



WINDOW
ALI MACLAGAN

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Love's Landscapes

An M/M Romance series

WINDOW

By Ali MacLagan

Introduction

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

What Is Love's Landscapes?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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Photo Description

A beautiful, toned man lies on a bed of white linen, naked but for a black cord around his left wrist, and a sheet barely covering his lower body. His left arm is bent, his hand resting against his temple. He is lifting his right arm up, away from his body. Mussed, brown hair hangs low over his forehead, and thick stubble covers his chin. His dark eyes throw a questioning glare toward the camera.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I shouldn't have come. He doesn't want me here. How many times do I need to hear him say it, shout it, snarl it at me, before I get it through my head that he means it? I wish I could turn my back on him and leave, and find someone easy. Someone warm and welcoming who would laugh when they see me, and give me a hug.

But even though he doesn't want me here, I still think, deep in my heart, that he needs me. And I just can't walk away.

Or maybe, I'm the one who still needs him.

Please no shifters, no BDSM, and at least a HFN. Otherwise I'm open to just about anything.

Sincerely,

Kaje

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: HIV, angst, bartender, accountant, fellating of fruits and vegetables, cheating scumbag ex-boyfriend

Word Count: 29,942

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Prologue

God, I wanted a beer. I wanted to drop my bag, grab a beer from the fridge, plop my ass on the couch, and not move until Monday. Tax week had been a bitch. But finally, three days after the dreaded April 15, I was home. I had the weekend off, and all I wanted to do was spend the time with a beer in one hand, the remote in the other, and a blow job or two, *or ten*, thrown in there for good measure.

I opened the door. The house was quiet and dark.

“Greg?”

The only sound to answer me was the low hum of the refrigerator.

He should be home. My commute was a half hour, but his was only ten minutes down to Commercial Street, unless he was traveling to some insurance conference or training session.

I set my bag down by the coat rack and made my way to the bedroom. I'd come home many times over the past few weeks and found Greg huddled under rumpled sheets and blankets, snores echoing off the walls. But this time, the bed was empty, made as neatly as it had been when I'd left for work that morning. The floor was even clear of Greg's dirty clothes which always seemed to litter it.

I flicked the light switches on as I headed back to the kitchen. The mugs we'd used this morning were washed and sparkling clean in the dish rack. I slid my phone from my pocket, checking for missed calls or texts. Nothing. Maybe he was planning a surprise. I didn't see this side of Greg often. But every now and again, I'd come home to a clean house, and Greg would be there with a smile and whisk me out for a night on the town. Those smiles were what soothed any niggling doubts I might have had about us.

My hand was on the fridge handle when I noticed the envelope. It was a standard, business-sized envelope, held to the door of the refrigerator by a magnet from the accounting office I worked for. My name was written on it in block letters, the only way Greg could write legibly. I grabbed a beer, popped the cap, and headed back to the living room where I flopped down onto the overstuffed cushions of the couch. I took a long pull from the bottle and closed my eyes enjoying the cold, brown ale on my tongue, before I placed it on the

coffee table and clicked the television on. Curling my feet beneath me, I turned my attention to the envelope.

I ripped it open making sure not to tear the folded papers inside; there were two sheets. The first was just plain notebook paper with words handwritten in black ink. As my eyes scanned the letter, my hands started shaking, and the rest of my body followed suit. Bile rose in my throat, and I sucked in a quick breath. My feet jerked out, kicking the coffee table and spilling the beer over the side and onto the carpet. I pushed myself off the couch, and half-ran, half-stumbled to the toilet... where I promptly threw up.

Chapter One

Twinkle lights? Seriously? There were twinkle lights in the window. *Nothing* about this place screamed, or even suggested, *clinic*, except the red ribbon painted on the window, but even that blended with the potted plants on the sill. The only thing identifying the place at all was the address listed on the plate glass door. *ONE SPRING STREET*. It was eclectic, more like a place where someone would go to have their palm or tea leaves read, to find out what their future held... so maybe it was appropriate after all.

Because this was a clinic. This was an HIV clinic. A place where people came to find out if they were sick or worse. The second piece of paper in the envelope was a printout of Greg's lab results. "NEG" was listed next to everything; except the one thing we all feared the most: HIV, and next to it, printed in undeniable clarity, I read, "POS". He was positive. That information, and the thought of all I had done with him, had stopped my heart and turned my stomach. Suddenly, everything in my world—my hopes, my fears, all of it—was now pinned to three letters: P-O-S or N-E-G. Everything was about to change, or possibly end, and there was nothing I could do about it. I had no control and... I was being melodramatic; HIV was not the end of it all. I knew this. But I also knew, regardless of my results, my life would not be the same.

I closed my eyes, took a deep breath, and turned up my iPod, trying to drown out the sounds around me, wanting to lose myself for just a few more moments in ignorant oblivion. The song was upbeat. It sang of happy days and lustful nights. Something I thought I'd had.

Tears were pricking behind my eyes again. My treacherous thoughts had circled back. They hadn't left in the four days it had taken me to work up the courage to get off the couch nor the two and a half weeks since. I couldn't sleep in the bed. It was still our bed, our room. The place we had made love. Now it seemed dirty. Because now, it was so painfully obvious Greg and I had never made love. We'd fucked. And then he'd fucked me over. *When had he started cheating on me?*

For ten months, I thought I was in a monogamous relationship. I thought I was in love. I was faithful. Thirteen weeks ago, I took *us* to get tested, and we both came back negative. And now here *I* was... surrounded by twinkle lights and falsely cheery prints. Waiting for someone to tell me I was sick. Because really, how could I not be? We made lo—no we fucked. Fucked. There was not a lot of hope for me. All because I was a fool. Because I believed in a lie—

Thump.

Something hit my arm, bringing me out of my tailspin. I opened my eyes and turned to see some guy in a hoodie, two chairs to my left. He looked at me, obviously annoyed. I glared back at him and pulled one of my earbuds out.

“What?” I snapped. Niceties were not that high on my priority list. I had enough to worry about.

The guy cocked his head, his mouth drawn up almost in a sneer. “Are you Tom?” he asked as he jerked his head toward the receptionist.

“No.”

“Oh... They’ve called the name twice now.” He stared at me pointedly, his eyes dark and angry. He jerked back into his chair, leaned his head back against the wall, and pulled his hood down over the top half of his face. “I just want to get this shit over with,” he muttered.

“You and me both,” I said, half to him and half to myself. I leaned back, my body mirroring his. God, how I wanted this over with. I looked up at the ceiling. It was white, smooth, and clean. I wondered how many other people had sat in this very same chair, looking at the same ceiling, wondering if their world was about to crash.

“I’m Jeremy.” I really don’t know why I said it. No one came to the HIV clinic to make friends.

“Aaron,” the guy grumbled. I turned my head to look at him. He looked around my age, twenty-eight, give or take a year. He was sprawled in his chair, legs stretched out and spread. I could see a hint of pale skin through a hole in his faded jeans. His hands were in the front pocket of his sweatshirt. Despite his relaxed pose, there was a tension radiating from him. He wore it like some invisible shield, not letting anything get through. I turned my eyes back up to the ceiling.

“Jeremy?” A female voice called from the hallway leading to offices and exam rooms. A woman was standing there with a bright smile on her face, holding a clipboard. Her dark blonde hair was pulled back in a ponytail. I didn’t know how to react to her. I looked at Aaron, who had pushed his hood back and looked up at me. His lips were tight as he gave me a quick nod and straightened himself up in the chair. I turned up the corner of my mouth in an attempt at a small smile before I picked up my messenger bag, trudged over to the woman, and headed back to face my fate.

I don't remember most of those first few minutes I spent in that sterile office. I remember the nurse asking me questions, and I remember responding. Telling her my partner had just tested positive, and my last test was just over three months ago. I remember feeling empty and detached when telling her the last time I'd had sex was twenty-four days ago, and *no*, we had not used a condom.

Outside the window, the sky was bright and blue with puffy, white clouds. Sea gulls flapped their wings about, squawking as they looked down searching for some sucker to shit on. People walked on the street below, moving about their lives, smiling and laughing, as I sat there and opened my mouth so some woman could run a white stick over my gums.

"Jeremy?" Her voice was soft. "It's going to be okay. Whatever happens, it will be okay." I didn't want to look up. I was too afraid of the pity I might see. I felt enough for myself, I didn't want anyone else's. I felt her hand on my arm and looked down to see her perfectly trimmed, non-polished nails. I moved my gaze to the floor.

"All right," I said determinedly. I straightened up, shaking off her hand. "What now?"

"Well, we have a twenty minute wait for the results. There are some things we need to go over. Would you like some coffee, water, anything?"

The thought of ingesting anything at that point made my stomach turn. *Twenty minutes*. The thought of staying in this room, even for a short time, was too much. I wanted to leave. I needed to leave. But, I couldn't leave. I knew if I left, there was a very good possibility I wouldn't be back. I put my hands under my thighs, and my right knee started bouncing.

"No. No, I'm good, thanks." I let myself look up at her. On her badge, the name, Carrie, was printed with the letters BSN underneath. I wanted to focus on anything but the words she was about to say... or on the white stick that was stuck into the contraption on the desk behind her... or on the timer next to it. *Eighteen minutes, twenty-seven seconds*.

Carrie had clear, blue eyes with little crinkles in the corners. There was something about her that made me think she'd lived a happy life. She gave me a gentle smile as she reached over to grab a couple of pamphlets and handed them to me.

I looked down, and the only things I saw were letters: HIV and AIDS. I placed them in my messenger bag and clutched at my knees.

“Okay, Jeremy. Here’s some information you need to know. Firstly, whether or not the test result is positive or negative, you will need to be tested again. If, and this is an *if*, it is positive, we will need to draw some blood and send it to the lab to confirm the results. This would rule out the possibility of a false-positive.”

My stomach twisted again. My hands gripped tighter. I stared at an orange speck on the speckled gray-tiled floor for just a moment before raising my eyes again. *Sixteen minutes, forty-eight seconds.*

Her voice was still soft as she continued. “If the result is negative, you will need to be tested again three months after the last time you had unprotected sex. This is because of HIV’s window period; the time it takes between the point when someone was infected to when the body has produced the antibodies the test detects.”

I knew this. I’d been learning about HIV all my life. Every gay man knew this. A thought occurred to me: maybe I was a victim of the window. Maybe Greg hadn’t cheated. We’d only been tested that once. Maybe he had it before we ditched the condoms. Maybe—I slumped in my chair. We’d been supposedly exclusive for five months before the test. There was no maybe.

“Jeremy? You with me?” I was starting to resent that kind voice and the way my name sounded when she uttered it. The way it grounded me and forced me back to the here and now. I tried not to glare at her.

Ten minutes, eleven seconds.

“Yeah, yeah, sorry. Blood test if it’s positive, three months if it’s negative. Got it.” I looked up into her eyes again, and she gave me a reassuring smile.

“Correct. The numbers aren’t exact, but there are estimates that fifty percent will test positive twenty-one days after being infected. That number rises to around ninety-seven percent after three months. If that test is also negative, and because we know you were exposed, you should then get tested at the six month mark as well, to be completely certain.”

I let out a long breath. “Okay.”

“I’m sure you probably realize this, but regardless of your results today, you still need to be careful. No unprotected sex. Always, always use a condom, for both oral and anal sex, regardless of whether or not you are in a monogamous relationship. And kissing is safe, even with tongue.”

She smirked. I harrumphed. *Yeah, that was going to happen.* I just found out my boyfriend of ten months had been cheating on me. Fuck that. Fuck kissing. Fuck relationships. Fuck sex... I let out a small giggle and felt my cheeks redden over the oxymoron. Carrie's smile grew bigger. *Oops.* Maybe I'd actually said that out loud.

