy’s treat stash. She is a well-loved dog. It was amazing she wasn’t heavier. Actually, with all the snacks Alex kept in the house, it was more amazing that he was so trim. His flat stomach didn’t hold an ounce of fat. He turns down a hallway and I can’t resist checking out his ass. With a flick of his wrist, he gestures for me to follow. I would follow that man anywhere.

“This is the guest room. I’ve been using it as storage, so it’s a mess. I’ll change the sheets in the morning and you can just sleep in my bed. It’s more comfortable and Stormy is used to sleeping there with me.” His face pinks up as he admits it. I think it’s sweet that he lets her sleep with him.

Growing up with dogs, I could appreciate the comfort of having a friend nearby overnight. It was one of things I missed most since moving in with Aunt Karen. Her little Shih Tzus didn’t want anything to do with me. The feeling is mutual.

“You don’t have to do that. I can sleep on the couch or whatever.” The thought of sleeping in his bed seems so intimate. Although I have to admit I’m a little excited, too. I wonder if he sleeps nude? Maybe I will.

“Hey, you’re doing me a huge favor. I want you to be comfortable.” As I follow him into the master bedroom, I take a look around. The dark wood furniture looks brand new and all matches. The large bed sits at least three feet off the ground in a display of grandeur and I have to resist the urge to jump on it. I know I’ll have time to really check out everything tomorrow.

There are a few pieces of art on the wall that look like they were painted by a kindergartener, still, it all works. The whole room has a very hotel-like feel. He either has a girlfriend that decorated or he hired someone, because I've never met a guy that had such elegant taste. This room reminds me of the Pottery Barn catalogs that Mom always has around the house.

Alex is pushing buttons on the remote and trying to explain how to turn on the different channels but I'm not paying much attention. I'm too busy looking for earrings on his dresser or a pink toothbrush over his sink. No signs of a live-in girlfriend. The fantasy continues.

Just as we walk out to the back porch with Stormy, we hear the doorbell ring.

"Oh, lemme grab that. Can you keep her out here so she doesn't get too hyper? She was good for you but she isn't as good when food is involved."

"Sure." Before I realize what he means, he is back in the house and Stormy is pressing her nose against the glass to check out the new guest.

A few minutes later, Alex is back with a pizza box and a six-pack of beer. "You haven't eaten yet, have you? I'm starving. I hope you don't mind a little food break."

"No, I'm fine. Thanks, though. I should get out of your hair anyway. I'm sure you have a lot of packing to do. Is there..."

"No, please. I'll feel like an ass if you make me eat in front of you. Have at least one piece and then we can finish up. I didn't know what you'd like so I got half pepperoni and half everything."

"Oh, yeah, that's fine" He ordered with me in mind? That was thoughtful. "Thanks."

"Beer?"

Well, I guess if I'm going to eat, I might as well have a drink.

"Yeah, I guess one would be okay." I settle at the glass patio table, in the seat across from Alex, while he sets out paper plates and napkins.

At first, we both study our pizza so intently you'd think neither of us has ever seen one before. Just as I'm thinking the meal is going to be completely silent, he finally breaks it. "So, Dr. Mills is your aunt?"

Stormy lies on a purple bed at his feet, just waiting for crumbs to fall, and Alex is pulling off small pieces of crust and "accidentally" dropping them near her.

"Yeah, she's been really great. She encouraged me to move here and get serious about my future. I guess it's time." I don't want to sound like a loser but I feel inadequate with Alex. He is more sophisticated than I will ever be. I'm sure he hangs out at museums and concerts, where I am more of a billiards and bowling type of guy. He even looks like he just stepped out of a men's fitness magazine. His hair is darker than mine and longer. He has a messy look that probably takes hours to perfect. It's obvious that he spends time indoors because his light complexion sets off the most amazing aqua-blue eyes.

My curiosity is getting the better of me so I ask, "So, what do you do?"

"I'm an account manager for an ad agency. One of my biggest clients has an event this weekend, and I'm going to be presenting to the management team tomorrow, then running around like a chicken with my head cut off for the rest of the weekend to make sure everything runs smoothly. Oh, what time do you get off tomorrow?" he asks before taking a drink of his beer.

I am about to answer him, but my eyes have drifted yet again to the rim of the bottle as it reaches his lips. Some guys put their lips around the whole bottle. Some guys stick their upper lip inside when they take a drink. Alex doesn't do either of those. He opens his mouth and actually pours the beer into it without even touching the glass. Just his open mouth waiting to receive the liquid that flows in.

I realize his lips have tugged up into a smile, breaking my trance. Shit! Busted.

"Oh, um, sorry. It's been a long day. I guess I'm zoning. Anyway, I get off at three so I'll be here right after that. Will she be okay until then?" I look down at Stormy, watching her scoot forward to lick up a piece of pepperoni.

“No problem. My friend, Stephanie, will stop by at noon to put her out and let her stretch.”

And there it is. The girlfriend. “Cool.”

We finish up dinner and Alex shows me a few more things before handing me a set of keys. I'm anxious to get on my way, suddenly feeling like I'm intruding in his personal space way beyond what is appropriate.

“Like I said, make yourself at home. Watch anything you want on pay-per-view. Eat whatever you want. Walk around naked. Whatever.” He laughs as he says it but I feel like he's staring at me. When my eyes catch his, they hold there. He seems to be questioning me, and I wonder if I've been too forward. Maybe I'm getting a little too bold for my breeches. I need to rein it in before I get my ass whooped.

“Will do. Have a good trip,” I mumble as I rush for the door. “I'll call if we need anything but Stormy and I should be fine.” Without meaning to, I practically slam the door behind me. I take a deep breath as I jog down his porch steps. The cool air flowing into my lungs is a welcome sensation. I might be able to dodge a panic attack if I can get out of here fast enough.

CHAPTER THREE

Alex

The scrubs he was wearing yesterday did not prepare me for what I find when I open my front door. He looks like he's right off *Brokeback Mountain*, and I want to ride that cowboy into oblivion. He wears a simple black T-shirt and dark jeans. Tight, dark jeans. Wranglers. Damn, I haven't seen anyone look so good in a pair of those in a long time. They are snug around his waist and down his thighs, not leaving much to the imagination. The bulge in front is encouraging. If that is what he sports when he's limp, I couldn't imagine what he'd look like... Stop. Focus. He's your dog-sitter, for god's sake.

After ushering him in, I let him greet Stormy while I compose myself. Holy hell, he looks even better from the back. He is kneeling again. This kid is killing me. Before he notices the drool from my chin, I release Stormy and she flies into his arms. I subtly adjust my jeans so my growing interest isn't as obvious. Then he laughs.

Shane has a deep, playful laugh that makes my stomach tighten. I feel that pull again, like I should go to him. I need to go to him. That's ridiculous. He's rolling on the ground with Stormy and doing an admirable job of keeping her casted leg from bearing any weight. If I'm not careful, that good ol' boy will beat my ass for coming on to him.

I take a few steps toward him and then catch myself, remembering that he's here for purely professional reasons. Walking past, I wait for him to pick himself up before leading him into the kitchen.

Showing him around my Craftsman-style bungalow doesn't take long. The guest room is full of boxes and I immediately offer up the master bedroom. It seems like he's checking out the room. Is that approval or disdain? I can't tell. I hope he doesn't think it's weird to sleep in my bed. I'm getting hard just thinking about him sprawled between my sheets. Too bad I didn't have a camera set up... *Okay, perv, kill the stalking tendencies.* I've got to remember he's just doing me a favor.

I spend a few minutes showing him how to use the universal remote to control the stereo, DVD and DVR, but he isn't really paying attention. He seems anxious in this room. Maybe he can sense my interest and thinks I'm gonna jump him. I have to be honest, the thought has crossed my mind. I don't want him to feel uncomfortable around me, so I quickly wrap up the demo.

Shane seems like a cool guy. Genuinely nice, and I already feel like I can trust him. I might even be able to set him up with one of the girls from the office. Steph is always bitching about all the good guys being gay. I'll have her stop by over the weekend and introduce herself. She's twenty-five, about the same age as Shane, and god knows she'd love a hot cowboy. Who wouldn't?

"Let's go out back, and then I think that'll be about everything." Shane and Stormy follow me as we walk out into the cool evening air. I'm about to show Shane the bin that we keep all her toys in when the doorbell rings. Almost forgot that I ordered a pizza.

Shane tries to get out of eating but I guilt him into it. My Catholic upbringing is good for something. I could guilt over a kind heart as well as the rest of them. Poor guy is obviously tired. I should let him go, but I'm selfish and want to spend as much time as I can with him. After tonight, I might not really see him again. When he zones out and looks like he's staring at my lips, I can't help but smile. If only.

I want to come out and ask about a girlfriend but I can't. If he is already feeling weird, that will definitely send him running. I just need to get past this weekend and then I'll figure out a way to see him again. Maybe Steph can get a better read on him. She's a cute girl; if he's single, he'll definitely be interested.

Shane looks like he saw a ghost when he bolts from the house. I don't know if he remembered a prior obligation or what, but I barely get to say goodbye as he flies down the steps and into his truck.

“Well, girl, he’s all yours this weekend, so you better behave. And make sure you’re close by when he showers. I want a full report of what he looks like naked. Leave nothing out!” Stormy is barely able to keep her eyes open enough to feign interest. She has no idea what she will bear witness to this weekend. *Could I get a nanny-cam set up in the next twelve hours?*

After a quick shower, I hop into bed. I’m too amped up to sleep, and flip through the channels to see if anything good is on TV. When did prime time TV become all about cooking and singing competitions?

My mind keeps wandering back to Shane. What is he doing right now? Who is he with? Is he going to bring some chick over here this weekend? So what if he does? He’s an adult and if he wants to use my house as his fuck pad for a few days, I guess I don’t have a problem with it. As long as he takes care of Stormy, he should have a good time.

I wonder what his story is. His chocolaty-brown eyes seem so innocent. Like they just want to be loved. His tendency to keep his eyes low is endearing. When he peeks up from under those long lashes, it makes me want to pull him into me. Like he needs to be protected. Which is crazy since he has at least twenty pounds on me and clearly doesn’t need any protecting.

His broad shoulders and swollen biceps were developed through years of manual labor. Lifting, carrying, working. Not like my leaner muscles that are borne from hours at a gym and running up and down countless hills. My vanity has kept me trim. He is all rugged man. Natural and hot as hell. I can imagine him as a teenager on a ranch. It must have been cool to work around dogs all the time. And cowboys. Did he ever experiment with any of the guys on the ranch? You hear the stories, but I wonder if there’s any truth to them. I grew up in the ’burbs and did my experimenting out in the open for god and the world to see.

I knew I was gay by the time I hit puberty. I couldn’t keep it down around any of the boys... but had nothing but friendly feelings for the girls. As much as my parents hate that I won’t be bringing home a nice Catholic wife or any babies, they are cooler than some. Our visits, though short and infrequent, are

always cordial and I know they love me. They just don't love certain things about me.

How would my life be different if I were raised on a ranch in Wyoming? In Seattle, we saw gay couples all the time and it wasn't a big deal. Not completely accepted but not uncommon. Out in the country, it probably wasn't so tolerant. If a guy like Shane was gay, he'd probably have to stay closeted or move. Why did he say he moved? Something about his future and starting a dog service here? Would there be a girlfriend following him? Steph better get some good dirt on him.

CHAPTER FOUR

Shane

Letting myself into Alex's house feels weird. I'm half expecting an alarm to go off and the police to show up. I've never really been in someone's home when they weren't there, and I feel like I'm violating his privacy.

Stormy's tail thumps loudly against the wall of her crate, and the huge, plastic collar around her neck bangs against the gate as she stands to greet me. I quickly release her from the kennel and let her lap at my face, her lower half bouncing in excitement. "I missed you too, girl. Are you ready to get out of that silly cage? Hunh?"

When I take the collar off her, she looks at me with grateful eyes. The poor thing really hates not being able to freely run and play. I am here to keep her happy without disturbing her injuries, so I will do just that. "Okay, okay. Let's go outside."

She eagerly follows me through the house to the back door. Carrying her to the lawn so she can do her business, I water a few of Alex's plants. He probably has a service take care of his garden, but if not, I don't want to be the reason his flowers are all dead when he gets home.

After Stormy has a few minutes to stretch, I carry her back inside. Alex's house has wall-to-wall hardwood floors, and every time Stormy stands up or gets excited, her paws slide on the slick surface. Knowing she must be used to it, I don't worry too much. As a loud truck drives by, Stormy jumps up to look out the window and her left leg slips, causing her right leg to take her weight. She lets out a short yelp and that is the end of her fun.

"Okay, missy. You're coming with me to the bedroom and we're staying in there." I scoop her up and carry her to Alex's bedroom. Stormy immediately gets comfortable on his bed while I gather a few toys from around the house. There is a hollowed-out chew toy that I stick a Milk-Bone in and toss to her. She immediately goes to work on getting out the bone.

Settling in next to her, I feel a little awkward on his bed. He's basically a stranger, and here I am snuggled up on his bed with his dog. It's such a domestic scene, I actually get a little sentimental. This is how I want my life to be. A cute, little house with a dog and a... boyfriend to come home to.

When I left Wyoming, it was so I could finally come out and attempt a relationship with a man. A real relationship where we both want the same things and are both comfortable enough to ask for them.

In the three weeks that I've been in Denver, I've only come out to the girls in the office and that's only because they were all hitting on me. It was extremely awkward to say the words, *I'm gay*, out loud but it was liberating too. I'd never admitted it to anyone. No one back home really knew for sure, except for Brandon. And her. My parents just had suspicions that I never actually confirmed or denied. It wasn't something we ever discussed, and we probably never would.

You didn't do those things where I was from. It wasn't right. The embarrassment that would come to my family would be too much for them to bear. My parents were sad to lose an employee but I think they were secretly relieved that I left before bringing any shame to their good name. They had a thriving business, and it could have been all lost if word got around that they had a faggot son.

Brandon said he wanted me to stay and that it wouldn't be the same around town without me... but I think he was secretly relieved that I was leaving too. I brought out a side in him that he didn't like. Wasn't proud of. He loved me like a brother and I loved him like a lover. It just wasn't good for either of us to indulge the deeper feelings. On those rare occasions when he would slip into my room after a night of drinking and we'd get each other off... I'd get my hopes up that maybe he was coming around. But really, he was just coming. Period.

I was a means to an end when there wasn't a pussy around. And it wasn't right. If I stayed, I'd have let him use me as a blowup doll for the rest of our lives. Just waiting to be his booty call while he got married and had babies and

lived the idyllic country life. No, thanks. I had to leave while I still had some dignity left to take with me.

It was getting easier to envision myself living openly with a man. Not having to hide behind excuses or fear for my safety. I saw gay couples walking around town every day now. I want that. To live happily ever after in a house like this. With a dog like Stormy. A man like Alex.

Aunt Karen hinted that if I wanted a friendship with Alex, I had to keep things professional while I was working for him. Did she know him well? I didn't ask her about him personally because I didn't want to seem overly interested, but she is a good judge of character. If he was a loser, she would have warned me to stay away.

She's known my secret since I was sixteen years old and not nearly interested enough in any of the girls as I should have been. She was the one to convince me that if I wasn't happy with how my life was playing out in Casper, I should move to Denver where people were very tolerant of all types and I could find whatever I was looking for without judgment. I could read between the lines. She knows and accepts me as I am. When I do meet someone I want to introduce her to, she'll be my biggest cheerleader.

Leaving Stormy to work on her bone extraction project, I slip into the kitchen to see if there is anything to snack on. Being a bachelor, I don't expect to find much in the fridge but when I open it up, I'm shocked. It is fully stocked. Loaded from top to bottom with milk, juice, beer, eggs, white wine, bacon, lettuce, tomatoes, steaks, cold cuts, and stuff that I don't even recognize. Alex must really like to cook.

I grab a Coke and walk to the pantry to see if there are any chips. Again, it is loaded. Bags of Doritos and Fritos and Lay's Barbecue as far as the eye can see. I feel like I am standing in the "food" aisle at a 7-Eleven. Just a bit overwhelmed by the options, I grab a bag of Fritos and go back to the bedroom. I sit at the edge of the bed to make sure I don't get any crumbs in his bed and flip the TV to a baseball movie.

I don't realize that I've zoned out on TV until the phone rings. It is so rare to hear a landline ring that I actually panic a little, not sure if I should answer it. Looking around, I see the handset glowing from the dresser across the room but I don't move to answer it. If it is important, they'll call Alex's mobile phone. After the third ring, the phone goes silent. Only a minute passes before my phone rings out from my pocket.

Glancing at the caller ID, I see that it's Alex.

"Hey, Alex," I say into the phone, trying to sound nonchalant.

"Shane. Hey." He sounds breathy, his voice low and heady. I feel myself almost hum into the line at the sound of it. "I just wanted to check in to see how you guys are doing. Is Stormy behaving herself?"

"Yeah, she's great." I look up at her because I haven't actually noticed her in a while. She is curled up on a pillow, sleeping. "She's taking a nap with me."

"Oh, you were sleeping? I'm sorry. I wasn't sure if you were going out tonight, so I was hoping to catch you before it got too late." He sounds nervous.

"Is everything okay?" I ask, unsure if he's nervous for Stormy or himself.

"Yeah, everything's good. Just wanted to... say hi and see if you needed anything."

"We're great. Thanks for checking in." And for reminding me of how sexy you sound. At least I know I'll be christening this bed tonight.

"Glad to hear it. Have a good night, Shane."

"You too, Alex."

When I hear the phone click, I instantly feel alone. I debate calling him back with a stupid question but I don't want him to think anything is wrong. He's busy working and doesn't need any additional stress.

The clock on my phone says it's eight thirty. Have I seriously let hours pass by watching stupid movies and day dreaming? I go back to the kitchen to

fix something for dinner. Having so many choices is always overwhelming for me. Everything looks good but I don't feel right making a big meal in Alex's kitchen. After considering several meal options, I settle on mac and cheese. Childish, yes. But, delicious and probably not something Alex would miss from his pantry.

Stepping out of Alex's luxury shower is tough. If the water hadn't cooled off, I would have stayed in there for another hour. There are fountains coming at me in every direction. I didn't realize how tight my muscles were until the hot water was pelting them with a massaging spray that switched between a steady stream and a pulsing trickle. I am so relaxed when I towel off that I can't think of anything better than passing out in my bed. Well, Alex's bed.

Passing his hamper, I notice a T-shirt on top. It is grey with the words *California Polytechnic State University* written inside a green circle across the front. I don't know what possesses me to pick it up, but as I hold it to my face and breathe in, I am instantly erect. I can smell Alex in his shirt. A little sweaty, a little musky, a lot sexy. Slipping it over my head, I take a quick look at myself. I look good in his shirt. I could get used to this.

With the stress of the week behind me, I slip between the sheets of Alex's bed wearing nothing but his shirt. Spreading out to feel the cool, crisp sheets over my bare skin feels amazing. I don't know much about thread count but his must be high because the sheets feel like velvet.

Scissoring my legs to feel the softness all over, I let my mind wander. With my legs spread, I close my eyes and imagine Alex in this bed with me. It doesn't take long for my hand to wrap around my cock and begin to pulse. Not wanting to make a mess on my first night, I pull back the top sheet and grab the extra pillow to angle my neck forward. Sliding my fist up and down my hard cock, I quickly give in to the fantasy. Being in this bed with Alex. His hand wrapped around me. His mouth on me. Him inside of me. Me inside of him. Fuck, this isn't going to take long.

On each upward pull, I let my thumb brush over the head to capture the drop of moisture that has settled there. Using it to lube the taut skin, I gently stroke up and down my dick. It's been a few days and the tension builds quickly. Taking a solid whiff of Alex's scent from my shoulder, I tighten my grip, pushing down hard at the base, pressing my balls against the sensitive skin behind them. Imagining that Alex is with me, I let my other hand slide past my thigh and roam below.

My right hand is stroking firmly, wrapping around my head and swirling the moisture with each pass while my left hand finds my opening. With only a mouthful of saliva for lube, my middle finger slides into my ass past the knuckle, quickly finding the ball of nerves hiding in there. Flicking it to the tempo of my other hand, sweat beads on my brow while my breath increases. I know I'm close. I think about Alex's bright blue eyes. His tall, thin body with hard muscles that look delectable. How it would feel to have his hand wrapped around my ass, pressing me to his body. I want to touch him. I want him to touch me. Stroke me. Suck me. Fuck.

With a final turn of my head into my shoulder, I inhale him again while I release. Thick cords of white cream pour onto my exposed belly, just missing Alex's shirt. His sheets aren't so lucky. Gently rubbing my come into my skin, I feel content. Sticky, but content.

Grabbing one of the extra pillows, I hold it against my chest and curl around it. Someday, it'll be a real guy. For now, this is good enough. It has to be.

The room is as warm as the wet tongue trying to peel open my eyes. I guess Stormy is awake. Looking at the clock, I'm surprised it's already nine. I don't usually sleep in this late, but I don't want to wake up. I haven't slept this well in ages. The bouncing pup next to me has other ideas.

"You ready to get up, girl?" I scratch behind her ears before finally sitting up in the bed. Grabbing a pair of shorts from my bag, Stormy and I head out to the back so she can stretch while I get her breakfast.

While Stormy is eating, I make myself some eggs and toast. I haven't cooked at all since being at Aunt Karen's. Most of the time, she cooks or the girls are hanging out in there so I just grab something quick and try to stay out of their way. Being at Alex's makes me feel like I'm playing house. I like it.

At the table where we had pizza a few nights earlier, I eat and fool around with my phone. I have a text from Mom asking me to call her but I ignore it for now. It's better to call her when I'm driving and have an excuse to keep the conversation short.

Alex has one of those one-cup coffeemakers with a hundred different flavors. I can't find anything that looks like regular coffee so I choose something that tastes like a coffee-flavored Snickers bar. I have to say, it's delicious.

Stormy has a ball in her mouth and is begging me to throw it for her. Not able to resist those eyes, I get down on the grass with her and gently wrestle the ball out of her mouth. As soon as I'm on my ass, she lets out a playful growl that tells me this is a game she's played before. While keeping her weight on her back legs, I steal her ball and try to hide it behind my back.

Between her growling and my laughing, I don't realize we aren't alone until I hear the snap of a camera above me.

Startled, I stand up instantly to face a little brunette with a Rockies baseball cap on. She has short hair and nice curves. This must be the girlfriend.

"Oh, sorry. I knocked but I guess you didn't hear me so I let myself in. You must be Shane." She extends her right hand to me. "I'm Stephanie."

"Yeah, no problem. It's nice to meet you, Stephanie." She isn't really what I would have expected Alex's type to be. I don't know what I expected, actually, but someone taller maybe?

"Damn, you're even cuter than Alex said." She's looking at me like I'm a piece of meat. I am used to getting attention from girls, but they aren't usually so forward. Back home, the dance was much more subtle. That's why it was easy for me to avoid it all together.

“Um, thanks.” I don’t know if that’s a joke or not so I just smile.

“I brought you bagels. I know Alex never has a crumb of food in this house and I didn’t want you to starve. I hope you like Asiago.”

Ozzie what go?

“Thanks but I already ate. He must have just gone shopping because there is a ton of food here.”

She barks out a laugh and reaches into the bag for a bagel before realizing I’m serious. “No way?” She takes the bagels into the kitchen and inspects the cabinets. “Hmm, that boy is smitten. Well, I guess you don’t need these.” She gestures to the bag in her hand.

What the hell is she talking about? Alex is smitten? With who? Her? She couldn’t mean me, could she?

“I appreciate the thought, though.” I tug at the hem of my shirt, feeling awkward after her comment.

“Oh, my god! Did you go to Cal Poly too?” She is pointing to my shirt. Alex’s shirt. FUCK!

CHAPTER FIVE

Alex

Food. I need food. And a drink. Today was crazy. When one of the hired promotional girls fell off the stage and got a very bloody cut on her head, I thought that was the worst thing that could happen. I was wrong. Her gory ordeal was not nearly as bad as it looked. But when the sound system died in the middle of a live keynote speech, I was ready to slit my wrists. It didn't get much better as the hours passed.

In the end, it all worked out, and the client was able to laugh off the debacle of a day. My nerves are so frayed I just want to curl into the fetal position and cry. I just have to get through the sponsored brunch tomorrow and then I'll be on my way home.

Too tired to go out with everyone, I pick up Chinese takeout on my way back to the hotel. I eat takeout almost exclusively since I'm not big on cooking for one person, so it feels like being at home. After scarfing down a container of chicken lo mein, I strip out of my clothes and flop on the bed. I don't even want to take a shower after being on my feet all day.

Finally looking at the texts that came in throughout the day, I see one from Steph from early this morning.

Looks like you've been replaced

There is a photo attached of Shane on the lawn with Stormy. She is trying to grab something from behind his back and he's laughing. He has a perfect smile. Seeing him so happy warms my heart. His dark eyes are so sexy and he looks damn good on my lawn, with my dog and... in my shirt. That *is* my shirt, right? I can feel little Alex starting to twitch just thinking about how that happened. He fills it out better than I do.

I wore that on Thursday night. Why would he put on my dirty shirt? I know why I would put on a guy's dirty shirt but that couldn't be his reason... Well, maybe I was wrong about that country boy.

Pulling a couple bottles from the mini bar, I lie back on the bed debating whether to call him or not. I empty the small whisky bottle into a can of Coke that was only half full and grab my phone. He's wearing my shirt for god's sake. A straight guy wouldn't do that.

Before I lose my nerve, I thumb out a quick text to Shane.

I see you met Stephanie.

Not two minutes later, I get a response.

Yeah. She seems nice.

Nice, hunh? That doesn't give me much. I'll have to go the more direct route.

She is nice. And Single. She'd come over if you called her. She probably even has a hot girlfriend 4 a one nighter if you're looking 4 something casual.

No way for him to be vague about that. If he responds, I should have my answer.

Thanks but not really my style. LOL

Damn, he's good.

Which part? The hot girlfriend or the one nighter.

Please say girls, please say girls, please say girls.

Both.

Thank you, sweet baby Jesus!

I guess we have more in common than a love of dogs.

Okay. That was lame. I need another drink. Opening up a bottle of vodka, I drink the shot straight. Just enough to warm me up. It's been several minutes so I might have spooked him. I try him again.

Is this a bad time?

No. Just took Stormy out one more time and now we're in bed.

Oops. Forgot to ask about my dog. The whole reason he's at my house. What a bad daddy I am! Ah well, all the more reason to find her a new daddy. Whoa, I think I feel those shots already.

So are you seeing anyone right now?

No. Very Single.

Maybe we can get a drink sometime next week?

Sounds good.

Monday?

Sure.

So you're in bed now? In my bed?

LOL. Yes.

Me too.

Is trying to sext too trashy for our first flirt session? I'm gonna have to assume yes so I'll let the poor boy go. As hard as it is to do it. And as hard as I am for him.

I'll let you get comfortable and go to sleep.

OK. Good night Alex.

Good night Shane. BTW, you look fucking hot in my shirt.

Okay, I couldn't resist that last part.

The next fifteen hours pass in a blur. I can't stop thinking about Shane while going through the motions of work. I am tempted to text him but hold off. We already did that and I don't want him to think I'm a horny teenager.

The brunch is the most successful aspect of the weekend and the clients are happy. But what I'm really focusing on is what time I'll get home and whether I can get away with ordering dinner again to keep Shane there a little longer.

Landing at the Denver airport, I practically run to my car. It's only four in the afternoon, and I'm hoping to hang out with Shane for a while before he has to take off. When I finally pull into the driveway, I can see his truck out front. It makes me wonder how often I'll see his truck in front of my house. Very often, I hope.

I can hear Stormy's high-pitched, excited whine so I know she heard me pull up. Taking a deep breath to calm myself, I get out of the car and grab my bags. I'm suddenly nervous about how he's going to react.

Forcing my features to relax, I walk in my front door. Shane has Stormy in a hold position but it won't last long, so I drop my bag and kneel beside her. She is licking my face before I can even release her from her hold. Shane's soft chuckle makes my stomach clench as I remember to be nervous.

"Looks like she missed you." He moves to straighten up the pillows where he was just sitting and then edges closer to the door. His bags are already waiting for his departure.

"Well, she seemed to be pretty happy in that picture Steph sent."

I give him a quick glance and notice his tan cheeks turn a crimson red. Now that I feel like I have permission to really look at him, I stare a bit longer than before. His bronze skin has a light dusting of stubble along his jaw that gives his boyish features a manly edge. Again, I have to fight the urge to reach out and brush my finger along it.

"About the shirt, I, uh, wasn't..."

"Don't. I think it's kinda sexy. Don't ruin my fantasy by telling me you only put it on because you spilled mustard on yours or something. Let me imagine it was intentional." I laugh when I say this but I need to put it out there. He's obviously shy, and now he knows I'm interested. The ball is in his court. And hopefully my balls will be in his... Focus!

"Oh, okay." That's it? That's all he's gonna give me? This kid is either in the closet or a virgin. Or both. A challenge. Well, god-of-making-me-work-for-it, challenge accepted.

“Have you eaten yet? I was thinking of putting some steaks on the grill? Can you stay?” Stormy’s still in my lap but is chewing on a bone, already forgetting about my three-day absence. Clearly, I wasn’t missed that much. But, let’s be honest, I’d rather spend three days alone with Shane too, if I were her.

“Um, I guess, I could stay. If you’re sure?” He looks like he’s ready to barf but he slowly edges closer to me. If I had to guess, I’d say newly out. Like, maybe as of last night. Could I be his first? Do I want to be? Hell yeah, I do.

Scooting Stormy off me, I stand up and head to the kitchen. Thank god I stocked up for Shane because there usually isn’t any food in the house. I wash my hands and immediately start blending spices for a simple rub. I’m not much of a cook but I can grill a mean steak.

After a few moments of silence while I prep the meat, Shane finally clears his throat and finds his voice.

“Want me to make a salad or something?” He is washing his hands and the view of his ass is mesmerizing. His black cargo shorts go just past his knees and I don’t realize I’ve been studying the muscles of his calves until he turns around and walks back to the fridge. I can only murmur out agreement while working the meat in my hands a little harder.

“So, it was a good trip?” It takes him a minute, but he seems more comfortable chatting now.

I don’t waste the opportunity. “Really good. My clients are happy. My boss is happy. After our little chat last night, I am happy.” I grab the tray of steaks and walk out the door before he can respond.

After a few minutes of standing over the grill by myself, Shane walks out with two beers. He twists the top off one and hands it to me then stands next to the grill. Making himself at home already. I love it!

“Yeah, I’m kinda new at this... so I hope I didn’t sound too desperate or anything.” He takes a swig of his beer and stares hard at the ground. Rocking back on his heels, he seems like he was trying to avoid looking at me. I hold my gaze until he finally makes eye contact.