"Well, in case you change your mind—" *Yup... said it out loud. Damn.* "Here are some condoms and lube packets." She handed me a small brown paper bag with the top folded down. I felt like I was a school boy, and she was handing me my lunch. Only this was not something I would have pulled out in the middle school cafeteria.

"No, I would think not." Carrie chuckled. *Damn!* I really needed my mouth and my brain to get in sync. This diarrhea-of-the-mouth was going to be the death of me, if AIDS didn't do it first. I looked back down at that orange speck and took another deep breath. I closed my eyes and just sat there. I thought of the sea gulls and the boats I had seen from the window. Of how it would feel to just sail out into nothing but blue. Of how it would feel to have wings and soar above, looking down at how small the world looked. To just stay on a course until the wind shifted and took me somewhere else...

Beep. Beep.

The timer brought me back, and I looked up to see Carrie turning to look at that awful white stick. This was it. *Oh God...*

"Come over here, and I will explain this to you."

I didn't want to. I really didn't want to. But I sat up and grabbed the bottom of my chair, turning and dragging it, letting the legs squeak and scratch against the linoleum, until I was sitting next to Carrie instead of across from her. Sitting in front of the stick. I felt my whole body shaking. My breath felt erratic. My heartbeat felt like I was sprinting the Boston marathon. I started breathing through my nose and exhaling through my mouth in an attempt to bring my body back under my control, but I could still hear it stutter. My eyes looked frantically for the trash can because I was positive I was going to vomit.

"Jeremy." There it was again. Her voice was still soft and kind. Her hand was back on my arm. "Jeremy, honey... come back."

I took another deep breath and held it for a second before slowly letting it out and looking up at her.

"Look." I slowly let my eyes drift over to the white stick. "There's only one line. Negative."

Negative. I slumped back into the chair. Carrie was still talking, but I couldn't hear her.

Negative. I closed my eyes and breathed a sigh of relief... and then my brain started working again.

Three months. Fucking. Window.

Chapter Two

With my messenger bag slung over my shoulder, my pamphlets and “lunch bag” tucked safely inside, I stepped out onto the sidewalk and sucked in a lungful of air. It wasn't exactly fresh. It smelled of exhaust fumes and salt water. But I was outside, away from that stifling office, and I could breathe. I reached into my bag and pulled out my earbuds.

“*Oomph!*” Something pushed me from behind, and I was thrown off balance. I was about to do a perfect face plant onto the Spring Street sidewalk while watching my iPod and attached earbuds do a hop-skip-and-a-jump into the middle of the road, when I felt hands at my hips steadying me. The hands were firm and strong. I stood up quickly as a memory of the last time my hips were gripped that way flashed through my mind. Pushing the thought aside, I whirled around to see who had managed to shove me—and save me.

Aaron.

“Sorry,” Aaron mumbled. His hood was down, and outside in the sunlight, I could see auburn streaks running through his dark brown hair. Those hadn't come from a bottle.

“I'm okay. Thanks.” I stared down at the sidewalk, not knowing what else to say. I wasn't especially good with people before this life crisis started, and my ability certainly had not improved any since. I felt the sidewalk tremble a bit and heard the engine of a truck as I felt the whoosh of air behind me.

“Oh fuck...” I looked up to see Aaron staring past me and into the street. I slowly turned around letting my gaze follow his, to land upon my now-crushed iPod lying on the pavement six feet away. I took a step toward the road to pick it up when I realized how futile it was. Letting out a defeated groan, I let my legs give way and sank my ass down to the curb; my legs spread out into the road. My shoulders slumped, and I fell back so I was lying on the sidewalk with my arms stretched out beside me. It was the last straw. *I loved that iPod.*

“Hey man, I'm really sorry. Like really, really sorry.” Aaron's voice sounded sympathetic, with a mite touch of desperation. I couldn't blame him. I wouldn't want to be the only witness to some strange guy having a mental breakdown on the street in front of an HIV clinic. The puffy, white clouds were still floating above me, and I remembered being a kid, lying on the hill behind my Nana's house staring at the sky, and trying to make out different shapes:

animals, monsters... Right then, I wanted those clouds to take the form of a giant twister that would come down and whisk me off to Oz where I could ask the wizard for a new iPod... or maybe a new life.

I could hear cars whizzing by. It wasn't like this was a quiet street. The Civic Center and a hotel or two were in one direction, and coffee shops, boutiques, and art galleries in the other. Maybe there was a bank or two in there somewhere. I don't know why all of this was going through my head. I wasn't about to change professions and become a tour guide in Portland, Maine.

A giggle bubbled out of me. *Welcome to Gay Portland. Here we have the city's most popular gay night club, with the state's premiere HIV clinic conveniently located next door, so after you spend some time in the back alley you can—*Another giggle bubbled up, followed by another, and another. They kept coming until the tears were dripping down the sides of my face and into my ears. I was losing it. I couldn't stop.

“Okay, seriously guy. Jeremy, right? Man, you gotta get up. I don't want to stand here and watch as your legs get flattened like your iPod.” I knew Aaron was speaking to me. His voice didn't sound really sympathetic anymore. Now it sounded more desperate—and annoyed.

The sun and clouds and sky disappeared, and there was just a man-shaped shadow above me, grabbing my arms and attempting to haul me upright. I felt a bit like a marionette, and Aaron was the puppeteer. He'd yank, and my body would follow. After a couple of unsuccessful tugs, he moved onto the street, his legs straddling mine as he stood above me and yanked my arms with a force that brought my entire torso upright and my face straight up into... denim. *Fuck!* My face was planted squarely in Aaron's crotch. I closed my eyes and inhaled. Laundry detergent, musk and man... all man—*What. The. Fuck?* Where the hell had that come from? I quickly jerked my head from side-to-side trying to dislodge the thought, which only succeeded in my nose rubbing back and forth across his fly.

“Jesus!” Aaron jumped back, and I was brought back to reality quickly enough to hear a car honk its horn. I instinctively reached out and grabbed Aaron's sweatshirt to yank him back toward me as I saw the car swerve and heard some curse words muffled through the windows.

“Shit,” I muttered, letting go of Aaron's shirt and pushing myself up off the ground. “I'm sorry. Really. I don't know what just happened.” Aaron stepped back onto the sidewalk. He took a deep breath and ran his hand up through his hair.

“Are you okay?” I asked, feeling more than a bit mortified.

“Yeah. I mean, yes. I’m fine. Thanks.” He looked up at me then. His eyes were dark blue, and as the sun hit them, they almost sparkled. A smile quirked on his lips as he shook his head. “Man. What a fucking day,” he uttered as he tossed his head back and looked up at the sky. I think he was talking more to himself than to me.

My lips drew up in a smile. A smile I actually *felt*, which hadn’t really happened in weeks. “You can say that again.” Because really, what else could I say? My mouth made the decision for me, before my brain could tell it to shut the hell up. “Do you want to go for coffee?” I clamped my jaw shut quickly and looked down at the sidewalk before glancing back up at him. *This diarrhea-of-the-mouth stuff really had to stop.*

Aaron looked over at me with raised eyebrows. “Seriously?”

I paused my ruminations to look at him. We’d both had crap days, and despite me nuzzling his groin and then inadvertently throwing him into traffic, he was still standing there. Hell, I had thrown myself down on the sidewalk like a four year old, and instead of turning and walking away as fast as possible, he had stayed and helped me—even though it was probably one of the last things he wanted to do. It was something a friend would do. And though he wasn’t a friend yet, I was beginning to think I wanted him to be.

“Yeah, seriously. Just as friends. ’Cause honestly, I could really use one today.” I bent over to pick up my messenger bag to avoid looking at him. If there was pity in his eyes, I didn’t want to see it after I’d just admitted how pathetic I was. I felt him brush by me, so I turned my head to watch. He checked to make sure there were no cars coming and went and picked up the remains of my iPod.

“Okay.”

“Okay?” I repeated his word back to him, making sure I heard him right.

“Yeah, okay. Let’s go get some coffee, new friend. I have a condition though.” He looked at me, and I could see a mischievous side of him hiding beneath the surface. His eyes gleamed.

“What’s your condition?” I gulped.

“It’s on me.” Aaron walked by me waving the busted iPod in my face before throwing it in a nearby trash can. “I think I owe you.”

“You really don’t have to,” I said and looked over at him. He raised an eyebrow, a smirk on his lips. I don’t think he was used to being challenged. “But, I have a condition too. No talk of any of this.” I raised my arm and made a couple big circles to indicate the clinic. “Why we came. What went on. Nothing. I want a day of normal.”

“Deal. Where do you want to go?”

We walked in silence for a bit, neither one of us feeling the pressure to talk, before we finally ended up at a café on Exchange Street, just a few blocks away. It wasn’t one of those chain places, more of a hole in the wall. A couple of customers were sitting at a table in the front, and some indie music I didn’t recognize was playing through the speakers. We ordered our coffee. Aaron got a dark roast, black. I got a cappuccino and grabbed a handful of sugar packets to add to it, before we made our way to a table in the back corner.

At some point since the last time I’d been there, they’d tried to do a makeover and put tablecloths on the still rickety tables. The walls were exposed brick and beautiful. I had always loved the unfinished, rough look in architecture—not like I really knew much about it to begin with, just what was pleasing to me. The scrape of a chair on the floor brought my mind back to the table. I looked up and saw Aaron staring down at his black coffee mug.

“So...” I tried to say something, but I didn’t know exactly what to say. When we were outside, the silence was almost comforting. Inside, it made me squirm. I opted to fill the air with a cop-out question. “What do you do?”

“I’m a bartender,” Aaron answered, not elaborating anymore. He turned his head to study some piece of art on the wall, but I don’t think he was really seeing it.

“Really? Where? I worked as a line cook in high school and then again in college. The front of the house always made me nervous. Too many people. I was afraid I’d do something stupid, spill something, say something offensive. Scared I’d end up acting like... well, myself. I wasn’t exactly the most graceful teenager.” I was rambling, and my cheeks felt hot.

“You don’t say? That’s something I never would have guessed after seeing you flop down in the middle of the sidewalk,” Aaron deadpanned.

“Hey!” I straightened in my seat, suddenly feeling indignant. “I was in mourning. I’d just lost my beloved iPod. I’ve had it forever. It was the first thing I bought with my first paycheck from my job.”

“It is, was, an iPod. It was not worth losing your legs over, regardless of how much you loved it.” Aaron looked across the table at me with his eyebrows drawn and his forehead wrinkled. He didn’t get it.

“I’d had a rough day,” was all I could manage. I took a sip of my cappuccino so I wouldn’t have to say anything else.

Aaron’s look softened just a fraction with a hint of understanding, maybe even empathy. “I hear you.”

“So...” It was time to move this conversation in a different direction because the way it was going, we would end up in forbidden territory, and I would quite possibly end up spewing my entire sordid story of what a fool I had been. “Where do you work?”

“At McIntyre’s, down on Commercial Street.” Aaron looked back at the painting on the wall. I followed his gaze. The painting itself was done in bright colors and bold brush strokes. It depicted a fishing boat moored off a rocky coast. He looked almost wistful, his features smooth.

“Do you like the painting?” I asked.

Aaron jerked like he’d forgotten I was even there. He straightened himself up and faced me before saying, “It’s all right, I guess. My father used to have a boat like that. He was a fisherman when I was growing up. Every year on my birthday, he would take me, just the two of us, out on the boat for the day or, if I was lucky, two. It was like camping, only on the boat in the tiny cabin. Usually we’d head up the coast. Downeast, sometimes Boothbay, sometimes Bar Harbor or one of the islands. But always just the two of us. Those are some of my favorite memories. The salt water spraying up in my face, looking through binoculars to see if we could spot any whales. Sometimes, we’d just cast a line and see if anything would bite. Mom would insist I wear a life jacket at all times. It was always bright orange. I loved the thing when I was six. By the time I was thirteen, I was begging for a life vest in a cool color. I wanted blue. I got yellow. Not exactly an improvement. I remember Mom saying there was no way she was going to buy me a blue vest.” Aaron’s voice went a pitch higher in what I assumed was an attempt to imitate his mother, “Now Aaron... I am not going to buy you a blue vest! How in the hell would your father, or God help you, the Coast Guard find you in a life jacket that is the same color as the water?”