“I get it. I’m just teasing you because you’re so damn cute. But if I make you feel uncomfortable, just tell me. I can be a little forward when I want something.” And I really want you. “But I can also be patient.” Kinda. Not really... but I’ll try.

“No, it’s not you. It’s... okay, I’m not going to say that, but it’s true.” He takes another heavy swallow and then squares up his shoulders and turns to face me. “I just haven’t really dated much. Back home, I couldn’t, and I’ve only been here for a few weeks so I haven’t met a lot of people.” He shrugs to play it off as no big deal but I can tell it is.

Feeling the need to save him, I change the subject. “Do you like ’em rare or medium rare?” I ask as I flip the steaks and glance back at Shane.

“Still mooing.” His smile this time is genuine. It is the most relaxed he’s been since I got home. “I’ll grab some plates and the salad,” he says, then disappears into the house.

After settling in for dinner, we chat about Stormy and how she behaved over the weekend. We keep it light and friendly but I don’t want him to leave without getting a better feel for what his intentions are. As soon as we both take our last bite, I lean back in my chair and go for it.

“So, would you want to go out sometime? I can take you to some of the bars around here, introduce you to some of my friends... but if you’re not ready to be out in public with an openly gay man, I get it.”

I smirk in an effort to challenge him but my insides are a mess. Why am I so nervous around him? *I’m* not the closeted virgin in this scenario. *I’m* the converted manwhore. I’ve done this dance a hundred times. Maybe thousands. Okay, probably not thousands but definitely hundreds. I shouldn’t be holding my breath waiting for his answer... but I am.

“So, all of your friends know you’re... you know? Are they... you know... too?”

Could he be any cuter?

“Gay? You can say the word. It won’t offend me, I promise.”

“Sorry. I don’t even know what is PC to say. Back home, no one ever said that word in a good way. Or, really at all. They used every other word in the book but I’ve never really been comfortable saying it out loud. I know that sounds stupid...” His cheeks pink up again and he stares at his empty bottle, probably wishing it would magically fill up and give him something to do with this hands... and mouth. I have a few ideas for both... but we’re not there yet.

“To answer your question, yes, all my friends know I’m gay. And my family. And my coworkers. And my vet.” I’m watching his reaction carefully and I can see the realization as it hits him. His aunt knows where he is and who he’s with. Is that going to be a green light or a red light for him? “So, does anyone know you’re gay or am I your first?”

When his eyes almost bug out of his head, I realize the double meaning in my words. Oops. “I mean, am I the first person you’ve told?”

“No, my family here knows. And the girls at work. They all fawn over me like I’m a damn teddy bear. It’s crazy. They call me ‘their gay’. I don’t get it, but it’s better than what I would have been called back home...” He trails off as his features harden. Obviously, his ranch in Wyoming wasn’t exactly liberal.

“What’s that?” I ask quietly. I know I shouldn’t pry. Especially if I’m trying to get in his pants... but I want to know.

“Hunh?” He barks out a surprised laugh. “Oh, probably ‘my father’s dead son’. Maybe, ‘that faggot that ruined his reputation and destroyed the family’. I dunno.” He looks like he’s ready to bail, so I lean forward against the table, trying to get as close to him as possible without physically moving my chair.

“So, do your parents know now?”

“I’ve never told them in so many words. Maybe never will. They’ve probably always known, but as long as they didn’t have proof, it was okay. I finally got tired of being alone and I knew the only way I could ever be happy was to leave. My aunt and uncle have been really great. Letting me stay with them and giving me a job has made it a lot easier to start over.”

Without a conscious decision, my hand reaches across the table and lands on Shane's. His breath hitches as he looks at my light skin clutching his large, rough fist. Despite the obvious differences, we look right together. I can feel the heat coming off him and his brown eyes darken even more. Neither of us say anything for a moment.

I haven't had a connection like this with anyone in a long time. And Shane probably never has. Wait, he didn't say that...

"So, no one knew back home?" I hedge, not sure how I want him to answer.

"No, not really. Well, except Brandon. He was my best friend." Shane quickly looks at me for a reaction and then looks away. Studying the leaves swaying on an apricot tree in my yard, it is clear he isn't sure whether to proceed or not. Not wanting to let the subject die, I wait for him to continue.

"He and I used to fool around sometimes. Nothing serious. Well, not to him anyway. He's getting married next month to his high school sweetheart. He'll have everything he ever wanted." He fakes a smile as he says it, but the hurt is evident on his face. He isn't over Brandon.

That means I have to really be patient or be a rebound. Damn it, both of those choices suck.

CHAPTER SIX

Shane

As uncomfortable as it is baring my soul to Alex, it also feels good. Like a Mack truck has been lifted off my shoulders because now at least one other person knows the real me. He seems to really understand what I'm going through.

I don't get to ask him much about his own history, but it sounds like his parents are still in his life. And all his friends know about him, which means they could know about me. It is like waking up after a lifetime of being sedated. I feel alive. Really, truly alive. I suddenly want people to know. I want to be accepted. I want to find a guy like Alex and fall in love. He joked about being interested, but he's not serious. He's the kind of guy you have fun with but it doesn't last.

If he was the settling-down type, he wouldn't be alone. He's too much of a catch. Funny, successful, sexy as sin. Yeah, he would be in a relationship if he wanted one. Unfortunately, that is what I want. I know I should take this sexual awakening as an opportunity to sow my oats and have sweaty sex with strangers in clubs, or wherever strangers go to have casual sex, but that's not me.

Even if it doesn't last forever, I want my first "real" time to be with someone I care about. Someone who knows me and accepts me and loves me... warts and all. Not like the last time. Not like with her.

Knowing that Alex probably isn't looking for the same thing, I have to keep my attraction to him under control while absorbing all of his confidence about how to be a gay man. How ridiculous is it that I need a tutor to be gay in public?

I agreed to meet Alex at The Unicorn at eight thirty, but now that I'm in the parking lot, I'm not sure. His Pathfinder is parked along the street so I know he's here, but I'm having trouble with the idea of walking in alone. Why

does it have such a fucking fairy name? Couldn't it be called the Beer House or Joe's Sports Lounge or something more neutral? There is no way for me to play it off as ignorance if I get called out while walking in. When you walk into a bar called The Unicorn you might as well be waving a damn rainbow flag.

I'm not ready for this. I want to be ready for this, but I'm not. I moved to a different goddamn state to do this. But I need more time. Maybe I'll go to an eighties bar first. Those seem pretty gay. I'll work my way up to The Unicorn. I'll just tell Alex I got stuck at work. Or I could say I'm sick. At least that wouldn't be a lie. I'm about three breaths away from puking.

As I'm about to start the truck, my phone buzzes.

I'm here. When you walk in, we're at a table on the left.

Stay or go? My traitorous thumbs make the decision for me.

Parking now.

Okay, I guess I'm doing this.

Keeping my head down, I walk into the bar and turn left. Taking a deep breath and steeling myself for The Village People to be dancing on a table in front of me, I quickly glance around. I'm almost disappointed by the fact that it looks pretty much like every other bar I've ever been in. There is a rainbow flag on one wall and an obvious absence of women, but other than that, it's not as flamboyant as I expected.

Alex is at a table with two other guys. He stands up as soon as he sees me and waves me over. *I can do this.* He pulls me into a quick hug and ushers me into the chair next to his.

"I'm so glad you could make it," Alex says while scooting his chair closer to mine.

I haven't been shy since kindergarten, but I am suddenly afraid to make eye contact with anyone. All eyes at the table, and, honestly throughout the bar, are on me and I want to crawl into a hole and die.

“Yeah, me too,” I say quietly, continuing to avert my gaze. What am I so afraid of? I’ve had guy friends all my life. Alex isn’t any different. Except in every way that matters.

I need a drink.

“Shane, these are my friends, Greg and Dave. I grew up with Greg in Seattle. They moved here about two years ago after they got married. Guys, this is Shane Greenly. He just moved here from some mountain in Wyoming and is working for my vet.” Alex is interrupted by a thin guy that looks like he’s fifteen and is wearing short jean cutoffs and a sheer, skintight V-neck. Okay, I guess that’s another difference from all the bars I’ve been to.

“Oh, Lexy, who’s your cowboy?” the server purrs above my head, almost drooling as he boldly checks me out. I unconsciously scoot my chair in deeper under the table so he can’t ogle my crotch. I need some looser jeans because these Wranglers don’t hide much, especially when I’m around Alex.

“Down, boy. Shane just moved here and I don’t want you scaring him away. He’s newly out so be nice and bring him a Blue Moon.”

“New, hunh? Well, sweet pea, I think you’ll fit in just fine around here. You are just delicious. I’ll make sure to add some orange to yours. You look like you could use a little tang in your punch,” he says while doing some pirouette thing to walk away. I am pretty much speechless after that. Noticing my shock, Dave comes to my rescue.

“Don’t worry about Jamie. He’s a total size queen, so unless you’re packing nine inches or more, he’ll leave you alone.”

What. The. Fuck.

Out of the last ten sentences I heard, I really only understood the words *Blue Moon*... and I’m not positive that isn’t a euphemism for something else. I’m so not ready for this. That fight-or-flight instinct is setting in again when Alex puts his hand on my shoulder.

“I know this is overwhelming but try to relax,” he whispers close to my ear. Feeling self-conscious, I glance at the couple across the table. Dave is

curled into Greg's neck and gazing at the silver band on his finger. "We've all been there to some degree. Dave just came out a few years ago when he met Greg. You're safe here."

Alex's hand drifts down to my bicep and he gives me a reassuring squeeze. Where is my fucking beer? And like the devil himself, Jamie is back. He puts the wet bottle on a napkin in front of me and turns completely around so his ass is leaning on the table.

"If you need a tour of the city or want to hang out sometime, just call me. Lexy has my number..." Jamie pats the side of my cheek and pushes off the table.

Remembering what Alex was saying before Jamie arrived, I nod at him. "I'm okay. This is sorta what I expected. Well, better in some ways," I look back to where Jamie is taking an order from the lap of a biker on the other end of the room, "and worse in others. But it's cool."

Taking a quick drink from the bottle, I'm already feeling better. Knowing that Alex isn't judging me helps take off some pressure to fit in. I know that I don't fit in yet but I really want to. More than anything, I want to feel comfortable in places like this.

"Okay, you two, you were about to tell me your big news when Shane showed up so let's hear it."

Both men break out toothy grins as they prepare for their announcement. Looking up to Greg, Dave nods. "We have a surrogate," Greg says quickly. He looks like he's about to burst from the chair.

"Seriously? That's awesome, guys. Congrats." Alex stands up and walks around the table. He pulls Greg up into a hug and holds him for a few seconds. I see him whisper something into Greg's ear but I can't hear what he's saying. It's obvious from their embrace that they are close. Probably very close at some point in the past. Dave is watching the exchange lovingly so it must be way in the past. Alex leans down to hug him as well. "Who's the lucky lady?"

"Do you remember Marisa from our New Year's Eve party? The gorgeous blonde that is like ten feet tall?" Dave asks, jumping into the conversation.

“Well, she posted something on Facebook about how her husband got snipped and they were done with babies but she was gonna miss being pregnant. So, I posted that she should be our surrogate so she could get the good parking spots and six weeks paid vacation and we’d get a baby. After a few conversations, she agreed to do it. Can you believe it?”

As the guys talk, I nod appropriately and laugh when they do but I’m not really paying attention to their words. My focus is completely on the men themselves. Watching the way Alex’s aqua eyes seem to twinkle when he teases his friends makes me smile. He is so generous with his laughter that I want to hug him. Or kiss him. Or both. Definitely both.

The craziest part is that I can. If I want to hook up, I’m pretty sure he’d be into it. And it probably wouldn’t change our relationship, as far as he’s concerned. He’s obviously had something with Greg in the past and they are still close friends. He’s just one of those happy people that wants to do his thing and let others do their thing. You gotta respect that. And I do. But I know it would change things on my side. I want a partner. A best friend *and* a lover.

When I turn to the couple in front of me, I feel a yearning for something that I didn’t realize I could ever have. I know gay people can get married, but those that I’ve seen on TV always seemed like old guys that had been married to women at one point and now wanted to marry men. Not guys like Greg and Dave. Not guys like me.

It’s almost shocking to realize I could have that if I want it. And I do want it. To be married. Maybe have a family someday. A husband. It still sounds weird in my head but it sounds exactly right in my heart.

CHAPTER SEVEN

Alex

When I told Shane that Greg and Dave were married, he blanched. Even in the dim light of the room, I could tell that his mind was spinning. At first, I thought he was upset by the idea. Maybe same-sex marriage hasn't made it to Wyoming yet? But as I'm watching his reaction to Flaming Jamie, and Greg and Dave's PDA, I realize he's not disgusted. He mostly looks fascinated by everyone. Like he's watching his favorite reality show.

His grin is genuine so I relax. He is just not used to this kind of open acceptance yet... but he will be. I know he needs time before he'll be ready for anything serious but the wheels are turning behind those sweet brown eyes. He might be ready sooner than he thinks.

I don't even realize how many hours have passed until Shane announces that he has to leave. Quickly signing my tab, I follow him out. His truck is in the back, and I walk next to him in silence until we get to his door.

“So, Greg and Dave really like you.”

“Oh, yeah? They seem cool. I can't believe they're married. And a baby? That's... wow. I've never met a couple like them.” Shane was fidgeting with his keys but I could sense a wistfulness in his words. That's a good sign.

Unable to resist, I reach out and place my hand on his forearm. I want to pull him to me but he's still tense. Obviously, he's not used to being touched. That makes me want to hold him even more.

“So, would you like to go to dinner on Friday? Just us?” I ask. He slowly moves his gaze from my hand, up my arm, stopping at my mouth and then finally settles on my eyes.

“Yeah, I would.”

“Good.” I smile widely, now that he's accepted. Pulling him into a hug, I whisper, “I'm glad you came.”

His arms are tentative at first and then he relaxes, holding me against his broad chest. He smells so good, I can't help but inhale his cologne. Maybe it's just his deodorant but it smells amazing.

"I'm glad I came too," he whispers into my neck. His hot breath tickles me everywhere. Afraid he's going to feel the effect he's having on me, I pull back. I want to give him a peck on the cheek but I don't. I just need to go slow with him.

Wanting this to be a proper date, I insist on picking him up. He's shy about me meeting his family, but this is all part of the process. If he wants to be out, he has to be able to invite a guy over to his home. At least, this is how I'm justifying the fact that I'm being selfish in wanting him to be ready to date. More specifically, ready to date *me*.

Dr. Mills answers the door with her husband at her side. "Alex, welcome. It's great to see you. Please, come in." They both step back so I can enter the large foyer. Their home is newly-built and quite large. Obviously, she's done well as a vet.

"Thanks, uh, Karen." I give her a quick hug and reach my right hand out to her husband. "Hi. I'm Alex."

"Ron. Good to meet you. I've heard a lot about you from..." Karen pinches his side and he stops himself. "Karen. She's always talking about that dog of yours."

Was he going to say Shane? Has Shane been talking about me to his uncle? Definitely a good sign.

"How's my favorite patient coming along? Has she been staying off that leg?"

Just as I start my update on Stormy, Shane appears at the bottom of the staircase. I can't speak. He looks so damn good I can feel my heart speed up. I know I've got a stupid grin on my face but I don't care. I just stare as he walks up to me. Unconsciously, I reach out and pull him into a quick hug.

“Hey,” he says tentatively.

“Hey. You look great,” I say quietly, aware of our audience but unable to suppress my mouth. If I don't speak, I might lick him or something equally inappropriate.

“Well, have a great time, boys,” Karen says as she drags Ron out of the room.

“You look good too,” Shane says shyly. He briefly scans up and down my body. His eyes are just as hungry as mine. We need to get out of here.

“You ready?” I ask, hands in my pant pockets to keep them from wrapping around his thickly muscled arm.

“I think so.” Shane's smiling but I can hear his hesitation. Before he can talk himself out of this night, I reach for his wrist and tug him out the door. By the time we get to my car, he's walking in step with me. I'm not usually traditional but I open his car door for him. That might have been a little too much because he just stands there on the sidewalk staring at the open door for a minute before finally climbing in.

Once we're driving, I realize something is wrong. Shane is unusually quiet in the passenger seat. I can see him watching me from the corner of my eye but I wait a few minutes before looking over to him.

“Is everything okay? You seem like you want to say something.” While we're stopped at a light, I shift in my seat a bit to fully look at him. “You can say anything to me. If you are uncomfortable with anything I do or if you have any questions, just let me know.”

“Um, well, do you always do that?” Shane asks, unable to make eye contact with me.

“Do what?”

“Open doors and stuff. Are you, like, always the guy?”

It takes me a minute to figure out what he's talking about but once I do, I have to chuckle. God, he's adorable.

“Yes, Shane, I’m always the guy. But, so is my date. We’re both ‘the guy’ tonight.” I’m trying to be funny but he hasn’t relaxed yet so I know it’s still bothering him. “I don’t know what kind of experiences you’ve had, if any, but I don’t go for the really femme guys. I like to be with men. Strong, tough, sweaty men. And I like to be strong and tough and sweaty too. But I asked you out, so I’m opening doors and picking up the check and all that good stuff.” He’s chewing the inside of his cheek so vigorously, I’m expecting to see a hole appear on the outside. Maybe that wasn’t the right answer either.

“Is that what’s bothering you or is there more to your question? I promise, you can ask me anything.” I don’t want to mess this up so I reach over and put my hand on his knee. It’s meant to be a reassuring gesture but I can feel the muscles of his thigh through his jeans and I’m tempted to pull over and rip them off him. *Control yourself, man!*

“I was just wondering if that translated into other areas. Like, are you always the top?” His gorgeous face reddens, but I’m glad he feels comfortable enough to ask. And even more glad that he is thinking that far into the future. Although, hopefully it’s not *that* far into the future. Like, maybe after dinner tonight?

“Oh, I see.” I should have known that would be a concern if he is inexperienced. “Actually, no. I can switch, but I’m usually a bottom.” The light is green so I can’t watch his reaction as closely as I’d like but I can see his shoulders relax back into the seat.

“Really? Hunh...” He’s quiet after that so I give him the rest of the ride to think. I can only imagine what’s going on in that pretty little head of his. Hopefully there are some images of him slamming me against my headboard in there. I know that’s what I’m picturing through the silence.

Dinner is perfect. The restaurant is one of the best in the city, and once you take that first bite, it’s obvious why. Reservations are usually booked a month out, but the owner does a lot of work with my agency and when I ran into him on Wednesday, he was happy to get me onto their VIP list. The table was in a

secluded corner that couldn't have been more romantic. It was also private enough that Shane doesn't mind when I make a toast to "us" with a seventy-dollar bottle of champagne. Or when I reach out to hold his hand while we wait for dessert. Or when I offer him a bite of my soufflé off my fork.

As we walk to my car, I hold his hand. He seems a little tense as we pass a couple in the parking lot, but when they don't react, his whole body relaxes. I can't remember ever being so self-conscious of my sexuality but I respect his hesitancy. Of course, that doesn't mean I'm not going to keep pushing him.

I walk him to the passenger side and place my hands on his hips, shifting his weight so his back is up against the door. Taking a step between his spread legs, I press the length of my body against his. When his initial shock wears off, he looks at me with a shy grin. That's all the encouragement I need. With my lips parted, I lean into his mouth, closing them around his lower lip and tug it gently. He is already breathing heavily when I run the tip of my tongue over the front of his teeth. He opens his mouth wider as I pull him into me, exploring his hot mouth eagerly.

Shane's hand untucks my shirt and kneads my lower back as we continue to explore each other. Remembering that we're still in the middle of a parking lot, I force myself to take a step back. Leaving one hand on Shane's neck and the other gripping his bicep, I look into his eyes. "You up for dessert?"

Getting him to agree to come back to my place for a drink takes some effort. I can tell he wants to... but is still afraid. Not willing to part ways so early, I pull out the big guns and remind him that Stormy needs to be let out. As expected, he quickly gives in.

When Stormy sees Shane, she almost pees herself. You would think they were long lost siblings or something. She is so jumpy that he has to sit on the floor and wrestle with her just to keep her weight off her cast. I quickly snap a picture on my phone and attach it to his contact. I could stare at that image forever.

Once she settles down, we sit on the sofa with some chardonnay and Shane confesses that he isn't much of a wine drinker. He seems to like it though, and I think it might loosen him up faster than beer.

“Tell me about this kennel that you want to open up,” I ask. We are sitting side-by-side on my sofa but still have a good foot between us. Close enough that we can be pressed against each other in seconds... but far enough away that I can continue to ogle him. It's fast becoming my favorite pastime.

CHAPTER EIGHT

Shane

Our date started off a little rocky. When he hugged me in front of Aunt Karen and Uncle Ron, I almost passed out. But they didn't wince or comment so I guess they can deal with it. But when he opened the car door for me I almost bolted. The only thing I could think was that if he's doing the guy stuff, that means he expects me to do the girl stuff... which I'm still not sure about.

But once we got into the restaurant and started talking, everything fell into place. Alex is thoughtful in ways that keep surprising me. Not only did he get us a table in a corner that was totally private, he also eased me into the physical affection. When he reached for my hand across the table and held it, in plain view of the world, I was beaming. I had to stop myself from climbing over the table and into his lap.

I waver on whether or not to go back to his house after dinner, but it's close to the restaurant and Stormy needed to get out. I didn't want her to suffer because I was being a pussy about alone time with Alex.

Now that we're on his sofa, facing each other with a glass of wine, I am so glad I came. This feels so natural that I can easily picture spending my evenings here with Alex for a long time to come.

"Well, my parents' ranch trains hunting dogs for people across the country. We'll usually get a pup for six to ten weeks and work with them until they are competent bird dogs. I guess I want to do the same thing here but on a smaller scale." I paused to make sure Alex was still interested and he was staring with rapt attention. Like every word out of my mouth is fascinating to him. "Ultimately, I'd like to have a few acres that I can use to do day boarding of dogs and just take a few training pups at a time. Land is more expensive out here, so it'll be a while before I can buy something, but Aunt Karen said I can manage her kennel services at the end of summer if I want."

"That's sounds great. Are you going to take her up on her offer?" Alex asks me, scooting forward just a bit so he can rest his hand on my elbow over the back of the sofa.

“Probably. I didn’t want to commit for the long term in case I didn’t like living here, but I’m starting to think this might be a good place to settle down.” Feeling suddenly bashful, I tuck my chin and look for Stormy. She’s curled up on her bed across the room, passed out.

“Is that what you want to do? Settle down?”

“Well, eventually. I just mean this seems like as good a place as any to set up my kennel. And with referrals from Aunt Karen’s office, it makes sense to be here.”

Looking over to Alex, his eyebrows are furrowed. He’s contemplating something that he doesn’t look happy about. Damn. I knew those words would be a turnoff, but I have to be honest about what I want. No more lying. That’s what I promised myself when I moved here and it has to start now. Of course, that doesn’t mean I have to disclose everything yet... but I will be honest about any direct questions he asks. I just hope he doesn’t ask *that* question anytime soon. Or ever.

Not able to stand the silence, I reach my hand up and rest it on his bicep. His compact but very well-defined bicep.

“What about you? Where do you see yourself in five years?” Whether he wants to talk about it or not, I need to know. If this isn’t going anywhere, I need to stop before we get too deep.

“Well, I’m a bit older than you, so I probably have different priorities. I hope that in five years I’ll be in a serious relationship. Maybe thinking about a family. Maybe get Stormy a little brother or sister.”

A little bit of wine dribbles out of my mouth as I almost choke at his confession.

A serious relationship? A family? “Human brother or sister... or canine?” I ask with a smirk. Maybe he’s just messing with me.

“Either. Both maybe.” He scoots toward me so his calf is pressed against mine. Even through our clothes, I can feel his heat. Looking into his eyes, the aqua is just a tiny border around solid black. He is just as aroused as I am. I’m

leaning forward without realizing it when he finishes his thought. "But don't let that scare you. I don't expect anything more from you than some fun. I know this is new to you so don't worry about that now. This can be totally casual."

What? What the hell does that mean? He doesn't expect anything from me. Does that mean he doesn't want anything serious with me? Am I just some checkmark off his bucket list? Seduce a virgin and then start looking for someone long term. Fuck that.

"You know, maybe I should get out of here. I'm flattered that I've made it onto your list or whatever but we aren't looking for the same things." I've gone from aroused and ready to pissed off and humiliated. Within seconds, I'm on my feet and heading to the door. "I'll just call a cab, you don't need to drive me home."

"What? What's wrong? Shane... why are you leaving?" He's right behind me but I can't look back. I'm afraid my emotions will manifest into tears and I don't want him to see that. I don't know why I'm so upset. I knew he wasn't interested in me in a serious way. What happened to my plan to just use him for "tutoring" and maybe friendship? Doesn't matter now. I've got to get the hell out of here.

I pull the front door open only a few inches before his hand passes my head and stops it. Palm flat against the door, only inches from my face, Alex slams it shut and takes a step into me. With his chest pressed into my back, he whispers, "Please tell me what's wrong. If I said something stupid, I didn't mean to. I'm just... really stupid. Please."

I'm frozen between Alex and the door. Part of me wants to run but he feels so good on me that I lean back. My ass is against his crotch and I can't help pushing into it.

"Just tell me what freaked you out so we can talk about it. Okay?" he asks into my ear.

I nod slightly and let him pull me back to the sofa. When he sits, he grabs my hand and laces his fingers with mine, holding them on his lap. Looking up

at him, I decide to try out that honesty approach I committed to just moments ago.

“I’m not looking for a one-night stand. I’m looking for a... boyfriend, I guess.” I try to pull my hand out of his grip but he doesn’t let me. His grip tightens and he adds his other hand to reinforce his point.

“I’m looking for that too. I just told you that,” he says softly. “What’s the problem?”

“Well, you said you weren’t looking for that with me. If I’m just some kind of conquest, I’m not interested.” Finally, I meet his gaze. The anger and embarrassment are back but I’m ready to confront him. Maybe even looking for a fight after all this.

“I did? I didn’t mean to say it like that. I meant that if you don’t want that, it’s okay. But, I definitely want more than one night with you.” His hand reaches up to cup my face, trailing his fingers along my jaw, brushing his soft thumb across my lower lip. “I want you. More than I’ve wanted anyone in a long time.”

Without another word, his palm wraps behind my neck and he pulls me in. My lids drift down as I feel his smooth, warm lips land on mine. At first, we are both still. Then, he begins to move over the curves of my mouth. Tasting me. It feels so good. It’s been so long since I’ve been physical with anyone that I quickly lose control. In a matter of seconds, I shift from hesitant to desperate. My mouth opens and I’m pressed into his lips, seeking his tongue, licking his teeth, practically climbing inside of him. I can’t get close enough.

Alex’s shirt is off before I realize that I pulled it straight up and over his head in one pass. He pulls me up and we’re stumbling to his room, never losing contact. My lips always on him. His jaw, his neck. God, he smells good. My mind is rationalizing what my body can’t stop. I know I should slow it down. That I’ve only just met Alex and we should wait but I’ve waited too long. I’m done thinking things through before I act. I need this. I need Alex.

Once in his room, he backs up to his bed until he’s leaning against it. My jeans and boxers are off and in a pile before he even sits down. Pushing him

down against the bed, he lays back and I climb over him, tearing my shirt off in the process.

I attack Alex's mouth, months of pent-up tension pushing me to keep going. Faster. Harder. He places a palm on my forehead and pushes back just a bit. "Hey, slow down there, turbo. We don't have to rush." He pulls me into a languid kiss and I melt into it... for about two seconds. Then, I am all fired up again and pawing at his pants to get those fuckers off.

"I don't want to slow down. I want you. *Now*," I almost growl as I finally pull down his pants. I am greeted by the most beautiful cock I've ever seen. Perfectly pink and glistening at the tip with anticipation. Granted, I haven't seen very many in person but Alex's has to be one of the best. It is lean and long, just like him.

Now that it's out, I need to put it in something. Immediately. I lean over and kiss it. So smooth. Wrapping my tongue around the head, I roll it around in my mouth, sucking on it like a pacifier. And it is.

Alex is making adorable moany sounds that make me want him even more. His short fingernails are grating the top of my head, trying to get a grip, but the sweaty strands slip easily between his fingers.

Taking a deep breath through my nose, I suck hard on his tip and push down, letting him slide further into my mouth. He is at least an inch longer than Brandon so I know I won't be able to take him fully in but it doesn't matter. When he hits the back of my throat, his thrust tells me what he needs.

I pull off his dick slowly and let him pop out of my mouth. He grinds up a bit but my hand on his thigh holds him down. We're doing this my way. Like a caged animal that has finally escaped, I am ready to lose my virginity. Well, to a guy anyway.

This *is* my first rodeo and I'm gonna savor every second of it. I want to try everything that I was never allowed to try before. Touch everything that was off-limits with Brandon. Do everything that I've spent the past ten years fantasizing about. And I'm gonna do it all with Alex.

CHAPTER NINE

Alex

Oh my god, this boy can give head. Obviously this is one of the things he did when he “messed around” with his buddy. I want to come but he won’t let me. Using his lips and tongue and teeth to get me just to the edge and then backing off. I almost wonder if he’s doing it accidentally, not realizing how close he’s getting me before changing positions. It might have been frustrating if it wasn’t so damn sexy watching him experiment on me.

This isn’t at all how I expected the evening to go. I thought I’d totally screwed up any chance I might have had with him when he went for the door. My stupid mouth got me into trouble again. After we straightened that out, he’s been unstoppable. But I’m definitely not asking him to stop. I did try to get him to slow down but he’s been slowed down, or stalled completely, for too long. As soon as he knew I was serious, he practically jumped me.

I hope he doesn’t regret this in the morning because I want all of him. And by the way his fingers keep inching toward my ass, I know he wants it too.

“Is this okay,” he asks, taking his lips off my cock only long enough to get the words out. He’s rolling my balls around in his hand with just enough pressure to make me squirm. They’re full and tight and begging to release.

“Mmmmm.” I’m so lost in the moment, I don’t want to speak. Afraid I might say the wrong thing again, I try to encourage him with the sounds that I like to hear. Sounds I don’t always make but can’t seem to suppress with Shane.

“Ah, ah, ah,” he coos against the seeping head of my cock, pulling off and trailing his tongue along the dorsal vein and then continuing down my thigh. Pushing both knees off the bed, he leans back and looks at me. I’m fully exposed to him.

“Please, Shane. I need to feel you,” I beg. Lifting my ass up off the bed, he just stares for a moment.

“God, you’re hot.” If I wasn’t on the brink of imploding, I would have felt self-conscious under his scrutiny. But I don’t. I know this might be one of the first times he’s ever really looked at a naked man, and I don’t want him to feel ashamed by it. I try not to let my own embarrassment tense me up. He seems to like what he’s seeing so I’ll let him get a good look. And I won’t feel bad when I subject him to the same ogling.

“Fuck me, Shane.”