He chuckled and light shimmered in his dark eyes. “Yeah. I never complained about the color of my vest again. I was too afraid I’d end up with neon pink!”

“That sounds really nice.” I gazed over and smiled at him. “My birthdays were always rather traditional. A few kids, a few presents. Cake and ice cream... When *is* your birthday?”

I thought I might have seen a bit of pink in his cheeks, but he ducked his head and took a sip of his coffee before I could be sure.

“So...” He looked at me curving up one corner of his mouth. “Six sugars, huh?”

I didn't quite follow until I my eyes found the six empty packets next to my cup. This time I knew *my* cheeks were the rosy ones. I shrugged my shoulders as I explained, “Um, yeah. I like my coffee sweet. When I was a kid, I'd go visit my Nana every Sunday, and she'd give me the tiniest of coffee cups. She'd put about a tablespoon of coffee in it, fill the rest up with milk, and then put in like a quarter-cup of sugar. I've been drinking it really sweet ever since.”

Aaron let out a slight chuckle while he shook his head. “I started drinking mine black when I was about nineteen. At the time, I was smoking a pack a day. One morning, I made a pot of coffee and grabbed the creamer out of the fridge only to realize it was empty. So, after throwing the empty container across the kitchen, I figured if I could smoke full-strength cigarettes, I could handle drinking black coffee. The cigarettes eventually went away. The black coffee stayed.”

We were quiet for a moment as we sat there sipping our coffees. The man sitting across from me was so different from the people I usually surrounded myself with. There was a silent confidence about him. He owned who he was, and people could take it or leave it. He would just keep going regardless. It made me wonder why he was sitting down with me, drinking coffee, and telling me stories of his childhood birthdays.

“You never answered my question.”

Aaron paused mid-gulp and peered at me over his coffee mug. His eyes narrowed a bit before he placed his mug back on the table and sneered at me. “What question? I pretty much just spilled my life story to you,” he growled.

“No, you told me where you worked and gave me one anecdote from your childhood.”

“Yeah, well that's more than a lot of people get. Consider yourself lucky,” he spat back at me.

Despite the harsh tone, his words stirred a warm feeling in my belly. He was stalling, deflecting. I looked him straight in the eyes when I asked, “When is your birthday?”

I crossed my arms over my chest and raised my eyebrow to him. Aaron scoffed and turned away. He leaned back in the chair and ran his hand through his already disheveled hair. Then he sighed. “Listen, Jeremy—”

“Answer the question, Aaron.”

He glared at me and his lips had formed into a tight line. I glared right back, a bit surprised that I had that much gumption, and really not sure where it came from or why I cared so much. Then, it all came together.

“It’s today, isn’t it? Your birthday is today.” I knew I was right when he let out a moan and looked down at the table before raising his eyes to glare at me—again. God, his eyes were gorgeous.

“Yeah. My birthday is today. Happy now?” he returned.

I didn’t know if I was happy or not. Sure, I’d figured it out on my own, but the way Aaron was looking at me, turned the warmth in my stomach to a rattle of nerves. What a way to spend his birthday; drinking coffee with some random guy after spending the morning at an HIV clinic.

“Come on.” I stood up and grabbed my bag from the floor. Aaron just sat there looking up at me, a disbelieving look on his face. I grabbed his sleeve. “Get up. We’re leaving. It’s your birthday, and you are not going to sit around the coffee house all day.”

I was proud of the strength behind my words. Aaron scowled at me, but he took a final gulp of coffee before muttering something I couldn’t quite make out, but I was pretty sure there were some curse words in there and could guess a few were aimed at me. He pushed his chair back from the table, letting it screech along the floor before standing up. He shoved his hands in the pocket of his hoodie, and jerked his head toward the door, all the while glowering at me.

His voice was more than a little indignant when he said, “Lead the way.”

Chapter Three

I didn't know what the hell I was doing. I'd gotten Aaron out of the café, and just started walking, trying to buy myself some time to figure out a plan. All I knew was Aaron had yet to walk away from me and if he was still with me, he had no better alternative. The thought made me sad, yet determined. So I made it my job to somehow make Aaron's day a little better.

I never did come up with a plan, the day just kind of happened. We wandered along and stopped when the mood struck. Mostly, Aaron wore a scowl on his face, but occasionally I caught him lingering on a display in a window. I'd drag him inside to investigate, and we'd end up browsing random novelties and rubber lobsters. I watched as he perused a selection of bracelets at the hippie store; and I chuckled, as he huffed and puffed when I bought the black-cord bracelet that had captured his attention and fastened it around his wrist.

Our aimless trek continued. When there were no interesting stores to invade, my seemingly chronic case of diarrhea-of-the-mouth kicked in. I walked along, rambling about the mortification of spilling yellow Gatorade down the front of my white shorts in middle school. I laughed as I told him about the clients I'd had last year, who had tried to deduct the cost of sex toys on their taxes as a medical expense.

Aaron grinned at my story and then at me. He opened a door and waved me into what turned out to be the condom boutique on Fore Street. He marched in like he owned the place and proceeded to pick up various dildos and lubes and ask me what my opinion was on them. Too big? Too small? "I think this lube made my ass feel all sticky, what did you think, Snookums?" he'd actually said to me.

My face got redder with each question causing his laugh to get louder and louder, which of course, made my face even redder until I was absolutely positive I could be mistaken for a mutant lobster. It was a vicious cycle, but it was worth it. To hear him laugh like that. I even suffered through buying a big glass dildo, an economy-sized bottle of lube, and about twenty different flavored condoms, going as far as to ask the clerk if they would gift wrap my purchases just to hear that deep, hearty laugh prolonged. The bastard winked at me when the goth girl behind the counter dropped a handful of flavored lube samples in the bag. I had a hard time putting any weight behind the glare I threw back at him.

We left the shop, gift-wrapped package in hand, and Aaron's chuckles filling my ears. There was a cadence to his laughter, almost lyrical. Aaron's laughter transformed him. It changed him from a scowling, ornery bastard to a person of real beauty. He was a handsome man when he wore a grimace on his face. When he wore a smile, he was stunning. His cheeks drew up, and his eyes sparkled. A light shone from deep within him. His teeth were perfectly imperfect, one of his eyeteeth sitting slightly crooked in his mouth. I wanted to lick it.

Whoa! Where had that thought come from? I hadn't even been able to jerk off since I'd read the letter from Greg. Anything remotely associated with sex made me nauseous, and yet here I was, trotting along next to him—carrying a fucking gift bag with condoms, lube, and a dildo—and the only thought running through my head was, *I want to lick his teeth*—and maybe some other things, too. My dick twitched. *Shit!*

I told my cock to behave itself, though I was still in awe that it remembered how to work. It seemed to listen, thankfully. I made sure to keep stride with Aaron so I would not be tempted to stare at his ass, which was mostly covered by his hoodie anyway. My dick was a bit resentful; my brain was eternally grateful. I did allow myself several peeks at his long legs, his broad shoulders, his mussed-up, brown hair, his navy eyes... I was quick. Never lingering long enough to get caught, but long enough to appreciate what a fine specimen of man Aaron was. I rolled my eyes at myself.

We were wandering down by the water when the street lights flickered on. I hadn't realized how late it had gotten. We'd spent all afternoon and evening ambling through the streets, doing nothing important, and yet, I was not ready for the day to end.

"Do you want to go somewhere for dinner?" I asked, suddenly taking a keen interest in the sidewalk.

Aaron stopped and turned to me. I brought my hopeful eyes up to meet his.

"Actually, I should head in." He gestured his hand over his shoulder. Across the street behind him, I saw an old brick building with green trim. A blue sign with gold-leaf lettering hung above a large, paned window that took up the whole store-front. It simply read, "McIntyre's Pub and Grill".

"Oh shit!" I said, probably a bit too loud. "Do you have to work tonight? Man, I'm so sorry..."

“Relax, Jeremy,” he said with a smirk. “I don’t have to work tonight. I live here. I have an apartment over the bar.” He turned and pointed up to the third floor. There was a dim light shining through the white curtains of one of the four windows.

“Wait, you work here, and you live here too? Wow, that’s convenient,” I said trying to extend the conversation. “Did you have the job or the apartment first?”

“Kinda both. My family owns the bar,” he said as he shuffled his feet. “We moved into the second floor after my grandparents died, and we took over running it. I moved up to the third floor when I turned eighteen.”

“So, you’re Aaron McIntyre then,” I said.

“Prescott, actually. Aaron Prescott.” He shrugged. “My mom inherited the bar from her parents.”

I stuck out my hand to him and smiled. “Jeremy Allen. It’s a pleasure to meet you, Aaron Prescott. Happy Birthday.”

His mouth turned into a grin, showing off that fucking crooked tooth, as he took my hand in his and shook it. “It was nice to meet you as well, Jeremy Allen. And thank you. Today could have turned out a lot differently, but I... I enjoyed myself. Thanks for dragging me out of the coffeehouse.”

His hand felt so warm in mine as I shook it. I couldn’t figure out where to look, and my eyes kept bouncing between his eyes and his mouth. *Stop!* God, I had to stop looking at this man’s mouth. I looked back up to his eyes and saw a raised eyebrow. I was still shaking his hand. “Uh, sorry,” I mumbled and let it go.

He chuckled again, before saying, “Well, I guess I’ll see you around then.”

“Yeah, oh, don’t forget this.” I thrust the gift bag toward him, and he gaped at me in confusion.

“You seriously did not buy these for me. Jer, that was for fun. You should take them home and have some fun of your own.” He winked at me. So flipping sexy.

I bit back the comment about how my dismal home was about as far away from fun as one could get. Instead, I threw some camp into my voice, *which was so not me*, and replied, “Naw, they’re for you, Snookums. I had them gift wrapped and everything.” His eyes narrowed, but he reached his hand out and

took hold of the bag. Our hands touched, and I let mine linger there for just a moment longer than necessary, enjoying the feel of his warm, rough hand over mine, before slipping my hand away and readjusting my messenger bag onto my shoulder.

“Happy Birthday,” I said softly. He looked at me again, and I thought he might be about to say something more, but instead, he nodded his head and mumbled, “Thank you,” before turning and jogging across the street. I stood there just watching as he got to the green door next to the bar and fumbled in his pocket, for what I guessed were his keys. I felt cold as I shuffled my feet and focused on the cement. I didn’t want to leave. I didn’t want to go back to my house, the memories, the reality, that fucking bed—

“Hey, Jer?” Aaron’s voice traveled across the road, and I looked up to see him standing there holding the door open. I must’ve looked pathetic.

“Yeah?”

“You wanna order a pizza?”

I looked both ways before I crossed the street and followed Aaron up the stairs.

Chapter Four

This was a bad idea. This was a really bad idea. A small part of my brain kept niggling away, trying to convince me to “just say no,” while the buzz tingling through my body didn’t really care what my brain thought.

I sat on the couch in the middle of the loft, trying to look anywhere but at the sexy man ten feet away from me. His apartment was one big room with the bathroom tucked in the back behind the kitchen. The space was divided by the strategic placement of furniture, creating a living room, dining area, and a bedroom—with a big, soft bed, white sheets, fluffy pillows...

From where I sat, I could see everything; the oh-so-forbidden-yet-tempting bed, the four large windows facing the street front, the black-and-white photos hanging sporadically on the wall. None of which I’d had the courage to look at closely. Remnants of the pizza we’d ordered were still sitting on the coffee table in front of me. Beer bottles we’d emptied earlier were arranged neatly by the kitchen sink. I focused on the half-emptied one in my hand and took a long pull.