“I want to but... I haven’t before. Not like... this.” He leans over my body and hovers just above me. Not even really touching me... just a faint teasing of his skin against mine. Grabbing his ass with both hands, I pull him against me, hard.

“That’s okay. We’ll go slow. I just... Fuck, I want you.” With that, his mouth is back on mine. I know he’s trying to pace himself but he’s just as desperate as I am. Moving his lips to my chin, he nibbles up to my ear.

Shane slips the tip of his middle finger into my mouth and I eagerly accept it, sucking it in deep as he shudders against my chest. When he pops his finger out of my mouth, he moves it straight to my hole and gently starts to rub. He isn’t pressing in yet, but I can’t wait much longer. I need to get this moving. Quick.

“In the drawer,” I mumble, pointing to the nightstand on the other side of the bed. He freezes for a moment before realizing what I mean. Climbing over me, and rubbing his rock-hard dick across my belly in the process, he opens the drawer.

“Um, what do we need?” He’s shuffling things around, probably curious about some of the toys in there but we don’t have time for that. Not this minute anyway. Maybe on the next go-round.

“Just the lube and a rubber.” And you in me. Now!

With supplies in hand, Shane resumes his perch above me and is suddenly shy. Not sure what to do next, he just stares at the condom.

“Do you have a preference? Like, position or whatever.” Could he be any cuter?

“C’mere.” Pulling him down into a soft kiss, I try to take a bit more control. I know he wants to do everything, and I want him to do everything, over and over again. But, I also want him to enjoy it and not be stressed about whether it’s right or wrong. This thing between us already feels different than with other guys I’ve been with. It already feels right. I want him to love every second of it.

Shifting him to the side, I reposition myself so I’m straddling him. Our cocks are finally touching and I’m ready to blow again. Reaching between us, I let myself touch him. With the overhand grip that I prefer to use on myself, I firmly grasp his head and stroke down to his base. The long breath that he lets out releases some of the tension in his body.

With a few more solid strokes, I sit back on his thighs and look into his eyes. “Are you ready?”

His eyes light up like a kid on Christmas morning, and that smile makes me melt just a little bit. “I want you, Alex.”

That’s all I need to hear. I unwrap the rubber and slowly roll it down his length. His cock is thicker than mine but a little shorter. Perfect. I want to spend hours inspecting every inch of his body but that’ll have to wait. Right now, I just need him to fuck me.

With a generous dollop of lube, I slowly cover his sheathed cock. When I lean forward to kiss up his chest, I reach under and coat myself with lube. Lightly pressing in the tips of two fingers, I stretch myself just a bit. I’ve only been with a few first-timers but it can get a little rough until they know how to read my cues. Not that it matters. At this point, I’d let him fuck me bare and dry if he wanted to.

When we’re both out of breath, I move him to my opening. As much as I want to keep kissing his face, I pull up so I can control my descent. Without breaking eye contact, I slowly slide over his head. Shane’s breath catches and his almost-black eyes bore into mine. I continue to lower myself, not even

waiting to adjust. He fits perfectly inside me and is fully buried within moments.

“Fuck, Alex,” he whispers. “You are so tight.”

With my palms on his chest, I lift up slowly until only his head is in me and then drop my weight quickly. He is pressed against every nerve that matters and I'm in heaven. I want to go slow but he feels too good. Trying to pace myself, I set a medium rhythm. Not super slow, but not fast enough to make him come before he's ready.

His pecs are solid and smooth. Just running my fingertips over his taut skin is almost enough to bring me to the edge. After a few more long strokes, I increase my speed. Shane grabs my hips and holds me against his pelvis.

“Don't move. Just hold there for a sec.” His eyes are closed and I have to grin. I know he's probably picturing his mother or some other mood-breaking scene to calm himself down. When his eyes open and he notices me watching him, he just smiles. That perfectly sweet smile. I lean down to him.

“You're so beautiful, you know that?” I ask softly as I lick the length of his ear lobe.

“You're pretty fucking gorgeous, yourself,” he says, chuckling. More seriously, he adds, “You have no idea how many times I've imagined this moment.”

“And?” I ask with a smirk. Part of me knows he wouldn't tell me if it was bad but I still want to hear him say it.

“Way better than I imagined. I'm trying not to come but... fuck, you feel good.”

Not wanting the boy to wait too long, I start moving again. With my knees spread wide so I can stay as low to him as possible, I set a faster pace. Sliding all the way to the tip and pumping hard against him. Each time he hits my prostate, I shudder. It's like I'm having mini orgasms with each pass. Is that possible? If it is, it better be a permanent phenomenon because I can't go back to the old way. This is amazing. Shane is amazing.

While I'm lost in my own ecstasy, I feel his body tense below me. He's ready. My hand wraps around my cock, matching the speed of his hips. With two quick, short thrusts into me, Shane releases his load. His hips arch off the bed as he tries to get even deeper, chasing the orgasm that has his body vibrating. As his eyes flutter back and his fingers dig into my thighs, I give into my own release. A deep, rolling wave of pleasure rocks me forward and I shoot hard all over Shane's chest.

After a moment of just lying in my come on top of Shane, I finally lift my ass off him and curl into his side. His arm wraps around me and pulls me closer. There is no place in the world I'd rather be than with this man, naked in my bed.

"Fuck, that was amazing," Shane says once he's caught his breath.

"For me too," I confess into his neck. "I felt like I was coming the entire time. I've never had that happen before." I reach down and pull off the condom, tying it and tossing it on the nightstand.

"Really?" I can hear the smirk in his voice.

"Yes, really. But don't go getting a big head or anything. I'm sure it was just a fluke," I tease. "You'll have to do that at least... I dunno, ten or fifteen more times before I'll believe it was more than just beginner's luck."

"Beginner's luck, hunh?" He shifts his weight so he is lying on me, his full weight pressing me against the mattress. I'm already hard and ready for him. "Well, let's see what you think about this."

CHAPTER TEN

Shane

Beginner's luck, my ass. Okay, it's true that I am technically a beginner, but I knew exactly what I was doing to Alex. His face is so expressive that when I hit the right spot, I knew it immediately.

After he was fully relaxed on me, I was able to angle my thrusts so every one counted. His weeping cock on my belly was proof enough of that. Each time I pounded into him, it seemed to thicken just a little bit more. When I knew I was ready to blow, I had to hold him in place. Deep enough to keep him stimulated but still enough that I could regain my loose grip of control.

I was just barely able to hold out for a few more minutes once he started riding me again, quickly stroking me with his ass in a way that made it impossible to concentrate on anything else. I could feel my orgasm building but when he reached for his cock and started jerking it, it was so hot that I knew I was done. Holding him down, I gave a few more thrusts before I was erupting within him. Pushing my ass off the bed, I tried to get as deep into Alex as I could. His muscles, still contracting from his release, were milking my dick of all that I had to offer.

I knew intercourse would be awesome but nothing I'd ever done alone or with Brandon could possibly have prepared me for how it felt to be with Alex. Not even with her. This was gentle and hot and... intimate. Alex was completely open to letting me have his body in a way I wasn't sure I'd ever feel comfortable doing. Yet with him, everything feels right. Like we've been doing it for years. When I came, I could feel every nerve in my body light up.

Maybe that was some kind of beginner's luck because I can't imagine ever leaving this bed again if that could be repeated. Not that I ever *want* to leave this bed.

After that first night, Alex and I have been practically inseparable. The excuses that we were using to see each other every day were so ridiculous that

it's become a running joke. One night he asked me to stop by to help him shuck some corn for the grill. A few days later, I told him I needed him to go with me to the barber shop to help me choose a new hairstyle.

Tonight, for our one-month anniversary, he asked me to go to dinner with him at his favorite dim sum restaurant so I could help him order from the Cantonese menu. Tomorrow, we're going on a hike so I can take pictures of indigenous butterflies. That'll be funnier when he remembers I don't own a camera.

I told Aunt Karen and Uncle Ron that I'd probably stay at Alex's this weekend but they know *probably* means one hundred percent definitely. Since that first weekend, I've stayed over every Friday and Saturday night and have trouble going home on Sunday.

So, with my duffle bag on his back seat, Alex is driving us to the restaurant with my hand entwined in his. Now that we're officially a couple, he is always touching me. I love it. I'm not even shy about public affection anymore. When I'm with Alex, the rest of the world seems to fade into the background. If people are uncomfortable around us, I don't even notice. I only notice where his skin is touching mine. Where his arm embraces mine. How his smile grows when he's looking at me. And how many minutes are left until we're alone again.

"You brought your English-to-Chinese dictionary, right," he says, tugging on my arm.

"Gong Hei Fat Choi," I immediately respond.

"Great." Alex laughs. "I'm sure after we wish them a happy New Year, they'll bring us something delicious."

"We'll just do what you usually do. Point and grunt at anything rolling past that looks good. It'll be fine."

Looking at me with those adoring eyes, he nods slowly and squeezes my fingers. "Yeah, it will be."

And that's how it always is. We joke around and act silly. And then there are these moments when we get lost in each other. I've seen my aunt and uncle do it and thought it was just something old people did when they were remembering their younger years. But now that I'm doing it, I realize it means something more.

Having never been in a real relationship, I didn't know how quickly one could go from being just attracted to a person to head-over-heels, completely in love with them. But, in only a few weeks, I've done it. I haven't said the words to Alex, and he hasn't said them to me, but that's how I feel.

Without meaning to, we rush through dinner. Everything tastes great, as usual, but Alex has something planned at his place that he was anxious to get back to. Based on past experience, I had a pretty good idea of what his plans would entail and I was just as antsy to get out of the restaurant as he was.

"Can you wait out here for a second?" Alex asks when he pulls into his driveway. "I need to get something ready."

"Sure."

He opens his door and then ducks back in to grab me by the neck for a kiss. It was meant to be a quick peck but quickly turned into the beginning of a full on mack session.

"Hold that thought for two minutes," he begs when he pulls away and hops out of the car.

When Alex walks back out, he is beaming. The goofy grin on his face has me mirroring his excitement.

"Ready?" I ask, getting out of the car and stretching my arms above my head.

"Are you?" he says back with a smirk.

"I've been half hard all night so if whatever is in there involves you getting naked, I'm more than ready."

"Is that all you ever think about?" he teases, grabbing me by the bicep and pulling me onto the porch.

“Honestly?” I look over his shoulder and down to his perfect ass. “Yes.”

“Good answer, perv,” he says, smacking my ass and pushing me through his front door.

Not sure what to expect, I enter his front room and look around. Nothing seems out of place so I glance back at Alex.

“What am I looking for?”

“Just keep going. Out back,” he says, pushing me to walk through the house.

When I step out the back door, I'm greeted by a twinkling picnic. Alex has clear Christmas lights strung across every branch and post in his yard, creating a beautiful canopy over a blanket that is set directly under the large apricot tree.

“I thought we could have dessert out here,” he says, glancing to me. He's still smiling but I can tell he's nervous about my reaction.

“You did all this?” Wrapping my arm around his waist, I pull him against me. “I love it.”

“It's not too much? I wanted to do something romantic but I didn't want to freak you out.” He brings his hand up to trace a finger around my ear. “You're not freaked out, are you?”

“Not even a little bit. It looks great.” I lean into his mouth and lightly kiss him. Just a soft brush of my lips on his before I feel him smile against me. Easing off, I ask, “So, what's for dessert?”

“Not that. Well, not yet.” Alex pulls back with a smirk and drags me to the blanket.

Taking a seat in the middle of the blanket, I watch as Alex opens the basket. He pulls out a bottle of champagne and two glasses. Then, he opens a container of huge, chocolate-dipped strawberries. Finally, a can of aerosol whipped cream is unveiled and my mouth is watering. I don't eat a lot of sweets but I have a feeling this night is going to satisfy more than my sweet tooth.

“So, I wanted to start off with a toast,” he explains, opening the bottle. The cork pops, but no fizz is lost. Alex has done this before. While he pours the champagne, I sneak a peek into the basket and realize it isn't empty. There is a small, black box with a red bow around it. A gift. Shit.

“What is that? I didn't know we were doing gifts, Alex.” I feel like a total douche. I should have asked what he had planned but it never occurred to me that I should get him something for one month.

“No, it's nothing. Don't worry about it. Please, just... here.” He hands a glass to me and raises his own. “I know it's only been a month but I really care about you, Shane. A lot. I know this is all new for you and I don't want to rush you into anything you aren't ready for but, actually, this is new for me too. I've never felt this way about anyone before. Even the guys that I thought I was in love with, I'm beginning to think maybe I wasn't. Because, now I'm thinking that maybe I really am... in love with you.”

I'm speechless. Alex just told me that he's in love with me. He loves me. Is that possible? Does he really feel about me the way I feel about him? I know he's waiting for me to respond in some way but it takes me a minute to compose myself. My throat burns but I manage to finally find my voice. “I think I'm in love with you too.”

The relief and happiness on Alex's face is evident. He was afraid to be honest about his feelings but he did it. I know that I'll need to be honest with him about everything at some point but not yet. This is too good to mess up. He is more than I ever hoped to find and I'm not sure how he'll react when he finds out what I did. Tonight that doesn't matter. All that matters is that Alex loves me. And I love Alex. And we've got all weekend to show each other just how much.

CHAPTER ELEVEN

Alex

After hearing Shane tell me that he loves me too, I felt like I was floating. I planned to give him a key to my house for our one-month anniversary but I wasn't sure how he would take it. I know one month doesn't seem like a long time, and in all my previous relationships, I was never sure I liked the guy enough to consider a key exchange until at least the six month mark. But, to my surprise, Shane happily accepted it. He looked as happy to say the words as I was to hear them.

We spent the whole night feeding each other strawberries and licking whipped cream off each other and making love. Just slowly moving with each other under the lights with only a small blanket to cover us from the world. It was amazing. I came over and over again within Shane's embrace. Cocooned inside of him in every possible way.

Fast or not, I was in love with Shane and couldn't stop myself from imagining a future with him. A long and happy future with Shane by my side. Living on a ranch with a bunch of dogs running around... and maybe even a baby or two at some point. I don't care how it all happens, I just want to be with that man for the rest of my life.

When Shane's phone rings at eight am, I immediately have a sense of dread. No one calls that early on a Saturday unless it's an emergency. The first time it rings, he just hits ignore and nuzzles into my neck. When it rings again a few minutes later, his whole body tenses up. I know that he's thinking the same thing I am. This is bad.

"Hey, Mom," he says into the phone, clearing his throat. He sits up in the bed to better focus on what she is saying.

"No, it's fine. What's up?"

"B negative, I think. Why?" The tension is now in his voice. Are they talking about blood?

“When?” Shane swings his legs off the bed and reaches for his boxers on the floor.

“What about... uh... Jacob?”

Jacob? He’s never mentioned a Jacob in his past. His best friend slash jacking buddy was Brandon.

“I’m on my way.”

“No, it’s okay. I’ll be there in a few hours. I’ll call when I’m close.”

Shane hangs up the phone and quickly starts gathering his clothes.

“Is everything okay?” I ask, stepping in front of him to get his attention.

“Um, no actually.” He looks at me for a second like he forgot I was there. “A family friend was in a car accident yesterday. I need to go home for a few days.” He pulls out of my arms and starts looking for his keys.

“Now? You’re driving up there now?”

“They’re in the hospital and need blood donations or something. I guess I’m the right blood type so I’ll see if I can help.” As he approaches the door, he seems to realize he’s about to leave me for a few days. Dropping his bag, Shane turns back to me. “I’m sorry I have to leave like this but I’ll call you later or tomorrow.”