My right knee bounced. I closed my eyes and listened as Aaron hummed along to whatever song was playing on the stereo. I couldn’t look at him. He’d shed his sweatshirt earlier, and my mouth had been salivating ever since. Pulling it over his head had dragged the T-shirt he wore underneath it up too, and revealed a beautifully carved stomach. Hard, lean, cut. I doubted Aaron ever went to the gym. He had earned that stomach through hard work, bending over—*bending over*—to lift cases of beer and liquor, running around the bar, up and down stairs. I groaned before I took another gulp of beer. *What the fuck was I doing?*

I was sitting on the couch, that’s what I was doing. And I was sitting there because Aaron had told me to sit there. His firm voice had left no room for argument, and I hadn’t given him one. I had complied, just like he knew I would. He was orchestrating something. He had a plan. He was in charge. And I was just sitting with a half-hard dick, which I really hoped my jeans were loose enough to disguise.

I opened my eyes, resigned to the fact that I couldn’t keep them shut forever. I watched Aaron dance around the kitchen, shaking his oh-so-fine ass. Fucking muscular ass. Fucking amazing ass. Just enough of a bubble butt to grab on to. I wanted to bite it. *Damn.*

Instead, I took another gulp from the bottle in my hand and watched as he gathered items from his kitchen. My stomach was doing flip-flops, then it started pole-vaulting when I saw him overturn the gift bag. The contents spilled out onto the counter, and the bright-red tissue paper drifted down to the floor. I closed my eyes again and took a deep breath, trying to steady myself. I was about to stretch some comfort zones. Hell, Aaron might just shatter them.

“Come here.” His voice was thick, deep, melodic. It was the type of voice that should be narrating masturbation-inspiring romance novels. And it was calling me. I felt my body stand up and move obediently. *Bad idea! Bad idea!* My brain screamed at me. But my feet kept moving across the room and didn't stop until I was face to face with Aaron, looking up and into his navy eyes. Eyes that had turned dark, almost black, in the dim light of the apartment.

“Are you ready?” he asked.

“Yes.” *NO!*

“Good!” he said quickly with a mischievous chuckle. He jumped to the side and danced around to the other side of the island. He swept his hand out above the neatly arranged items on the counter. “What do you think?”

My stomach was in knots. I looked down at the counter.

Two cucumbers, one zucchini, four bananas, and a dildo.

I couldn't stop the laugh that bubbled up from my belly or the smile that spread across my face. Aaron's eyes were gleaming. He reminded me of a little kid showing off some magnificent tower he'd just built with his LEGOs. “Well, Jer? What do you think?” he asked again.

I really wasn't sure how to respond. “Um... I like zucchini?”

Aaron harrumphed. “I don't care if you like zucchini. We are not going to eat the zucchini. It's just an instrument for our little experiment.”

“Experiment?” I raised my eyebrows as I looked at him across the island.

“Yeah, experiment. You and I are going to do a taste test,” he said proudly, crossing his arms across his chest.

“Taste test?”

“Yeah, a taste test. Stop repeating what I say and get with the program here.” He looked down at the items on the counter, and then reached over and grabbed a condom packet, wiggling it back and forth. “Now Jer, I don't know

about you, but I've never had oral sex using a condom—giving or receiving.” He shook his head and held up his hand. “I know, I know. Don't say it. I already got that lecture once today. And we have—” He turned around and looked at the clock on the stove behind him. “—two hours and thirty-four minutes left before we can talk about that place. But, what we can do is figure out which flavored condom tastes the best. For future reference, of course. You with me?”

He was smiling at me again. Who was this guy? And what had he done with the grumpy Aaron I'd met and hung out with most of the day? I looked over at the collection of empties. I never would have guessed that Aaron was a happy drunk.

I smiled back, reached down, and grabbed a banana. “Let's do it.”

Aaron's face lit up, and he began placing a condom in front of each of the *instruments*. “Now we actually got a few duplicate flavors, so I left those out. But there are about twelve different types here. I realized I only had seven phallic food choices so I was a little bummed, but then I remembered the dildo.”

I felt my cheeks redden. I'd been avoiding looking at it. I hadn't looked at it in the store either. Aaron had just picked it out and put it in our basket, and I took everything to the counter and paid for it. Now it laid on the counter, the last in the lineup of phallic fruits and vegetables. It was bright, gleaming cobalt-blue and probably about eight inches long. It was thick with ridges down the side and a ring at the end... *for an easy grip*? It was intimidating, and enticing, all at the same time. At least that's what my cock thought as it gave an approving twitch.

“Okay, should it be a surprise, or do you want to know what flavor it's supposed to be?”

“Um, I think we should know the flavor. I don't really like surprises, especially in my mouth.”

Aaron's cheeks puffed out, and his face turned bright red. A feeling of concern ran through me, until suddenly he bent over and let out a loud laugh that filled the whole room. He sputtered a bit before pulling himself together. Another chuckle escaped. Bastard.

“Ah, yeah. I didn't really mean that,” I muttered. Then, of course, the rambling started. “Well maybe, sort of, I guess. I had this great aunt who was

the worst cook in the world, and every time we went over to her house, my mom forced me to eat whatever food was put in front of me. I could never tell what I was eating 'cause nothing looked the way it was supposed to. So I'd take a bite of something I thought might be strawberry, and it ended up being jalapeno pepper. It totally exploded in my mouth..." I realized what I was saying. And it was obvious Aaron did too, since he let out a deep belly laugh. I threw my banana at him.

"Will you stop, already?!" I narrowed my eyes at him.

"All right, all right. No surprises for your mouth. I got it," he replied, letting a chortle escape. "As long as you stop brandishing your banana at me."

I rolled my eyes and groaned. He chuckled, but set his shoulders and picked up the condom packet.

"Okay, pick your instrument." He stared at me intently. I pointed to the zucchini. "Nice choice."

"I'm glad you approve," I deadpanned before I grabbed my beer, tipped my head back, and drank every last bit down. I put the empty bottle back on the counter and found a still-as-a-statue Aaron looking straight at me, eyes wide, mouth open. After a moment, he seemed to jerk himself out of whatever trance he'd been in. "Oh, I almost forgot," he said. He turned to grab a sleeve of crackers from the cabinet and put them on the counter.

"To cleanse our palates," he said. "Okay, where was I? Oh right, zucchini, condom. Okay, can you hold that for me?" He indicated the zucchini with his eyes, and I picked it up and held it out over the counter for him. I heard the condom wrapper rip open. A sound I hadn't heard in months, and yet my cock decided it was time to get with the program and chub up. I was like some warped version of Pavlov's dog, and I was more than thankful to be on the other side of the island from Aaron, where I could stand behind the counter and keep my unruly dick out of sight. I needed another beer.

I still had the zucchini extended, and Aaron had the condom out of its wrapper. He brought it up to the vegetable, and pinched the tip before rolling it down the substitute shaft. I giggled. "What?" he asked, furrowing his eyebrows.

"Um, I don't think you need to worry about leaving room for the ejaculate," I said wagging it in his face. "This isn't about to spew cum."

"Hey, no more wielding food items at me. We've been over this. And yeah, I don't need to take precautions so these don't break, I know." He shrugged his shoulder. "Just habit I guess."

His voice seemed to deflate a bit with that last statement. It made me wonder how he'd come to find himself at the clinic this morning. Had a condom broke? Was his situation parallel to mine? I focused on the task at hand to stop the spiral my brain was about to embark on. "What flavor is this?" I blurted out.

Aaron looked at me with a smirk before saying, "This one is cola. You want to go first?"

Shit. Did I? Did it matter? Not really. I shrugged and brought the thing up to my mouth. I stared at it, long enough for my eyes to start to cross, before I stuck my tongue out and took a tentative lick.

"Eww!" I scrunched up my face and thrust the zucchini at Aaron. "Yuck. Latex-y licorice, with maybe a hint of turpentine. Bleck!" I was suddenly thankful Aaron had thought of the saltines as I grabbed a couple and shoved them whole into my mouth trying to chomp away the taste.

"So, cola does not win an award tonight, I'm guessing," Aaron said with a smile. "I think we might need something else."

Aaron put two shot glasses on the counter, both filled with ice-cold vodka. I poured the one closest to me down my throat, not even feeling a burn. "Next!"

"Shot or condom?" Aaron asked, holding the bottle in one hand and a condom in the other.

"Condom. You first this time," I pouted.

"Okay. Here, you put this on a banana or something. I'll pour shots, 'cause I have a feeling we're gonna need them."

And we did need them. Or rather, I needed them. I didn't even look when I rolled the condom down the banana. All I could see was the man across from me. His tight, black shirt, the way it hugged his torso, the way his nipples were pebbled underneath.

"Here you go," I sighed and held it across to him. He was still busy pouring a shot, but leaned over and took the end of the banana in his mouth then pulled off it with a pop. *Holy fuck.*

"Ah. That one was banana... sort of," he said grimacing, smacking his lips and working his tongue. "You can probably skip that one. It's not gonna make my go-to list." I handed him a cracker, and he mumbled his thanks while chewing.

“Shots.” He shoved a glass in front of me, raising his own in cheers before throwing it back. I watched his Adam’s apple bob. My dick perked up. I drank the vodka down.

I could feel the warmth in my belly as I watched Aaron rolling a bright-pink condom down a cucumber. “Strawberry.” He smiled and took a long lick with the flat of his tongue. He passed it over the counter and winked at me. I stifled a groan. Bastard. *Well, two could play at this game.*

I let my gaze linger on him for just a second before I let my tongue dart out and take a swipe, then another. I wrapped my lips around the end and bobbed my head slowly up and down over just the tip. I let my tongue peek out from my lips and leisurely dragged my mouth off.

“Oh, not too bad. It’s kinda like a fruit roll-up.” I shrugged a shoulder, acting coy.

Aaron was leaning heavily on the counter, his eyes locked on my mouth, which felt a bit tacky from the lube. I licked around my lips before smacking them together. “What’s next?”

“Uh...” Aaron didn’t move. He just sat there slack-jawed as I grabbed a banana and rolled a purple condom onto it.

I took a teasing lick, and said, “Skittles maybe. Grape Skittles.”

“Skittles?” Aaron asked, shaking himself out of his stupor. I held my arm across the island and offered it up like an ice cream cone. And the man took it, down, way down. I could feel his breath on my fingers, and I felt fucking pole-vaulters going for Olympic gold in my stomach. I couldn’t hold back the whimper that escaped as he slowly pulled his lips back up the banana.

“Yup, definitely Skittles, with a bit of rubber tree,” he said, his eyes boring into mine.

I gulped. “Another shot?”

Chapter Five

I'd had three shots and I think about fifty saltines. My mouth tasted like latex and goo, when I finally proclaimed, "Last one!"

"Thank fuck," Aaron muttered back. He was leaning back with his elbows on the counter. My ass had found its way onto a bar stool when I became too lazy to stand anymore. "Seriously, who's fucking bright idea was this?" he asked.

I gave him what I hoped was a pointed look. I could feel my entire face stretch out and then scrunch back up in what I was sure was a less than attractive look. It was also way too much effort, so I stopped. I turned my attention to the last thing left to fellate. The bright-blue dildo. I straightened up and grabbed the thing off the table, showing a kind of confidence I really wasn't feeling. "All right. Where's the condom?" I said in a too loud voice.

Aaron leaned an elbow onto the counter and held his head in one hand while using the other to unceremoniously *and*, not to mention, inaccurately, throw the condom toward me. He let out a long sigh.