“Do you want me to go with you? I can take a few days...”

“No. Thanks, but no.” Staring into my eyes for a long moment, he kisses me urgently. I can feel the fear and pain in his motions but I tell myself it’s just his fear of losing a loved one. I have so many questions I want to ask, not the least of which is about *Jacob*. But, I hold my questions. He’s obviously distracted and needs to get on the road. “I love you,” he says quickly as he pulls away.

“I love you too.” I barely get the words out as the front door shuts and Shane is gone. I feel like my whole world just walked out the door.

The drive to Casper should have taken about four hours on a Saturday morning. It's now four pm and I haven't heard from Shane at all. I've sent a few texts to see how he's doing but no response yet. I try to distract myself with laundry and errands but I can't stop thinking about him.

I'm not generally insecure but I can't help feeling that I'm about to lose Shane. It's stupid and immature but I just need to hear from him. I need to know he's okay. And that we're okay.

Greg took pity on me and invited me over to their house for dinner. I wasn't in the mood to socialize but I couldn't stand being home any longer.

"Lex, come on. You know he adores you. He's just got to deal with a family thing." Greg is always good for a pep talk but it's not working today.

"I know. I'm sorry I'm being such a downer," I apologize.

Dave sits next to me on the couch and hands me another glass of Syrah. "Remember when my mom broke her hip a few years ago? I think I went three days without calling Greg because I was so focused on helping her and keeping my dad calm and making sure my sisters weren't fighting. Just give him some space and once the initial shock wears off, he'll be just as anxious to get back to you as you are to see him."

"You think so?" I want to believe that's all that's happening but I can't completely trust it. Until I hear from Shane that we're good, I just won't be able to rest.

"Of course, I do." Dave pats my knee. God, I hope he's right.

At nine thirty on Sunday night, I finally get a text from Shane.

Hey. Sorry couldn't talk til now. I'm OK. U?

I'm fine. Was worried about you. I miss you.

Miss U 2.

When will U be home?

Not sure. Got some stuff to take care of here. I'll call this week.

Can you talk now?

Can't. At the hospital. Not supposed to use my cell.

OK. I love you.

Love you 2.

Okay. That's not so bad. He's okay but in the hospital where he can't use his phone. That makes sense. I still want to hear his voice. See his face. But I can chill for a few days and give him space. He knows I'm here for him when he's ready. I just hope he isn't planning an extended stay.

CHAPTER TWELVE

Shane

When Mom told me that Ashley had been in a car accident, I felt bad for her but wasn't sure why Mom was telling me. But when she said that Jacob was with her and is now in critical condition, I was shocked. She knows. Mom wouldn't have called me if she didn't know.

I don't know how I avoided a ticket but I managed to go almost three hundred miles in three and a half hours. The whole drive, my thoughts jumped between what to tell Alex and what to do about Jacob. I should have known that life couldn't be as easy as it was.

Everything is perfect with Alex. I am finally in a relationship with a guy that cares for me the way I care for him and that could all be ruined. One stupid moment in time eighteen months ago and now my life could be changed forever.

Walking into the hospital I visited several times in my childhood makes everything more real. My mom is in one of the waiting rooms when I finally arrive.

"Shane, honey, you made it." She rushes to hug me. "I didn't expect you for a few more hours."

"Well, there wasn't any traffic..." I'm happy to see Mom but still ashamed that she knows about the secret I've been hiding for over a year. "How's Ashley?"

"Come sit with me." Mom pulls me to a chair and holds my hands in her lap. "The accident was very serious. A truck hit their SUV head-on and caused it to roll over twice."

I feel like I'm listening to her through a pair of headphones. Her voice seems muffled as I take in every word.

"Tim died instantly. He was driving and had the most direct impact. Ashley had a lot of internal bleeding when she arrived but we thought she'd pull through. I talked to her last night and it seemed like she had turned the

corner. But, overnight, she went into cardiac arrest and passed away at about four am.”

“Oh my god.” I can’t believe this. Standing up, I pace the small room trying to understand what my mom is saying to me. “Why didn’t you tell me on the phone?”

“I didn’t want you to be upset while you were driving but, as I mentioned, we needed you here. Jacob wasn’t actually hurt from the accident itself but there was a bag with tools in the car, and when it rolled over, a screwdriver impaled his leg, nicking his femoral artery. Because it was a clean wound, he didn’t lose as much blood as he could have but I wanted you to know.”

I’m still contemplating the meaning of her words when a doctor asks me to join him in an office.

“Thank you for coming so quickly, Mr. Greenly. I take it you know why you’re here.”

“Yes, sir.”

“So, you know that you’re Jacob’s biological father?”

All I can do is nod. I never thought I’d hear those words again. After Ashley brought Jacob over to meet me before I moved, I thought that would be the last time our secret was ever discussed. Who knew that she and her husband would both be dead just a few months later?

“As his next of kin, you’re now legally responsible for making decisions about his care. He is doing well, but it’ll be a few more days before we know for sure. We’ll need you to fill out the necessary paperwork as soon as possible.”

“What do you mean, I’m responsible? I don’t know how to make decisions for a baby. I’ve only met him once.”

“Don’t worry. We’re the doctors so we’ll tell you what needs to happen. I just need to know there is someone here to make decisions on his behalf.”

The doctor says more stuff but I can't remember what. I nod a lot and sign the papers that are put in front of me. When I get back to the waiting room, my mom is still there.

"Are you ready to tell me how this happened?" Mom asks as soon as I sit down across from her.

"What did Ashley tell you?" If she doesn't know about me and Brandon getting caught by Ashley, then I'm not going to tell her. It wouldn't be fair to Brandon and Missy. I never would have believed that one night could have such a significant impact on so many lives.

We both knew there was a risk of getting caught but we'd just come home from a game and were amped up. Since we had the house to ourselves, we decided to stay out on the deck under a full moon instead of going to my room. Ashley stopped by to pick up her paycheck and when I didn't answer the door, she went around the back to see if my dad left it on the picnic table. I was on my knees with Brandon's dick in my mouth when Ashley turned the corner and caught us.

I begged her not to tell anyone and she agreed as long as I'd do something for her. She'd been trying to get pregnant for years but her husband was almost completely sterile. The doctors gave him only a ten percent chance of successfully fertilizing an egg so she agreed to keep her mouth shut if I'd get her pregnant. Thankfully, it only took one well-timed lay to do the deed. Never did I imagine I'd be the kid's only living parent just a year and a half later.

"Well." My mom takes a deep breath. "She didn't tell me much. She just said that you were Jacob's father and she wanted you to take him if anything happened to her. Of course, at that point we expected her to pull through, but now it looks like you'll be his legal guardian."

"I don't know how to take care of a baby," I say in a whine that I would only attempt with Mom.

"I know, sweetie, but your father and I are here to help. I can watch him during the day and you'll learn as you go. That's how all parents do it." She stands up and moves to the chair next to me.

“But that would mean I’d have to move back here.” It’s all just starting to sink in. I’d have to leave the world that I was just starting to feel comfortable in. And Alex. I don’t want to leave Alex but I can’t go back with a nine-month-old son. He made it clear that’s not when he’s looking for right now. Not to mention that I can’t support a kid working as a vet tech and living in my aunt’s guest room.

“Of course, you would. That way we can raise him together. It takes a village, you know. And your father and I did a pretty good job with you. He’ll be so relieved when finds out.”

“Wait, what?” I interrupt her grandmotherly fantasy. “What are you talking about?”

“Well, you know, he’s always been a little worried about you. He thought you moved away because you didn’t like women. Now that he knows you’re fine, he’ll be so happy to have you home. And a grandson. Wow, he’ll be shocked. I didn’t say anything to...”

“Mom, stop.” This can’t go on. Whether I’m at home or not, I can’t continue to live a lie. This ends now. Angling my body so I’m fully facing her, I say the words I never wanted to say. “Dad wasn’t wrong. I don’t like women, in that way. I’m gay, Mom. And, believe it or not, I am fine. More than fine. I’m actually pretty happy with how my life is going. As a matter of fact, I have a boyfriend.” Well, had a boyfriend. I’m pretty sure this is going to be a game changer for him.

“Honey, don’t say that. I know you needed to experiment while you were living with your aunt but now you have a son. You’ll want to find a mother for him.” She paused for a moment, her eyes pleading with me to just agree with her. “Unless, well, unless you want your father and I to raise him for you?”

And there it is. She wants Jacob. I guess I’m not surprised. She always said she wanted more kids but wasn’t able to. Honestly, it would probably be the best-case scenario for all of us.

“How’s he doing? Jacob, I mean.” I haven’t seen him yet but I know my mom’s been talking to his doctors while I was gone.

“He’s a fighter. And he looks just like you. Honestly, I can’t believe I didn’t make the connection sooner. I remember saying to Ashley that he looked like you when she’d bring him by but it never occurred to me...” As if remembering that I never gave her the story, she changes course. “I didn’t even know you two were having an affair.”

“Mom, did you hear what I just said? We didn’t have an affair. I don’t date women.” My voice is getting louder but I can’t help it. This has to be said. “Ashley was blackmailing me. Sorta. She found out I was gay and made me knock her up to buy her silence. We were never dating.”

My mom is speechless... but I think she finally understands. It’s all out there and she looks like she is about to faint. I reach for her hands and hold them on the armrest between us. “Mom, are you okay?”

She nods her head but doesn’t say anything. After waiting a few minutes for her to speak, I move to stand, but she holds tight, keeping me in place. “Are you sure this is what you want? How you want to live?”

“Yes, Mom. I’m very sure.”

“Okay.” She takes a deep breath and slowly blows it out. “Well, then, I guess we do need to have a talk with your father.”

Really? Not exactly what I expected her to say but I’ll take it. Whether or not Dad ever accepts me, at least I know Mom can deal with it.

As we’re both thinking about how that conversation might go, a doctor comes into the room.

“Mr. Greenly. Mrs. Greenly. Jacob is awake if you’d like to see him.”

“Of course, thank you, Doctor.” Mom is out of the chair and rushing down the far hallway to the pediatric trauma wing before I collect my phone and keys from the coffee table.

I follow Mom down the quiet corridor but not too closely. She’s been here all night so she just walks to a scrub sink and begins a rigorous process of washing up. Following her lead, I read the instructions on the wall for getting dressed in scrubs and washing my hands and arms.

When we're finally ready to cross the curtain, I hold my breath and walk to the bed my son is strapped to. I don't know what I was expecting to find, but seeing a little baby with his wrists strapped down in a crib and monitors taped to his body makes me a little light-headed. I stop short of the crib while he turns his head to look at me.

I can see what Mom means. He does kinda look like me. He has the same nose and his ears stick out like mine. Except for the eyes. He has Ashley's crystal-blue eyes. I'm just staring at him while Mom rearranges some wires and unstraps his restraints, lifting him to her chest. Settling in the rocker next to the crib, she cradles him in her arms. I can imagine her holding me that way when I was a baby.

Apparently a curious baby, Jacob is craning his neck to look at me so I move to stand closer to Mom. The large, green pacifier in his mouth stops moving as he stares at me.

"Jakey, this is your..." She looks at me. "Maybe we shouldn't use the word he'll associate with... anyone else. He's still waiting for them to come for him." Her eyes well up as she looks down at him. "Jakey, this is my little boy, Shane."

I don't realize I've got tears streaming down my cheeks until they tickle my chin. I can't imagine what he must be thinking. Yesterday, he was driving in the car with his mom and dad. Today, he'll never see either one of them again. I reach out to touch his hand. His fingers close around mine and he holds on. He's still studying my face but his pacifier is moving at a steady pace again.

"Hi, buddy," I say quietly. Despite all the machines and the gauze on his left leg, he seems healthy. His chubby arms and cheeks are a little pale but he's alert. And strong. He won't let go of my finger. When Mom offers to let me hold him, I try to step back but he just holds on. Without much choice in the matter, I trade places with Mom and snuggle with Jake in the rocker.

"I'm going to call your father," Mom says. "If you need anything, just hit that button there and a nurse will be right in."

“But, what if...” I try to argue with her to stay but she cuts me off.

“You’re doing fine, honey. I’ll just be a few minutes.”

When I look back down, Jake is still staring at me but his pacifier is out of his mouth. We’re both analyzing each other. He’s inspecting every inch of my face and I’m doing the same to him. I can’t help but wonder if he can sense that I’m his biological dad. I know that’s not really possible, but deep down I’m almost hoping he does.

After a few minutes of silence, I begin to ramble.

“You all done with that? It doesn’t look very tasty.” He smiles at me. Do nine-month-old babies smile or is it just gas? Either way, it looks like a smile. I can finally see that he has two bottom teeth. He really is a cute baby.

“You think that’s funny?” I say to him. “Well, just wait until you taste your grandma’s cooking. Then you’ll know what tasty is. You’ll never want a pacifier again.”

And then he laughs. He actually laughs. I don’t even realize Mom is back until I hear her sniffing from the other side of the room.

“I think he likes you, sweetheart,” Mom says as she wipes her eyes with a tissue.

CHAPTER THIRTEEN

Alex

This has been one of the worst weeks of my life. I know Shane is dealing with stuff but we haven't talked at all. He's sent a few texts to let me know he's okay but he won't answer when I call and keeps making excuses for why he can't call me back. I feel him pulling away and I hate it. Every morning I have to talk myself out of driving up to Casper just to see him.

If he's done with me then I want him to say it to my face. I don't know what's going on but I'm not just going to give up without a fight. I've never had this kind of reaction to guy and to feel this strongly after only a month... well, I think it's worth fighting for.

And who is this Jacob that he rushed out of my bed to see? Maybe he's an ex that Shane didn't want to tell me about. Maybe he's someone that he crushed on but never had a chance with before? Not knowing is the worst part. My brain is constantly thinking up ridiculous scenarios of what could be happening but they all play out the same way in the end. Shane doesn't come back.

Pathetic as it is, I made an appointment to see Dr. Mills, hoping she'll give me a hint about what's going on. Stormy's cast came off last week so she isn't due for a follow-up for another week, but I can't wait that long. I make up some weak story about Stormy limping and they let me come right in.

Fortunately, Stormy has healed really well and isn't limping at all. It's not ideal for my lie but I'm thankful that she's not limited anymore. After being cooped up in the house for weeks, she's so happy to be back in the car and on her way to the "treat people".

When Dr. Mills comes into the exam room, I know she knows that I'm full of shit and just looking for info. But she was rooting for us from the beginning, so I'm just hoping she'll take pity on me and give me something I can hang on to.

“Stormy, girl. Have you gotten yourself into trouble again,” she says, not making eye contact with me when she first walks in.

“Hi, Doctor. She seems to be doing well but I think I noticed a limp earlier so I wanted you to check it out.”

“Hi, Alex. It’s good to see you.” She gives me a look that is both sympathetic and frustrated. “Let’s see what we have here. Stormy, are you ready for a treat?”

Stormy hops up and trots over to Karen. Not even a token stumble to help sell my story.

“Well, Stormy, you look perfectly healthy to me. I think your daddy must be seeing things.”

“Well, I figured it was better to be safe than sorry,” I say, feeling stupid for trying to pull one over on her. But, as long as I’m here, I have to get what I came for. “So, how are you doing?”

“I’m well,” she says, leaning back on her supply cabinet with her arms crossed over her chest. “How are you?”

“Fine.” I lean down to put the leash back on Stormy’s collar. “Actually, kinda bummed that Shane’s still gone. Do you know when he might be back?”

“Alex, I know this isn’t easy for either of you but Shane’s dealing with some family stuff that I’m not sure he’s ready to talk about yet.”