I reached over and picked the condom up and then tried unsuccessfully to open it. I cursed under my breath, which caused Aaron to look up at me. I put the corner of the packet in my mouth and pulled, hearing the crinkle and the rustle as it gave way. I wedged the dildo between my legs and rolled the red condom down. With a triumphant, *Whoop!* I threw both fists in the air and exclaimed, "Ladies and gentlemen, I submit our last offering of the evening. For your licking pleasure, or maybe not pleasure *exactly*, I present, cherry!"

I smiled widely at Aaron. His mouth hung agape, and his eyes were focused on—well, somewhere that was not my face. I furrowed my eyebrows, confused, and followed his gaze—directly to my crotch and the dildo standing there at attention, gleaming purple as the colors of the glass and the condom blended together. *Shit.* My cock full-on jerked. So did the dildo. My cheeks went hot, and Aaron's eyes went wide. The dark navy getting even darker. His tongue darted out and licked his upper lip. My heart rate sped up. My breath was coming in pants, while I did my damndest not to come in my pants. The dildo kept twitching. *Fuck!*

"So um..." I picked up the phallus and held it out to him. "Do you want to go first?"

“No. You.” His voice was husky, wet, and throaty. He tore his eyes away from the dildo in my hand and met my gaze. I didn’t even look down, just at Aaron, when I slowly stuck my tongue out and swirled it around the tip before turning my head and licking down the side. “Mmm. This one isn’t bad either. Cherry Skittle? You should try.” I held it across the counter for him.

“Yeah, I think I should.” But, instead of taking the dildo, Aaron stalked around the island to stand in front of me.

I didn’t know what was happening. My body had a mind of its own. I stood up and took a step closer to him, the dildo still upright between us.

Aaron’s hands came up and cupped my face, and then brought his face in close. My breath caught in my chest, and then disappeared completely as I felt his tongue lap over my upper lip, before moving on to trace the lower one. One swipe, then two. I was certain my knees would give way.

“I like cherries. A lot,” he husked, pulling back an inch. I sucked in a mouthful of air and heard the thump of the dildo as it hit the floor, freeing my hands. I grabbed his shirt and pulled his body flush with mine, and I kissed him. I. Fucking. Kissed. Him.

Rough, chapped lips pressed against my own. I wrapped my arms around him. Feeling the muscles of his back through the soft cotton shirt he wore. He pressed himself closer, and I could feel his pebbled nipples and his hard pecs, and his hard—

I shoved my tongue in his mouth and tasted cherries and vodka, and man. Fucking hell, he tasted so fucking good. My tongue found that crooked tooth and stroked it, lapped it, before finding Aaron’s tongue, twisting and dancing with it. And his danced right back.

It was a kiss I felt in my toes, and my knees, and my cock—which was done twitching and jerking and was now straight-up hard. It was electric. If I’d had a hand to spare, I probably would have tried to feel if my hairs were standing on end from the power of it. But my hands were too busy touching, squeezing, groping. One hand went up to his head, pulling at his hair, while the other made its way down to his ass and squeezed. That ass felt better than I had imagined.

Aaron groaned, and I swallowed the sound. He squeezed my nipples, and I bit his tongue gently to stop the next whimper that was about to escape my throat. Whether it was him, or me, or both of us, I don’t know, but everything slowed down. Soft laps, tentative exploration. The coarse feel of scruff teasing

along my neck and the tender kisses that followed. The frantic urgency had dissipated, and a quiet need for closeness had replaced it. I rubbed my hands up and down his arms as his rested on the small of my back, teasing at my waistband. I breathed him in. For a moment, I knew nothing else outside those walls and those arms. Just him and me. And then, he gently pushed me away.

“Wow.” His voice was quiet, and his eyes were closed as he brought his forehead down to rest against mine. I kept my eyes open, admiring how beautiful he was, flushed and disheveled, as we both sucked in deep breaths in attempts to cool down.

When I was confident my voice would work again, “Wow is one way to put it,” I said quietly.

He opened his eyes, and I saw so many emotions circling there. He was wistful, and confused, and lustful, and... afraid? I would have given anything to know what was going on in his head. “Well, this is not how I saw the day ending.”

I chuckled and took half a step back and studied the hardwood floor. “Agreed.” I smiled and raised my eyes up to his again. I was positive I could look at this man a long, long time and never tire of it. “Happy Birthday.”

The corners of his mouth turned up the tiniest bit when he replied, “Thank you, Jer.” He turned and looked at the clock. “Twelve-oh-two. It’s not my birthday anymore.”

“No, I guess the day is over,” I said almost mournfully, not relishing going back to face reality, ticking the time away as I drifted through the next two months.

“Why did you go to the clinic today? Why on your birthday?” I asked him, surprising myself a little. I realized I wanted to hear Aaron’s story more than I didn’t want to share my own.

He groaned and fell back onto the stool I’d been sitting in. Running his hand through his hair, he looked up at me and asked, “Do you really want to talk about this?”

“Yes.”

“All right,” he sighed. “I think I might need a beer, you want one?” he said, pushing himself up and walking over to the fridge.

“No thanks, but do you have anything non-alcoholic?”

He was bent over in the fridge when he turned his head toward me and smirked, eyes gleaming. “I have cola.” He wagged his brows. I narrowed my eyes and growled.

“Cola would be great, thanks,” I said pointedly. “So long as it doesn’t taste like turpentine.”

He stood up, a beer in one hand, a Coke in the other, and laughed before closing the distance between us. He didn’t sit down though, just paused, handed me the Coke and said, “I’m sure it tastes like plain ol’ Coca-Cola. Let’s move to the couch, okay?”

I followed him over and watched him drop his body down and sink into the cushions. His long legs were sprawled in front of him, and his arm stretched out along the back. I sat down at the other end so I wouldn’t be tempted, and curled my legs beneath me, angling my body to face him.

“God,” he said resigned, and took a pull from the bottle. “Why did I go to the clinic? Okay. Here’s the story. I’d been seeing this guy for a few months. It was a very off and on thing cause he lives in Boston, just travels up here for business once or twice a month, sometimes more. We didn’t go out really, or if we did, it was usually early, then we’d come back here and hang out, listen to music, drink... fuck.” He peered up at me through his lashes, his head tilted down. I took a big gulp of my Coke, attempting to hide my reaction to his words and his gaze.

“It was good. You know—comfortable, fun. So, then maybe a month ago, I ran into him at the mall. It was obvious he was caught off guard, and he was not happy to see me. I didn’t know what exactly the deal was. I just knew he was lying. I’d invited him out to a concert that week, and he’d told me he couldn’t come up to Maine because he had meetings all week down in Mass. So, I was nice for about ninety seconds and then told him to go fuck himself because I wasn’t playing whatever game he was spinning.”

Aaron was picking at the label on his beer bottle. He took a deep breath and exhaled slowly. His voice was flat when he continued, “About three weeks ago, I got a text from him. I was at work, and I remember seeing his picture pop up, and just groaning and rolling my eyes. I shoved the phone back in my pocket and finished up my shift. I got the bar closed down and locked up, then came up here. I’d forgotten all about the text. I figured he was looking to hook up or something. Maybe he was going to grovel and beg to get back with me.”

My hands clenched the soda can, and I felt a tightness in my belly and a prickling sensation on my scalp. I didn't like where this was heading. I didn't want to hear my instinct was right. I wanted to take Aaron in my arms and hold him and tell him everything was going to be okay. And then I wanted to go find the asshole and punch him. But I couldn't do any of that. Aaron held his body stiff and clenched his jaw. He wasn't open for comfort. And right then I hated myself for asking him to tell me this story.

“But, I'm sure you can probably guess, that wasn't what the text said. Nope. I got eight words. I was worth eight words. *‘I tested positive. You should get checked. Sorry.’*”

He was lost in recollection. His eyes were looking straight ahead, away from me. He'd gone back to the day when some fucking coward sent him a text to tell him he'd been exposed to HIV. Whoever the guy was, I was quite sure if I wanted to know what he looked like, I'd just need to look up the word *douche-bag*, and his picture would be there illustrating the meaning.

I was shaken from my own thoughts when Aaron continued, “We'd used condoms, but there were definitely a few drunken moments we were not as careful as we should have been. And like I said earlier, I've never used a condom for blow jobs, so I'd swallowed a bunch of cum.” He shrugged a shoulder, a rueful smile on his lips.

“What made you go to the clinic on your birthday?” I was a little bit pissed at myself for asking, but I still wanted to know.

“Ah, that was just shitty luck. I spent a couple of weeks breaking things, and sending some very angry and verbose messages to Mal. When I finally got that out of my system, I called the clinic to make an appointment. They were pretty booked, which surprised me to be honest. I could either go today, or yesterday, whatever. Or, I'd have to wait another week. I just wanted it over with, so... yeah.” He paused and regarded me. “That's my story. What's yours?”

Oh shit. I was so busy feeling incensed and outraged for Aaron, I'd forgotten I'd have to reciprocate. I hadn't shared this story with anyone yet. I'd told people at work Greg was at a conference. Told my mom the same thing. As far as life outside my house was concerned, everything was the same, Greg and Jeremy going strong. I needed to find my fucking spine.

“Well,” I began, suddenly wishing I had something other than Coke to drink. “I was a fool, I guess. I haven't really had a lot of relationships, just one in high school, and then a couple short-lived ones in college. I'm not really one

for hook-ups or back alley blow jobs. I had a job and had bought a house; life was all right, though lonely. A little less than a year ago, I met Greg through some mutual friends. We hit it off and started seeing each other. We became exclusive after about six weeks and dated for seven months before he moved in with me. We went and got tested, and both of us got negative results, so we stopped using condoms. I was content. Except for the clothes he'd leave on the bedroom floor, which annoyed me, we were happy enough." I slumped back against the sofa, sighing as I ran my hand through my hair.

"I thought he loved me, so I could forgive him the little things. Every now and again, I'd come home, and he would have everything clean and sparkling. We'd go for a nice dinner somewhere. It made me feel special." I could feel the humiliation was sneaking in, churning in my stomach, prickling at my neck, but I continued with my story. I owed that much to Aaron.

"I came home exactly three weeks ago and found the house spotless. I was actually excited because we hadn't gone out for a while; I figured he was planning a date night. I went to the fridge for a beer and found an envelope with a 'Dear John' letter and his test results. I haven't heard from him since."

"Damn."

"Yup. That about sums it up," I said, before I took a sip of my Coke.

"Do you want me to beat him up for you?" Aaron asked.

"Maybe, if I knew where he was, but I don't. So thanks, but I'll pass. He's not worth getting assault charges pressed against you anyway." I closed my eyes and leaned back into the cushions. It had been almost cathartic to tell somebody. Once the story was out, my entire body felt drained. I turned and looked at the man at the other end of the couch. It wasn't sympathy I saw in Aaron's navy eyes, it was empathy. I hoped he could see it in mine.

My voice was quiet when I finally found the courage to ask the question I'd wanted to ask since he'd bumped into me on the sidewalk.

"What were—"

"Negative. Yours?"

"Negative. But now—"

"Three months. The window."

"Yeah, the window."

The air was heavy with the silence. It wasn't an uncomfortable silence; it was charged. Something was happening between us. A bridge, a connection. Then I remembered the kiss. I felt a thin layer of sweat form all over my body. I couldn't get enough air in my lungs. I needed space. I made a quick excuse and headed to the bathroom.

I closed the door behind me, leaned back against it, and looked up at the ceiling. I didn't know what I was doing. I just told this man the most humiliating story of my life. I'd made out with him in his kitchen after fellating fruits and vegetables and a dildo for Christ's sake. This was not Jeremy Allen. Jeremy Allen played it safe. Jeremy Allen's life was all about order and routine. And for the last twelve hours, Jeremy Allen had, for some unknown, mysterious reason, thrown it all out the window. And now, Jeremy Allen was talking to himself in the third person. It was all I could do not to sink to the floor and press my face against the cool, gray tiles.

Breathe, just breathe.

I pulled myself together, pushed off the door, and took care of business. I washed my hands and splashed some water on my face before taking a long look in the mirror. The reflection was the same one I'd been looking at for weeks now.

My brown hair was shaggy, in need of a trim. I had dark circles under my hazel eyes, and they stood out more than they should have against my pale skin. My body was still lean, almost to the point of too skinny, just like it always was. I'd never been able to put on much muscle. Not like I'd ever seriously tried.

But now, I saw a subtle difference in the mirror. I didn't look as fragile or as weak as I had yesterday. A new determination reflected back at me. I pushed away from the counter and headed back to the living room.

I came to a quick stop when I reached the kitchen. Aaron had moved from the couch and was standing stiffly by the island. The food, condoms, and dildo had all been cleaned away. The only thing there was my messenger bag, which had been on the floor by the couch when I'd gone into the bathroom. My cell phone was sitting on top of it. Something was wrong.

"Aaron?" I heard my voice waver.

“Thank you for yesterday, Jeremy.” Unlike mine, Aaron’s voice was steady... and cold.

“You’re welcome. Thank you for dinner.” I didn’t know what was going on. What could have happened while I was in the bathroom? I hadn’t been in there that long. Not to have caused this quick of a shift in moods.

“I called you a cab.” *What?*

“Um, okay?” *Not really.*

“It was just your bag, right?”

It was obvious Aaron was done. Ten minutes ago, the man in front of me had been kind, and full of empathy. Forty-five minutes ago, he’d had his tongue down my throat. But now, for some reason, he’d changed. He was finished. With. Me.

My chest hurt, but I set my jaw and reached past him to take my bag. Hefting it onto my shoulder, I stuck out my right hand. “It was nice to meet you, Aaron.”

I noticed the smallest of flickers in his eyes, like some camouflage was failing, but then it was gone. He grabbed my hand and gave a curt shake before letting it go. “Likewise.”

He took two steps and opened the door for me. I stared at him for just a moment before I walked out to the stairwell and heard the door shut and dead bolt behind me.

With every heavy step I took down those two flights of stairs, the confusion and dejection grew. By the time I reached the street, my legs felt like they were made of lead and my cheeks were wet.

Chapter Six

I thought the trip to the clinic would bring an end to my pity party. I was wrong. Aaron's cold dismissal sent me spiraling with uncertainty. I went home that night and buried myself under a blanket in the guest room for nearly thirty-six hours. The hours I spent in dreamless sleep, I was beyond grateful for. The waking hours were another thing entirely. Those were hours of self-inflicted torture.

I thought of Greg. How angry I was with him and with myself. What signs had I missed? How long had it been going on? How many men? Did he laugh at me? Did he talk about me with them? How stupid could I get? How pathetic could I be?

I thought of the clinic. The brief moment when I exhaled a sigh of relief. The moment when I felt every worry in my body just float away. The moment I thought somehow I had beat the odds. And finally the moment when all the tension and fear came flooding back, and I realized it was not yet over. How would I tell my mother? My brother? Would I have to tell my boss? Would I be treated like a leper?

And then I thought of Aaron. The beautiful, resigned face I saw at the clinic. The way his voice would rumble from deep in his chest. Then the way a smile would change him into a whole new person. I thought of all the facets to this man I hadn't yet seen. But I wanted to. I really wanted to.

While I had sat in the waiting room a jumble of nerves and tears, he sat there with a silent anger, seething. Pissed off and ready to fight. A man had done him wrong, and *in the middle of the mall*, he'd told him to fuck off. He would have never looked back except he got a fucking text message and he'd been forced to. There was a lot to know about Aaron. I had only seen a glimpse.

My thoughts circled and coiled through my head during those waking hours spent in the guest room. I don't know how long I would have lain there, but it was Sunday afternoon when the cramping in my stomach finally compelled me to emerge. I sat at my breakfast bar and sipped chicken soup, staring out the window into my now overgrown back yard.

It was sunny; spring had come in quickly and just as rapidly, it was becoming summer. Not an unusual occurrence in Maine. It had been twenty-five degrees two weeks ago, and now, I saw the daffodils that had fought their

way free of the hard soil, lazing in sunlight. They were beautiful. It didn't matter that they would be gone in just a few weeks.

And that was the crux of it all. I could be here another day, or I could be here another seventy-five years. But if I spent whatever time I had lying in bed under the comfort of darkness, nothing would change. Nothing would grow.

I got up, rinsed out my bowl, and headed to take a long overdue shower.

Numbers never changed. It's what I liked best about them. I liked being an accountant because it was my job to find the right formula to make the numbers the most beneficial to a person as they could be. Sure, I couldn't change a person's previous year's gross income, but I could find a way to make it work best for them. I could make something bleak, into something a little less bleak. It was all how I looked at it. Taking the story the numbers gave me, looking for the variables and the idiosyncrasies, and using those to make it better.

I had to figure out my idiosyncrasies. My variables. My formula.

I dug out a paper calendar the oil company had left for me. I figured out the three month mark and circled it with a bright red marker. *Sixty-five days.*

When I finally dug my phone out of my bag, I found a bunch of missed calls from both my mother and my brother. I called them back and apologized for being MIA for the weekend. I didn't explain the reasons. I'd tackle that when I had a concrete answer. Instead, I told them I'd been feeling under the weather and had spent the weekend in bed. It was, at least, a diluted version of the truth.

I'd also found two missed calls from Greg. He didn't leave a message, and I was thankful. I didn't want the sound of his voice to send me crawling back into bed. I couldn't decide what I wanted from him. I didn't want to hear his reasons or his excuses. I knew I didn't want to hear the names. None of that mattered. I didn't call him back.

I did, however, want to call Aaron, but we had never exchanged numbers. I wanted to know what had made things change. Something about the man had intrigued me, called to me. But after his abrupt dismissal, I was fairly certain he didn't want to hear from me.

Aaron was one of my variables.

Time had been divided for me. Pre-test and post-test. I wasn't as sullen as I could have been. Instead of moping around and wondering what to do next, I took to walking around the Old Port. I let my mind wander where it wanted to. There were still so many things I didn't have answers for, but I still had choices. I was still breathing. I still had my life. I needed to figure out what I wanted from it.

Without noticing, I found myself retracing the path Aaron and I had taken. My feet had a mind of their own. I did a walk-by of McIntyre's. Even for a Wednesday night, the bar was full. People were everywhere, laughing, clapping. I stood at the window staring in, not daring to venture inside. Aaron was behind the bar, his body angled away from the window. He had his arms crossed over his chest and a towel tucked in his back pocket. A patron came up to the bar, and Aaron grabbed a pint glass, and with a flick of his wrist and a finger, he had a draft poured and placed back on the bar. He started to turn toward me, and I ducked my head and hustled along as quickly as I could. It was close.

I ended up at the coffee shop. I sat at our table, studied the painting that had started it all, and sipped my too-sweet cappuccino. In my head, there was a beautiful, grouchy man in a hoodie sitting across from me.

And then, he wasn't in my head. He was there, sprawled in the chair, his eyes shooting daggers.

"Hey," he rumbled.

"Hi, Aaron." My voice sounded meek, and I hated it.

"Wanna tell me what you're doing?" He sounded like a parent who'd just found out his kid had trampled through a tomato patch, and now he was giving them just enough rope to hang themselves with. *He'd seen me. Fuck.*

"I'm drinking a cappuccino."

"Try again, Jer." His arms were crossed over his chest as he tilted the chair back onto two legs.

"What?" I opened my eyes wide and hoped they looked like a puppy dog's. "I'm sitting in a coffee shop, and imbibing the beverage that I purchased. What do you want me to say?"

"How 'bout the truth."

"That is the truth," I said, feigning indignation.

“No, that’s part of the truth. Those puppy-dog eyes you are trying to throw at me aren’t going to work.”

Shit, damn, fuck. I sagged down in the chair.

“You need to stop it, Jer. I don’t want to see you. Don’t come by the bar again.”

“I didn’t come inside. I was just curious.” God, I was back to sounding like a six-year-old. “I don’t understand, Aaron. Help me understand?”

He stood up and put both palms flat down. The ominous tone in his voice made sweat start to drip down my back, as he snarled, “There’s nothing to understand. I. Don’t. Want. You! I don’t want to see you, talk with you, kis—”

His words cut off, and he brought his lips into a tight line. “Stay the fuck away from me, Jer. I mean it. Stay. Away.”

He pushed away and strode out the door, even his ass exuded attitude. My dick twitched.

He couldn’t say he didn’t want to kiss me.

Chapter Seven

It took a couple of weeks, but eventually, I fell back into the comfort of my routine. Greg still called. I still ignored. I still went on my walks down in the Old Port, but I avoided the coffee shop and the bar, not wanting another run-in.

Every morning I'd get up, shower, drink my coffee while browsing the news, and head to work, where I would lose myself in the security of numbers for the day. When my coworkers asked me how Greg was, I gave them the truth, I didn't know. I told them he'd moved out and avoided giving any more details. Most of them respected my wishes not to talk about it.

With regards to my mother and my brother, I was not so lucky.

When I told my mother Greg was gone, she had wanted to come down and stay with me. I said no. She asked me if I was okay about three hundred times in between snuffles. I said yes... about three hundred times. It was more than I could handle. I ended up feigning plans with friends just to get off the phone.

I talked with my brother, Dustin, on Thursday. He wasn't nearly as emotional as Mom had been. He just asked me a couple of questions, and I'd given him vague answers. He didn't probe. But I could hear the skepticism as he said, "Okay, Bean, if you say so."

Friday evening, I marked another day off on my calendar with a small smile. *Fifty-three days left*. One day closer. I was just about to put my Hungry Man dinner in the microwave when I heard it; the unmistakable rumble of Dustin's Harley followed by a swift knock at the door. Wiping my sweaty palms on my jeans, I got up and answered it. I had the widest grin I could manage plastered across my face.

Dustin was going to see right through it.

He was five years older than me. We'd always been close, and we grew even closer when I was fourteen, and our dad died. He'd become my rock. And, despite giving me the rather unfortunate nickname, *String-Bean*, Dustin was my hero.

He was the first person I came out to. I was this gangly, awkward sixteen year old boy, and I was scared to death. Dustin, just held me as I'd sputtered, *I don't want you to hate me*. He had just squeezed me tighter and said, *Never gonna happen, Bean*. When I'd stopped crying and was able to get out the

words, *I'm gay*, he'd told me he'd figured that out when I was ten. I was out, and my hero still loved me.

And now, twelve years later, I felt like that sixteen year old kid again. I didn't want to tell him, though not because I thought he would hate me, but because this time it would hurt *him*. History had taught me that Dustin wouldn't let up, though, not until I fessed up. I let out a resigned sigh. "Come on in, D. I think you might want a beer for this one."

Dustin wasn't having any of it. He dragged me out of the house, saying I needed the fresh air. I tried to protest, but as usual D won out. We wandered around through the side streets until finally making our way to Back Cove and the calming scent of salt water. Dustin was silent, and so was I, as we simply enjoyed each other's presence and walked the trail that edged the bay. *I don't know how to tell him*. A couple of boats were heading out toward the bridge, but beyond that, all was quiet but for the gentle lapping of the waves, the occasional call of a gull.

I looked over at Dustin. We were so different. People would never guess we were brothers. He was muscular; I was scrawny. He was blond; my hair was brown. He hated math; I used it as a coping skill. The only thing we had in common were our hazel eyes.

God, I loved him. I had to tell him.

"Greg left because he was positive," I said in a quiet, yet, surprisingly, calm voice.

Dustin turned to me, perplexed. "What? Positive? That you two weren't going to work? Bean, that's—"

"No, D... Greg tested positive."