I stand up to face her. “But, is he okay?”

“I think he’s adjusting to some things going on. I’ve made it clear that he still has a home with us and I hope he comes back but I’m just not sure if he will.”

What? I back up to the bench at the back of the room and slide down onto it. “Not come back? Like, at all? I thought this was temporary? What could be happening that would keep him from coming back?”

I feel like I’ve been kicked in the gut and I want to double over.

“I wish I could answer your questions but you really need to talk to Shane.” She walks over and rests a hand on my shoulder. “I know he doesn’t want to hurt you but he’s not sure how to handle his new reality.”

“Is this about Jacob?” I ask, anger replacing my hurt. “Is that why he doesn’t want to come back?”

“You know about Jacob?” Karen seems shocked that I know about him.

“Yes. Well, no. Are they, like, seeing each other or something?” I glance up at her, afraid of her answer.

The smile that breaks across her face is surprising. “No, Alex. It’s not like that. You need to have a conversation with Shane. If I talk to him tonight, I’ll try to get him to call you. I think he’s just worried that you aren’t going to handle his news well.”

“What’s his news? Is he sick?” God, could he be sick? The rolling cramps in my stomach start up again.

“I’ll ask him to call you, Alex,” she says again and walks out of the room.

It’s been four days since I went to talk to Karen and I haven’t even gotten a text from Shane. I’m officially in panic mode. I can’t stand this any longer. I’ve called in sick to work, dropped Stormy off with Steph, and am driving to Casper. If he wants to dump me, he needs to just do it. This state of wondering is killing me.

It was easy enough to find a listing for Greenly Training Kennels on Casper Mountain. It is an impressive ranch on over a hundred acres of open space. I can almost see why he would want to come back. It does seem like the perfect place for Shane. But, then again, he left it for a reason. What could possibly have changed in just a few weeks that could make him want to stay there? And not want to talk to me. Well, I’m going to find out.

I’m not sure if he’ll be at the ranch but it’s the only place I can think of to start. His parents may not want to tell me where he is, but if I have to park in front of their house until he shows up, I will. Either they will talk to me to get

rid of me, or the Sheriff will pick me up. I don't care which, as long as I get some answers.

When I finally pull up to their ranch, the large gate seems ominous. The rusted metal bars are propped open on both sides and a sign above welcomes guests to Greenly Ranch. I stop just outside the gate, debating whether or not I should keep going.

If Shane wanted to talk to me, he would have called. Or even sent a text. He obviously needs some space and this is the last thing I should be doing. On the other hand, if he thinks I'm going to reject him because of some weird family issue going on, then I should be here. I want to reassure him that I'm here for him... regardless of what's going on at home. If he needs to stay here for a while, we can work through that. The drive isn't too bad and it's not like I can't bring Stormy with me. She loves road trips. We'll figure it out. Just as soon as I know what *it* is.

Although, if there really is another guy and he wants to end it with me... well, I guess I'd rather know that for sure than to stay in limbo. I'm doing this. One way or another, I'm going to see Shane today.

With a newfound determination, I drive through the gate and down the long path to the house. There are several buildings but the main house is centered on the property. It's a yellow farmhouse with green shutters and dogs everywhere. There are at least fifteen dogs running loose on the property, but none give me a second glance as I park beside Shane's truck. He's here.

CHAPTER FOURTEEN

Shane

The rest of that first weekend home was spent in Jacob's room talking to him or watching him sleep. Mom and I never left his side. At about six pm on Sunday night, a woman burst through the door wearing too much makeup and perfume that made me dizzy from across the room.

With a nurse closely inspecting her, the stranger scrubbed up and prepped to fully enter the room. Jacob woke up and instantly reached for me so I gathered him in my arms and waited to meet his visitor.

When she finally comes in, she eyes Mom and me suspiciously but then zones in on Jacob.

"Oh, baby boy, I'm so glad to see you." Her loud voice and wide arm gestures cause him to flinch as she rushes to take him from my arms. When he sees her quickly approaching, he starts to cry. It's the first time I've heard him really cry and it breaks my heart. I want to punch this bitch for scaring him but I still didn't know who she is.

"Hello, ma'am. Can I help you?" I ask as politely as I can manage while trying to soothe Jacob and shield his eyes from her scary clown makeup.

"Yes, please. You can hand me my nephew. I'm Amber Osterlund and I'm his legal guardian."

The fuck?

"Amber, it's so nice to meet you. You are Tim's sister, right?" Mom says, jumping in before I can.

"That's right." As if remembering to be in mourning over her dead brother and his wife, she chokes out a few sobs and reaches for a tissue. "I still can't believe they're gone. I talked to him just last month and he was fine."

Okay, she's clearly a sharp one. I want to tell her that car accidents don't usually manifest a month in advance but I bite my tongue. Mom's got this for now.

“I’m so sorry for your loss, Amber.” Mom stands and guides the woman to her chair, and away from us. Thankfully.

“Thanks. It just breaks my heart that this little guy is an orphan now. But, I’ll make sure he knows what good people his parents were.” She is still eyeing me but hasn’t attempted to get any closer. “And you are?”

“I’m Margaret Greenly and this is my son, Shane. Ashley worked for us and was a close family friend.”

“It’s nice to meet you both. I appreciate that you’ve been here to keep an eye on Jacob until I could get in town but I probably should take some time to bond with him. This is really just a family matter. I’m sure you understand.” Standing again and walking towards us, she further explains, “We’ve got a long drive back to Aberdeen and I don’t want him fussing the whole time like I’m some stranger.”

I lean away from her and wrap my arms protectively around Jacob’s still form. He’s watching her speak but has a death grip on my shirt. *Don’t worry, kiddo. You’re not going anywhere with her*, I think to myself.

“Um, ma’am, I think there is a misunderstanding.” I have no idea how to tell her that her dead brother’s son wasn’t his son... but there isn’t any nice way to say it. “I’m sorry to be the one to tell you this, but Tim wasn’t Jacob’s biological father. I am, and I’ll be keeping Jacob here.”

She stops just short of tearing him out of my arms but is able to contain herself.

“I think you’re mistaken, Shane, was it? Jacob is my brother’s son and I am the beneficiary... I mean, I am the guardian that they chose to raise him. We discussed it on several occasions.” She’s going with the sweet route but it’s not going to work.

“Amber, I understand your confusion. We are all still in a state of shock, but the doctors have confirmed that Shane is the biological father, and since Tim never adopted him, Shane is now the sole parent. Of course, we want your family to stay in his life and would love for you to visit as often as you can.”

Mom was always great at handling people. Said it was similar to working with dogs. The irony is not lost on me.

“Listen here, lady. I don’t know who you are but if you think you can just show up and claim rights to this baby or his inheritance, you’ve got another thing coming. My lawyers will be all over your ass if you try to fight me on this,” Amber says to Mom, waving a finger in her face.

Mom gently pulls Amber out to the nurse’s station and asks for a family counselor to intervene. After an hour of yelling and swearing, Amber eventually leaves in a huff with the threat that she’d sue the hospital if they let Jacob leave with anyone but her.

By noon on Monday, Mom and Dad had their attorney file the documents to change his birth certificate, and I was assured that Amber did not have any kind of case. Ashley’s mom stopped by once to see Jacob but she didn’t stay long. She and Ashley were never close and she seemed relieved when we explained that I was his guardian and she wouldn’t “get stuck with the kid,” as she said.

Jacob was off all the monitors and able to keep formula down. If his vitals remained strong, we would be taking him home on Tuesday. Dad stopped in to bring a change of clothes for Mom and to say hello to me. He was civil, but it was clear that Mom had given him the rest of the story. He was colder than usual but said he’d be setting up a crib at the house and had picked up a car seat for the ride home. I almost laughed at the picture of my big, gruff dad in his dirty Carhartt jeans and plaid flannel in the baby section at Walmart.

The entire time I sat in that hospital room, I kept thinking of Alex. Jacob’s blue eyes turned a bright aqua when he laughed or cried. They reminded me of Alex and everything that we wouldn’t have together. But, honestly, I wasn’t resentful of how things were working out with Jacob. Sad for him and for me, but not resentful. After just a few hours of hanging out with the little guy, I couldn’t help but love him. He seemed so vulnerable and alone. He didn’t have anyone left but me and my parents.

Mom taught me how to change a diaper and give him a bottle but that was really just the very basic part of being a parent. Actually being there for his every need was the overwhelming part. Mom and Dad agreed that they would raise him. I'd have to stay in Casper to help out, but he needs more stability than I can give him. I'll go back to working at the ranch and get an apartment in town. As he gets older, maybe he'll want to spend the weekends with me.

Maybe at some point, I'll even try dating again. I wouldn't ever have the kind of lifestyle that allowed me to hold the hand of a guy as we walked down the street. Or, sit in a dark restaurant with a man over a romantic meal. That was completely out of the question but maybe I could be happy again. Eventually.

Bringing Jacob home was almost as scary as meeting him for the first time. I carried him into the house in his car seat and didn't quite know what to do next. He was asleep so I just put the carrier on the table and went to find Dad. We hadn't said more than ten words to each other since I came home so we had to have it out.

"Dad, you got a second?" I ask, peeking my head into the kitchen where he is making a sandwich.

"Yeah. I've got a few. You hungry?"

"Yeah, that'd be great." He pulls out two more slices of bread and begins making me sandwich.

"So, are you sure you're okay with all this?" I grab two Cokes from the fridge and sit at the table.

"I'm okay with taking care of my grandson." He was silent for a few minutes while he finished with the sandwiches and then turned back to me. "If you aren't man enough to step up to your responsibilities, then I guess I have to do it for you."

This is pretty much what I expected. I take a few deep breaths and try to steady my voice before speaking. I don't want this to turn into a fight. He's right about that part.

"Dad, I don't know how to take care of him. He's just a baby. Once I get settled in an apartment, I can try to keep him sometimes and—"

"No, I don't think so." He put down his sandwich and stared at me. "You can't be a role model for a man. You're barely one yourself. No, he'll stay here. You go do whatever it is you want to do."

"Dad, I know you don't approve but I'm still a good person. I just, well, I just..."

"I don't want to hear about it. From you or from any of my friends so I hope you'll be discreet in your exploits." With a disgusted glance at me, he stands up from the table and stomps out the door.

That went well.

Every time my phone buzzes in my pocket, my heart breaks. I want to answer it. I want to call Alex and hear his voice and tell him I'll see him soon... but I can't. I can't give him what he wants anymore. I thought I could but not anymore. Now that I'm going to be staying in Casper, I have to let him move on. It's not fair and he probably hates me by now anyway, but I really don't have a choice anymore.

Aunt Karen told me about her talk with him. She said he seemed sad but I just couldn't do it. I can't say the words that will officially end us. I'm just going to let him come to that conclusion on his own. It's a chicken-shit solution, but it's all I can do right now.

Staying with my parents is awful. Dad, though not openly hostile, is cold when he does have to speak to me. Fortunately for both of us, he doesn't speak to me much. Mom's been great with me and with Jacob but I'm anxious to get a place of my own. The only thing holding me back is Jake. He's really growing attached to me. As soon as he wakes up, Mom brings him to me. She

places him on the bed next to me and he pokes my face until my eyes open. Then he laughs.

That laugh gets me every time. I wonder what he'll think when I'm not living here. Will he be just as content to hang out with Mom all day? He loves being with her but I have noticed that as soon as I walk into a room, his eyes are on me the whole time. If I get within ten feet of him, his arms fly up for me to take him. And I have to admit to being pretty attached to him too. I never imagined being a dad, but I'm already considering him in everything I do.

When I want to run to the store, I consider whether Mom or Dad can watch him or if I should take him with me. When I take him out, I check the weather to see if it's supposed to rain so I can pack his diaper bag. And when I think of Alex and want to call him, I remember that I can't. That I have a son now and I'm not the single guy that Alex fell in love with in Denver. I'm the single parent of an infant, living with his parents on Casper Mountain.

Not speaking to Alex for over a week has been tough. I let my phone battery die a few days ago just so I don't have to feel the pain every time it buzzes. I hate myself for doing this to him but it has to be this way. He's probably already over me. Maybe he's been going back to The Unicorn to pick up guys that are actually eligible. The thought makes my stomach turn but I can't begrudge him that. I want him to move on and be happy. He deserves that. He deserves all the happiness in the world.

CHAPTER FIFTEEN

Alex

Steeling myself for the rejection I'm heading into, I walk to the front door. It takes a minute for me knock but once I do, I wish I didn't. I don't want to hear the words that I know are coming. When Shane tells me it's over, I'm not sure what I'll do. Will I cry? Will I beg? Will I die? It feels like it.

The door pulls open and Shane is on the other side. There is a woman approaching behind him that I assume is his mom.

"Alex," Shane says, looking shocked to see me. There's something else there in his eyes—I want to believe it's happiness, but that's probably just my wishful thinking.

"Hey. I'm sorry to just show up but I really wanted to talk to you."

The woman quietly backs out of the room, leaving us alone.

"Yeah, of course. Come in." He steps aside to let me pass but I don't. I walk into him and wrap my arms around his chest. He feels so good. Smells so good. He's stiff for only a second before his arms come up and hold me too.

"God, I've missed you," I whisper into his ear. I know I sound desperate but I can't help it. I am desperate. Desperate to have him back. Desperate to know why he might not come back.

"Me too," he says. "Let's go sit down."

I follow Shane to a cozy den and he sits in an armchair next to the couch. I have no choice but to sit on the couch, away from him. Damn, this isn't good.

"I know I owe you an explanation and I'm sorry I couldn't give you one sooner. I just wasn't sure what was going to happen here and then, well, I was afraid of what you'd say so..."

"Shane, please tell me what's going on. I can't stand not knowing. If you've moved on or if this has to do with Jacob or whatever, just tell me. I can handle it."

"What do you know about Jacob? Did my aunt tell you about him?"

That is not what I want to hear. The rolling of my stomach increases as I shake my head. "I don't know anything about him." I school my features and try to sound more composed than I feel but my words just come out pissed off. "I just heard you say his name but no one will tell me a goddamn thing. Please just spit it out."

He looks away and takes a deep breath. I know it's serious by the way he's avoiding eye contact. "He's my son."

"Your... son?" I feel like the room is spinning and my mind is jumbled. Is this actually happening?

"I was with a woman one time and she got pregnant. It was planned, on her part. She threatened to tell my parents about me if I didn't do it. Anyway, she and her husband were both killed in the accident and now I'm Jacob's legal guardian." His words come quickly, all in one breath. He lowers his face into his palms and holds there, unwilling to look at me.

After a moment of taking in his words, I scoot to the edge of the couch and reach for Shane. Tracing the outline of his ear with my fingertips, I trail down to his jaw and nudge his face upward. Once he is looking at me, I recognize the fear in his eyes.

"So, there isn't another guy?"

He looks stunned for a minute before he grins. "Well, not like that. But, there is a nine-month-old little guy, I guess."

"So, do you still..." I don't want to say the words because I'm afraid of his answer. But I have to know. "Do you still love me?" I whisper with a shaky voice.

"Of course, I do. But everything's changed now. I have to stay here and we can't be together." He chokes on that last word and I slide off the couch onto my knees, landing right in front of him.

"Why not? Why do you have to stay here?"

"Well, I don't want to leave him here. I thought about it, I swear I did, but we've bonded. He's already lost his parents and I can't just leave him here..."

no matter how much I want to be with you.” He looks away but not before a tear escapes his watery eyes.

“Shane.” He still won’t look at me. “Shane, I’d never expect you to leave him here. Bring him to Denver. It’s a great place to raise kids. I’ll help you. And Karen said you still had a home with her. I’m sure they’d love to have a baby around.”