I could see the meaning of the words hit him. The look of confusion and indignation slowly slid from his face, and then his eyes got wide and wet. He worried his mouth before reaching over and pulling me close, holding me so tightly it was hard to breathe.

His voice was soft, "This isn't supposed to happen."

I steered us to a nearby bench and sat us down. His face was so sad. Even though I knew this wasn't entirely on me, I felt like I'd let him down.

"I'm so sorry, D..." He reached over and pulled me close again.

“Don’t. You’re my baby brother. I’m supposed to protect you from all the bad shit. I’m supposed to be the one...” His voice trailed off, and I sat there in the safety of my brother’s arms.

“I love you. And you are the best brother anyone could ever have. I am so thankful that you are mine.” I mumbled into his shoulder. I squeezed my hands between us and gently pushed myself away from him. My voice stronger with the bit of distance, I continued, “You have been my strength for so long. But I’m my own man, D. I made my own choices. This—this is something you couldn’t prevent. This, you can’t protect me from.”

“So you’re, you’re...”

“I don’t know. I went to the clinic two weeks ago and took a test. It was negative.” I could see hope shining through him, but I reached over and gripped his arm. “It doesn’t mean anything. It was really early. I have to go back for another one, maybe two.”

“How did this happen, Bean?” Dustin was looking at the ground, sounding so defeated. At that moment I hated Greg. Hated him.

So we sat there on that bench looking at the water, and sometimes each other, as I told him the story. I watched as the gamut of emotions swept over his face. When I told him about the letter, he pushed himself up and off the bench and started pacing back and forth with his fists clenched until I reached up and dragged him back down in a hug. I sat there with my arm around him as I told him all of it. Greg. The Clinic. I even told him about my day with Aaron and how it ended, though I left out the details of the in between.

“Next time I’m going with you.”

“D...”

“Don’t fucking argue with me. I. Am. Going. With. You. You give me the date, the time, I will be there. You are not going to go through this alone. You hear me?” Dustin’s jaw was set, and this was not an argument I would win.

“Okay,” I conceded. “Okay. I’ll let you know when I make the appointment.”

“Good. I love you, Bean.”

“I love you too.” And then I remembered my mother, and I panicked. “You can’t tell Mom! Not yet. Promise me you won’t tell her. I can’t deal with her yet. It will kill her, and I just can’t handle that right now. Please, please promise me!”

“No worries, there. I don’t think I could handle her either. We’ll wait. ’Til we know for sure.”

We. I don’t know what I did to deserve a brother like Dustin. I hadn’t thought I could love him any more, but at that moment I did. I let out all the air I had trapped in my lungs and slumped back onto the bench. “Thanks, D. I mean it. For everything.”

“It’s my job, little brother. Anytime.”

Our stomachs growled in unison. We laughed as Dustin stood up and offered me a hand, which I accepted.

“You want to go find some food?”

The burger weighed heavily in my stomach after a month of meals that were all prepared in the microwave. This bar had become a tradition for us, starting when I’d bought my house. Good beer, good food, convenient location on Forest Avenue. Only a quick cab ride from home, but definitely walkable when we felt like it. And it had outside seating on the patio, where we and only a couple other tables were currently located.

It was good to have Dustin there. He teased me; I called him an ass. It was *normal*. We’d had just enough beer to give us that warm and fuzzy feeling... and to send me to the bathroom. I put it off as long as possible, not wanting to battle the crowd inside. But eventually, my need won out, and I pushed my way up from the table and made my way in.

The bar was crowded, raucous, and loud. The local college had just let out, and the kids were out celebrating. It was like a giant frat party. And I fucking hated frat parties, but my bladder left me no choice. I weaved through the maze of bodies, squeezing and turning, trying to fit into the tiny spaces. I hadn’t been anywhere this packed in over two months, the last time with *he who shall not be named*. By the time I found my destination, I needed to get away from all the people, all the sweat and the beer-smelling breath. I pushed the door, and it stopped short with a thump halfway from being fully open.

“Oomph! What the fuck? Asshole! Fuck! Son of a bitch!”

Oh shit.

I knew that growl.

There was another thump, and the door suddenly jolted back. Pain radiated from my forehead as I was pushed back a couple steps and abruptly stopped by some big man, wearing flannel. “Watch it man,” he said, before he shrugged me off and pushed me back toward the bathroom. *Shit*. My head started pounding along with my bladder. I felt like I was in a pinball machine.

I took a moment to gather myself. I stared at the door, the wood grain, the molding.

Crash!

The sound of glass breaking brought me back, and immediately, though tentatively, I gave the door a small push. When it met no resistance, I slowly opened it the rest of the way and moved inside.

The smell of beer was overwhelming as I looked at the shattered remains of a pint glass in the corner. There was a puddle of what I assumed—hoped—was beer pooled a couple steps away from the door. *Shit*. We’d collided—again. Though this time the casualty was his beer and his shirt, not my iPod.

Aaron stood at the sink, pissed off and fuming. His shirt, dark and wet, had been thrown in the sink. Water trickled down from his wet hair, to his face, and then slithered down to his naked chest. I’d had a glimpse of his abs a week ago, now they were on full display. Defined. Perfect. I saw the dark hair from his armpit as he reached down to splash some more water over his face and his neck, which caused goosebumps to break out all over his creamy skin. *And if I was honest, mine too*. His brown nipples tightened as one small dribble of water slid down between them and snaked its way into his belly button. My eyes followed that tiny drop to its destination and kept on going to the waistband of his low slung jeans and the hint of dark hair that peaked out from beneath.

My breath stuttered and my motherfucking, unruly cock was twitching and jerking like it was banging out Morse code.

SOS!

The sounds of my labored breathing must have alerted him I was there. “Jeremy?” he spat. “What the fuck are you doing here?”

“I... I’m sorry. I didn’t mean to open the door into you and spill your drink,” I stammered, hating how I sounded. I gnawed on my lip to stop from saying anything else.

“Huh?” His voice sounded equally of confusion and vitriol. “Of course it was you. Jesus. Can you ever just not be in my path. Every time a door opens,

there you are, crashing on the other side.” He threw his hands down by his side, pursed his lips and let out a long breath. Shaking his head, he looked up at me with narrowed eyes.

“Are you here for a reason, Jer? Or did you just come into the bathroom to get me naked.” His lip curled with that last statement. “Oh... that’s what you want isn’t it?” He stalked toward me, spreading his arms wide. I pushed my back into the door, half-wishing to be on the other side. The other half of me, *which included my dick*, was so fucking grateful I wasn’t.

Aaron turned around in a circle giving me the full view of his body. I couldn’t move my eyes away from his torso, all that skin... He leaned in close to me, putting his cheek next to, but not touching, mine. I closed my eyes, feeling his heat, inhaling the scent of Aaron and beer. I felt his hot breath on my ear. And then, I heard his gritty voice, “Do you like what you see, Jer?”

My teeth clenched down on my lip... I tasted blood. Blood. HIV. Fuck.

I let my lip go, and ducked down and around Aaron, so I could move and breathe freely again. My fists clenched at my sides, I pulled the air in and then slowly exhaled, before I turned around. He stood there leering at me, half-naked and dripping. And beautiful. There was some emotion, something beyond hate or distaste, brewing behind his eyes.

The door moved behind him. “Bean? You in here?”

I didn’t answer for a moment. The door moved again, this time hitting Aaron in the back. “Fuck this,” he scoffed before pulling the door wide open.

“Jeremy? You okay?” Dustin’s eyes bounced from me to Aaron and back again.

“What—”

“Ohhh, he’s with you,” Aaron said with a cutting glare. “Wow Jer, you move quick. I never would have thought you had it in you.”

“No—” I started.

“No need to explain. I’ll let you two get back to whatever it was you were doing.” Aaron turned and clapped Dustin on the back. “Thanks for the loaner, man.”

He threw me a wink and walked out the door, leaving his shirt, still dripping in the sink. My head was throbbing, the confusion of what just went on didn’t help. I leaned against the counter with a groan.

Dustin hadn't moved. His feet were planted, and his mouth hung open. After a moment, "What the hell just happened? Who was that asshole?"

"That..." I said as I finally made my way to the urinal, "...was Aaron." I finished up and moved back to the sink to wash my hands.

There was a hint of disbelief in Dustin's voice. "Seriously?" The disbelief was short-lived, as he met my gaze in the mirror. His features turning tight and red. A near-growl vibrated from his chest.

"What the fuck happened to your face?"

Chapter Eight

Sunday afternoon, I found myself standing across the street from McIntyre's watching Aaron through the window. He was slumped over the bar, flipping through a magazine. Only a handful of customers filled the tables in the restaurant. I shifted my weight between my feet. For two days I'd been trying to calm Dustin down... and get the knot on my forehead to shrink. I hadn't been very successful with either.

I was angry. Pissed. Confused. My hand clenched around Aaron's T-shirt. In a moment of weakness, I'd brought it home and washed it. For the past day, it had sat on top of my washing machine taunting me. It made me question everything I'd felt that day before he'd kicked me out. Had I been drunk that night? A little, but the three shots and two beers over four hours did not get me wasted. The kiss. He didn't fake that. And all the laughs we'd shared, the silliness. For an accountant like me, who liked everything in its place, and got annoyed when things stepped out of line, that must have meant something.

I just didn't know what.

And then there was the "bathroom incident". He hadn't been expecting me to walk through that door. I saw the confusion in his eyes when I walked in. It was real. But then, like so many other times, the ornery asshat took over while the real Aaron hid behind his camouflage. I just needed to figure out if the real Aaron was worth wading through all the shit he'd laid in waiting.

Why? That was the biggest question of all. I twisted the shirt in my hands until my knuckles went white. Maybe after all this time, Dustin's hot temper was wearing off on me.

Except, I didn't know if I could do this. Thinking it was one thing, doing it...

I felt like a colony of ants had taken up residence in my epidermis.

You're being ridiculous, my brain told me. You just told D you were your own man. So fucking act like it. Man up and cross the street. Worst case scenario, he yells and humiliates you. What's new about that?

My brain and I had to work on motivational pep talks.

"Okay," I said aloud. "I'm doing this."

I steeled my shoulders back and set my jaw. I stared straight across the street. *I'm doing this.*

I stepped off the curb and into the road, focusing only on Aaron through the window. His disheveled hair, the slope of his shoulders—

HONK!

I jumped back startled, and watched the car swerve toward the middle of the road to avoid me. *Jesus, I'm an idiot.*

I stared across the street. Dark eyes stared back at me. I scowled right back. This time, I looked both ways before I crossed.

“How can I help you today?”

I sat, hunched over and fidgeting, on the bar stool, the T-shirt on the bar in front of me. I was rubbing my fingers so hard, I was afraid the skin would come off. In the time it had taken me to cross the street and enter the building, Aaron had done a disappearing act.

A woman in her mid-fifties, with salt and pepper hair and knowing, navy eyes was staring down at me. I felt like a third grader sitting in the principal's office. She had to be Aaron's mother. I didn't know what to say or how much she knew. Did she know about Mal? Did she know about the clinic? Did she know about me?

“Um, I'd like to leave this for Aaron... please...” With a trembling hand, I pushed the shirt closer to her. “...ma'am.” I gulped down a mouthful of spit.

“Don't call me ma'am, kid,” she scoffed. “I'm Maggie. You a friend of Aaron's?”

“Yes,” I said. “Well, sorta.” My language skills were impressive.

“Sorta? Hmm.” She ran her hands over the T-shirt, smoothing out the wrinkles. She twisted her lips. “What's your name?”

“J-Jeremy.” My mouth was suddenly dry.

“Jeremy, huh? How'd you get that bump on your head?” She gripped the other side of the bar and leaned over just enough to make me squirm even more than I already was.

“Is Aaron here?” I deflected. I didn't know how to answer her question.