“It’s not that simple. Daycare is expensive and we can’t just live in her guest room forever. I’m not capable of taking care of him right now. If I can save up for a few years, maybe we can move back, but I wouldn’t expect you to wait around for that. Who knows how long it might take. You deserve to find someone that can give you everything you’ve always wanted. Be the partner that you need.”

“I already have. I want to be with you, Shane. Please don’t give up on us.” My eyes are filling and my throat stings as I’m literally on my knees begging him. “We’ll figure it out.”

After twenty minutes of trying to convince Shane that we could find a way to be together, we heard a small cry from the back of the house. Shane’s eyes lit up.

“Do you want to meet him?” he asks tentatively.

“Hell yeah. Oh, sorry. I guess I have to watch my mouth.” Oops, I’m already screwing this up.

“Why?” He seemed confused for a second. “Oh, shit. I guess so. Wait here. I’ll go get him.”

While Shane is gone, I take a look around the room. The walls are covered with photos of Shane growing up. There is an eight by ten portrait for every year of his life. He was a cute kid. Always had short hair and big ears... and those big brown eyes. When he was little, his eyelashes were even longer. Adorable.

Caught staring at his high school graduation photo, I hear a cooing noise and turn back to the doorway. Shane is standing there with a wide grin, holding a miniature version of himself. Jacob has a light downy layer of brown hair on his head and the same Dumbo ears as his daddy and I can't help but laugh.

"He looks just like you," I say, walking up to them. "He's gorgeous."

"Yeah, he's pretty cool."

"Hi, Jacob," I say, shaking his foot.

He seems tentative with me at first but when he looks up at Shane and sees his smile, Jacob gives me a mostly toothless grin. I like this kid already.

"He's probably hungry. Come with me while I feed him."

I follow Shane into the kitchen and he places the baby in a high chair. Shane's mom is at the sink when we walk in. She dries her hands and looks at me. Taking a deep breath, she approaches with an outstretched hand.

"Hi, there. I'm Margaret and you must be Alex. I've heard all about you."

Surprised by this, I look to Shane. He seems just as shocked by her announcement.

"It's nice to meet you, Margaret," I say, still watching Shane.

"Where did you hear—Oh, Aunt Karen," Shane concludes. He takes a container of yogurt from the fridge and pulls a stool up to the high chair.

"Well, you must be tired after that drive. Have a seat. Can I make you a sandwich or something?"

"No, thanks. I'm fine," I reply.

My stomach isn't quite ready for food yet. I'm still in shock over the news about Jacob. That was the last thing I expected to find when I showed up. I guess it's better than finding some twenty-five-year-old cowboy here with him, but still a shock nonetheless.

The more I watch Shane with Jacob, the more relaxed I become. He really has taken to parenthood well. It's only been a few weeks and he already looks

like a pro. Wiping up the extra yogurt with the side of the spoon like I've seen moms do and placing the cup just out of reach. I'm impressed. He's even chatting up Jacob like they are having a full conversation.

"Do you need any help," I offer. I've spent some time around babies and am not a complete idiot when it comes to taking care of them.

"Oh, yeah," Shane looks surprised by the offer... but pleased. "Can you get me one of those baby wipes by the sink?"

Walking back with a wipe, I gently swipe it across Jacob's mouth. He is staring at me like I'm crazy but he isn't scared. Probably just curious at the stranger that is touching him. Looking over to Shane to make sure it's okay, I can see him watching me. His eyes meet mine and the fear that was there earlier is gone. I just see happiness on his face now. Taking that as approval, I run the wipe through Jacob's fist to clean off the mess he made when he grabbed the spoon.

I spent the night at a motel to give everyone some space. Jacob's mom offered to let me sleep in their RV but I didn't want to push my luck with his dad. When I finally met Robert Greenly, I could feel the hatred and disgust seeping out of every pore in his body. He shook my hand when his wife nudged him to, but I know he probably soaked it in bleach after. By the way he crushed my fingers together, I am lucky I can still drive. It's already starting to bruise. But, that's a small price to pay if I can keep Shane in my life. And I guess that means Jacob too.

Shane and Jacob meet me the next morning at an IHOP. It was a bit of a drive from where I was staying but I think Mr. Greenly made it clear that Shane needed to keep his "funny business" away from the prying eyes of their neighbors.

When they finally show up, I rush out to his truck to help him with Jacob. He continued to impress me with his comfort at being a dad. He disconnects the carrier, hands me a diaper bag, and we walk into the restaurant like we own the place. The little stand they bring out for the car seat is interesting. We both

reach for it every time someone walks by, afraid it would topple over. But, I guess they are sturdier than they appear because it didn't move and he was content to chew on a rubber block for most of our breakfast.

Just before the check is dropped off, Shane's phone rings. I'll forever associate his phone with bad memories, but I try to keep the panic at bay until he looks at the caller ID. When his brows furrow, my stomach turns.

"It's local. No one around here has this number." Looking at me and back at Jacob, he scoots back his chair. "Are you okay with him if I grab this?"

"Yeah, sure." Watching the baby was fine. Watching Shane walk away with that damn phone to his ear took ten years off my life.

When Shane returns ten minutes later, his expression is unreadable. He seems to be in a state of shock, again, and I want to puke. Now what?

"Is everything okay?" I ask, not really wanting to hear the answer.

"Yeah." He sits down and stares at the black screen of his phone. "That was my dad's lawyer. He's been trying to reach me but my phone was dead."

"What's going on?" Instinctively, I reach across the table and hold his wrist. Shane looks at me with a shocked expression on his face.

"Apparently, Tim and Ashley had life insurance. They left it all to Jacob, of course. But, since he's a minor, I have access to it to take care of him."

"Seriously? Is it... a lot?" I'm not actually concerned with the amount but if it means Shane can afford to move back to Denver with Jacob then I'm very interested.

"Yeah. It is. They each had policies worth two hundred and fifty thousand dollars. So, Jacob has half a million bucks." He looks over to Jacob, sucking on his fingers. "He's rich."

"Well, he better be smart, since now he can afford to go to any college he wants to." I'm still waiting for Shane to say what I need to hear.

"I guess so. And, I guess that means day care won't be a problem. Shit, we can get a nanny if we want."

We. He said we. Does he mean me and him, we? Or, does he mean him and his parents, we?

“Yup, anything you want. You guys have choices now.”

Shane's face softens as he takes both of my hands in his. “Choices, hunh?”

CHAPTER SIXTEEN

Shane

When Jacob and I get back from breakfast, Mom and Dad are both sitting in the kitchen. I put Jacob in the high chair with some Cheerios and sit at the table between them.

“Have you heard from the lawyer?” I ask.

“Yes,” Mom says quietly. “It’s great news.”

“It means I don’t have to stay here.”

“I knew it,” Dad says and slams his coffee cup on the table. “I knew you’d run at the first chance you got. Just because you have some money now, you’re gonna take off with that hippie and just leave your responsibilities with us.”

Hippie? I want to comment on that but now isn’t the time.

“I’m not leaving Jacob.” I look to Mom. She knows what this means. She already has tears in her eyes as she reaches for my hand.

“Honey, please be reasonable. He’ll be so much better off with us. We can provide him with a normal childhood. He needs a mother and a father... not... well, please think this through,” she begs.

“There’s nothing to think through, Marge. He isn’t taking our grandson to some sex shack where he’ll be raised to be just like them. It’ll be over my dead body!” my dad yells, making Jacob flinch at the noise and wail loudly. This is only the second time I’ve heard him cry like that. Like he’s terrified. I will not make him live like this. If I have to deal with my dad the way I did with that crazy woman that tried to take him, I will.

Rushing to get Jake out of the high chair, I pace the room, holding him tightly to my chest. He likes when I press his arms against me and he can’t squirm. He knows he’s safe with me.

“Do you seriously think I’d leave him here? He is my son and I will raise him. You have no right to keep him,” I say to him through gritted teeth. The

only thing keeping me from completely going off on him is the scared baby in my arms.

“Shane, we know you don’t have to leave him, but just think about. What kind of life will he have with two dads? That won’t be healthy for him. He can still visit you and you’ll always have a home here but please let him stay with us.” Mom is fully crying and I want to go to her but I’m watching my dad. He should be comforting her instead of being an asshole. But, really, that’s all he knows. He’s an ignorant homophobe, and he isn’t going to change just because his son has come out. That probably makes him hate all gays even more.

“I’m sorry, Mom. I know you’d be great with him and I want you to be in his life but I can’t let him be raised by a bigot. What kind of things would Dad teach him? What does he say about me now? Do you want Jacob growing up to be like him?”

I know they both hear me but neither will look to me. That’s okay. I don’t need their permission or approval. I’m going back with Alex tomorrow, whether they like it or not. I’d rather raise Jacob completely alone than around someone like my dad.

After Jacob goes down for the night, Mom suggests I go get some air so I head over to Alex’s motel. He was catching up on some work and said he’d just get something delivered for dinner. When he answered the door and saw me, he immediately pulled me into his arms.

“You’re here? Is everything okay?” he asks, hesitantly. With all the bombshells he’s had lately, it’s no wonder the poor guy is paranoid.

“Everything’s great. Jacob’s down for the night so my mom suggested I ‘get some air’ but she meant see you.” My grin is contagious and Alex quickly sports one too.

“So, she’s okay with everything? Okay with us?”

“She’s dealing with it. The three of us talked for a while today.”

“Oh?” Alex turns off the TV that was on in the background and pulls me next to him on the bed. Sitting directly across from a mirror and dresser, we are looking at each other through the reflection across the room. We look damn good together.

“I told them Jacob and I are going back to Denver with you tomorrow.” Watching Alex’s reaction without turning toward him is funny. He quickly turns his torso to face me, a wide smile forming across his face.

“You did?”

“I did.” I finally face him. We are practically giddy. He hops up and straddles my lap.

“Tomorrow? You’re coming back tomorrow?” His right hand cups my cheek and his left combs through my hair. Having been sidetracked for the past few weeks, it’s long enough that he can grip it. His fingertips leave a trail of heat every place they touch. I’ve missed this so much.

I nod, leaning forward to meet his lips. Alex’s mouth is hungry. The weeks of fear and loneliness and anxiety pour from him in waves. His hands grab my hips and yank me lower so I’m flat on the large bed. His whole body is pressed onto mine, his weight holding me still, securing me with his embrace.

His tongue explores my lips. Moistening me with his warmth and entering me eagerly. My hands are under his shirt and trying to pull it over his head, even though I don’t want to lose contact with his mouth. I’d forgotten how good he tastes. I don’t ever want to move from this position but I need to feel more skin. With a frustrated groan, I release him long enough to get his shirt off and then he’s back on me. Kissing my jaw, licking my neck, sucking my earlobe.

“I need you, Shane. Don’t leave me again,” he whispers into my ear. His hot breath sends tingles down my body to the tips of my toes. Fumbling with the button on his shorts, I finally get it open and the zipper down. Sweet Jesus, has he gotten bigger? His dick is sticking straight up out of his boxers. Its beautiful head is pressed against his belly and seeping for me. Waiting for me.

“You’ve got me, Alex. I’m not going anywhere.” I gently shift our positions so I can stand up and slip off the rest of my clothes. Once naked, I take a moment to admire this man spread open on the bed before me. He’s given me more than he’ll ever know and I want to show him how much I love him.

Taking a quick look around the room, I see his toiletry bag on the dresser. I grab it and place it on the bed next to us. Lowering myself over his thighs, I take the head of his dick into my mouth and gently suck. The bittersweet drops make my own cock twitch. Alex whimpers and grabs my hair with one hand, holding me against him. With a tight suction around his shaft, I slowly lower my mouth, sucking as I go. When I am as deep as I can go, I release the seal with a pop. Alex shudders beneath me.

“God, that feels good,” he says to the ceiling, his head thrown back.

But I want to see him. I want to watch him when I make him come. So I slowly pull off of his cock and leave a trail of wet kisses from his pelvis, up to his right nipple. I swirl my tongue around it to tighten it even more, then gently close my teeth over it. Just tight enough to get his hips to buck into me, but not enough to hurt. My tongue flicks the beautiful brown nub a few times before sliding across his chest to the left side. Knowing what to expect, he lifts his shoulder off the bed just an inch to get his nipple into my mouth even sooner. I eagerly accept his offering, sucking hard, while wrapping my hands around his waist to cup his ass.

Every part of his body is hard. He’s like a live wire just buzzing with anticipation. Moving my lips up to his hot mouth, I devour him. I’m almost as close as I can be and it’s still not close enough. Reaching for the bag, I feel around for the lube and a condom. We’ve done this enough now that I don’t need to look. I couldn’t pry my mouth away if I wanted to so I tear open the package and roll it onto myself without ever opening my eyes.

Feeling more ready than I ever have, I lift up and sit back on my heels, between Alex’s bent legs. Slowly applying a handful of lube to myself, I lock Alex’s gaze. Running my slippery hand over his cock a few times, he bucks up again, begging for more. But, we’re not ready yet. This is going to last a while.

After adding more lube to my fingertips, I hover over him, resting my weight on my left hand by his head so I am perfectly aligned with his body. Still staring into his bright blue eyes, I press my middle finger into his opening. Feeling only a moment of resistance, Alex relaxes and I slide completely in.

He's already panting as I work my finger in and out. By the third stroke, I slip in a second finger. When they're as deep as I can get them, Alex squirms. I know he wants more and I want to give it to him. Scissoring my fingers just a bit, I stretch him as much as my patience will allow and pull out.

Moving down for a soft kiss, just barely enough to taste his mouth, I slide my cock into him. He takes me completely in one motion, bucking up to suck in every inch of me. He is watching me as I am watching him. Studying his sparkling eyes and beautiful mouth and perfect nose. His wavy hair is moist with sweat and I can feel the heat of his body like I'm lying on a cloud. As I move in and out of him, I know this is where I always want to be. Right here with Alex. Making love to him slowly. Always reminding him how much I love him.

Six months later

Moving back to Aunt Karen's house was an adjustment for everyone. The girls thought Jacob was a dress-up doll and spent hours taking pictures of him in different outfits. Uncle Ron brought home a new piece of sports equipment every day and Alex and I figured out how to be in a relationship with a baby in the mix. It was a little awkward at first to explain to everyone how he came to be, but everyone has been supportive.

On September fifteenth, Jacob turned one. We had a quiet party at Alex's house with close friends and family. He took his first step that day to the balance bike that Uncle Ron brought for him. He is now running and can babble up a storm.

His first word was *me*, while tackling Stormy. His second word was *dada*. Alex was holding him but he was looking at me. Well, that's what I keep

telling myself. Honestly, Jake adores Alex. His natural confidence carried over into his handling of Jake. He always seems so calm, even when I'm freaking out about a scratched knee or bumped head.

As soon as we got back from Casper, Alex cleared out his guest room and started setting up a room for Jake. I resisted at first, needing time to make sure we were both ready for full-time parenthood. But now, after six months of figuring everything out, Jacob and I are going to officially move in. It won't always be easy and it definitely isn't as traditional as some families, but sometimes you just know when it's right.

THE END

Author Bio

Born and raised in Los Angeles, California, Aria enjoys the year round sunshine and laid back environment of the west coast. She lives with her husband and two children on a quiet hill that gives her lots of time to read and write. Her first series was a semi-traditional look at sexy gigs found online. She has now ventured into the exciting M/M world of gay erotica. She loves to hear from readers so please feel free to drop her a note or visit her at www.ariagracebooks.com.

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