“No, he went to the basement to check a keg which I know full well has nothing wrong with it.” She cocked her head, and looked at me as though she was trying to place a crucial puzzle piece. I squirmed some more.

“Okay, I just wanted to talk to him.” I started to move off the stool.

“You the one I heard leaving his apartment a few weeks back?”

“Um...” I didn't have any answers for her.

“Thought so. Listen Jeremy. I don't know what happened between you two, but Aaron's got a lot going on right now. Give him some time.” She shoved a draft in front of me. “Here kid, maybe this will help you remember how to talk. You look like you could use it.”

“Thanks.”

The beer tasted cold and creamy and finally my mouth started working.

“Did Aaron talk to you?” I asked, sincerely.

“That kid doesn't talk to anybody.” *He'd talked to me.*

“Aaron's my son. I know him, whether or not he thinks I do. Not much gets by me. He's a good kid, despite whatever words are flying from his mouth. Whatever is going on, it's not meant to hurt you.”

“I don't know what I did,” I said. “One minute, everything was fine, great even. The next, it wasn't.”

“Oh hon, you probably didn't do anything,” she said, placing her hand over mine. “I don't know why he's acting like he is, but believe me when I say, he is probably doing all this in some warped effort to protect you. He's got a lot going on right now. I bet you came as a surprise to him, especially after...” She didn't finish her sentence, but gave me a warm smile. “Like I said, give him some time, okay?”

“Okay.”

Maggie and I talked for another half hour or so. Not so much about Aaron, instead, she asked about me. I told her about my job, and when she joked about a discount on her taxes, I gave her my card and told her to call if she ever needed any help.

I left there feeling better about things.

I was still thinking about all of it Wednesday, when I walked through my door and dropped my bag by the coat rack. I took two steps and stopped dead in my tracks.

Greg was standing in my kitchen fixing a cup of coffee.

I squeezed my hands into fists and stalked toward him.

“Get the fuck out of my house, Greg!” I roared.

“Hi, Jeremy,” he said, when I was an arm’s length away.

My eyebrows were up past my hairline. “Hi, Jeremy. That’s what you have to say to me? *Hi, Jeremy?* You are fucking unbelievable. Get the fuck out.”

“I came to say I’m sorry.” His ice-blue eyes met my narrowed ones.

“Sorry? I think we’ve gone beyond sorry, but if it will get you out of my house, fine, you’ve said it. I’ve heard it. Leave.”

“Did you get—” he started.

“You don’t get to ask that question!” I yelled at him. “You cheated on me! You didn’t even have the balls to face me! I got a fucking letter!”

“I know. I know. I made a mistake.”

“Mistake?” I let out an incredulous chuckle. “Just one?”

“Jeremy, let me explain. Please,” he begged.

“I don’t need an explanation. You cheated. You didn’t use condoms. You got HIV. It’s pretty clear cut. I don’t want you here. Please leave.”

“C’mon J...” He stood there in my kitchen with his hands stretched out. I didn’t want to hear him. I didn’t want anything from him. Why was he still standing there?

“Leave, Greg. Now.” I said resolutely. My feet were planted. I had my phone in my hand, ready to make a call if he didn’t.

“Okay, it’s obvious you aren’t ready to talk. I’ll go now, but this conversation isn’t over.”

I opened the door for him and watched as he walked out the door, shoulders slumped, with his hands shoved in his pockets. I almost had the door shut when he turned back to me and said, “I miss you, Jeremy.”

What the fuck? I slammed the door shut and turned the deadbolt and sunk to the floor. I let my arms rest on my knees and my head fell back as I let out a huge breath. Damn.

Dustin was on my doorstep again. “Fridays are now officially brother-bonding days,” he proclaimed.

Looking down at the tool box and Home Depot bag he carried, I doubted that was the purpose of his visit. “Really?”

“Yup, really. You order some Chinese, pick out a movie, I’m changing your locks.”

I sighed and rolled my eyes, but did as he asked.

Two hours later, I had new keys on my keychain, and a belly full of MSG. I was lounging on one end of my sofa with my brother on the other, ready to surrender to the inevitable food coma, when my phone buzzed. Shit. I didn’t want to talk to anybody.

I slapped around for my phone until I finally found it on the end table. It wasn’t a number I recognized. My stomach was starting to churn as I contemplated whether or not to answer. Fuck it.

“Hello?”

“Jeremy, that you? Did I get the right number?” I’d only heard the voice once before, and it had been standing behind a bar giving me the what-for.

“Maggie? Yes, you got the right number. Is everything okay? Is your quarter ending or something?”

Dustin sat upright on his end of the couch and leaned his elbows on his knees.

“No, it’s not my damn taxes, though right now that might be easier to deal with.”

“Oh shit,” I mumbled. If she was calling me, and it wasn’t about her damn taxes, it was about her...

“Yeah, it’s about my damn son.” *How the hell did she do that?*

Dustin narrowed his eyes. I waved him off. “What’s up, Maggie? Why are you calling me? If it has to do with Aaron, I don’t know what good I can do. He’s made it abundantly clear he doesn’t want to see me.” I figured I’d beat her to the punch. Cut, whatever the request was, off quick. Make her see... but yeah, I forgot. This was Maggie, with her freaking sixth sense about the human psyche.

“That’s just his way of telling you he likes you.”

I scoffed, “I don’t think it’s very effective. I’d hate to see how he treats people he doesn’t like.”

“Well, that goes one of two ways, either he punches them in the face, or he completely ignores them. You, he actually cares enough about to yell at.” She said the words like they made sense.

“Um, I’m not following you here, Maggie,” I said, honestly confused as to where any of this was leading.

“You got me all sidetracked. I need you to come down here, Jeremy.”

“That’s not a good idea,” I replied, because it really, really wasn’t.

“Yeah, it is. I’ve spent the past two days trying to get through to that kid. He won’t talk to anyone. I need reinforcements. I need you.”

“Maggie...”

“Quit your yappin’ and get your ass down here. Now!” The phone line went dead. *Fuck.*

Dustin was waiting to get filled in. After the bathroom collision, he was still very much in the anti-Aaron camp. I scrubbed my face with my hands before uttering, resignedly, “Feel like going to get a beer?”

My brother groaned as he pushed himself up off the couch. I followed.

Chapter Nine

We hadn't even made it to McIntyre's door, and Maggie was outside.

"You," she pointed at Dustin. "Inside. Pick a spot at the bar. I'll be there in a minute."

Dustin did the only thing he could do, he opened the door and went in. I gulped.

"Now, Jeremy. Here are the keys. There's the door. Good luck." She placed a ring with two keys on it in my hand and gave it an extra squeeze.

"B-but..."

"The square one is for the deadbolt, but I'd turn the other one first, it's quieter."

"Mag..." I saw a streak of gray, and she was gone. *Well, shit.* What the hell was I getting myself into?

I trudged up the two flights of stairs. It was quiet but for the thumping of my feet as they landed heavily on each step. Appropriately enough, it reminded me of a dirge. Cue the Chopin...

At the top landing, I paused and stared at the door, still five feet away. My back found the wall, and I pressed my shoulder blades against it. *What was I doing here?*

I shouldn't have come. Regardless of Maggie's request, I shouldn't have come. Aaron didn't want me here. How many times did I need to hear him say it, shout it, snarl it at me, before I got it through my head that he meant it?

I wish I could turn my back on him and leave and find someone easy. *Easy.* What a foreign term! What would *easy* be like after the cheating asshole? You'd think I'd look for someone warm and welcoming. Someone who would laugh when they saw me, give me a hug, or two. Nope, I found Aaron. Aaron, who had tried to push me away at every turn. Who would sooner show me his back or disappear before putting his arms around me. Yet, here I was. Because, deep in my heart—or somewhere—I believed that he needed me. And I couldn't just walk away. Because maybe, if I were being honest with myself, maybe I was the one who needed *him*. *Shit.*

I pushed off the wall, took three steps to the door, unlocked it, and went inside.

The black bracelet. I'd forgotten about it. But there it was. Still wrapped around his wrist. I couldn't remember if it had been on his wrist the other times I'd seen him; it didn't matter one way or the other. I could see it now, as he lay sleeping in his bed. He looked innocent. Naked and beautiful, covered only by a thin white sheet. I wanted to crawl in next to him and put my arms around him, feel his body pressed against mine. God, he took my breath away.

So did the apartment, but for an entirely different reason. It looked like H&R Block at 12:01 a.m. on April 16. The coffee table was overturned, a mess of pizza and boxes strewn around it. Trash was piled high in the bin and spilled out all over the kitchen floor. Glasses and picture frames were shattered...

Aaron snored.

Shit. I didn't want to wake him up. He looked so peaceful, and there had obviously been enough upheaval in his life; I wanted him to take the quiet when he could find it. I made a plan.

I went in search of trash bags and started cleaning. I turned the furniture upright, and I moved to the kitchen, gathering the dishes, picking up old wrappers, throwing everything I could into trash bags, before digging around in a closet and finding the broom. I swept up the broken glass and washed the dishes. It took me about a half an hour before I felt the kitchen could pass muster. I moved on to the next section, dragging the broom and trash can with me.

I tossed a boot toward the door where some other shoes were. I bent down and gingerly picked up a framed photo, staying clear of the broken glass that surrounded it—

“What the fuck?”

Releasing a shaky breath, I slowly stood up, and turned to face him. He'd propped himself up on his elbows. The sheet had fallen down to his hips. Surrounded by white, there was nothing peaceful about the man glaring at me. The look he wore now made me cower. *Bracelet. He's still wearing the bracelet.* It had to mean something.

“How the hell did you get in here?” he snarled.

I pulled my shoulders back. “Your mom gave me the keys.”

“Of course she did,” he said as he rolled his eyes. “And what do you think you are doing?”

“Cleaning,” I deadpanned.

“Of course you are.” He narrowed his eyes, and I watched as they drifted from my face to my hand to the trash and back. “You can leave now.”

I placed the frame on the coffee table, before moving to the edge of the bed. Keeping my voice steady, I simply said, “No.”

He flopped back against the pillows. “Please, Jer. I’d like you to leave.” His voice sounded defeated.

“Why, Aaron? Why do you want me to leave? You give me the reason, the real reason, you don’t want me here, and I will walk out that door, wishing you the best of luck, and never come back. If that’s what you want, just tell me.” I crossed my arms over my chest. This act of his, the vitriol and spitefulness, the snarling, growling, and posturing. It was all going to stop, one way or another. Right. Now.

All the color drained from his face. Those navy eyes were filled with longing and... *regret*... pleading with me for something I didn’t understand.

He rolled over and buried his head in the pillows, curling his arms underneath. He was hiding... from me.

“Aaron, help me here. I don’t get it. I want to, though. What have I done to make you this angry? I don’t understand what I’ve done that’s hurt you.”

I heard a muffled, “Nothing. You haven’t done anything,” coming from the bed, and he turned to rest his cheek on a pillow. His stare was empty as he looked away from me into the room. He seemed so lost.

I took a step toward the bed, and another. My knees were level with the edge, and then I crawled up and over him. I kept my body high above his, but dipped my head down so my mouth was next to his ear. “Talk to me,” I whispered.

A sound close to a whimper escaped from between his lips. “Talk to me, Aaron. Let me help you.”

I lowered my lips to kiss the skin right behind his ear. I felt him stiffen, but I continued to drift and kissed into his hairline. He smelled of stale sweat and musk. I thought I heard him groan, but I ignored it. My lips had taken over navigation and found their way to his shoulders, and I kissed my way across the unmarred skin.

His ass bucked up and nudged my groin. My hips pushed back, and I let out a whimper of my own as I kissed my way down the bulge of his bicep and

licked my way back up, tasting the salty skin, the fine hairs tickling along my tongue.

He tried to move and push himself up, but I grabbed hold of his wrists and held him steady. I leaned my whole body over and kissed his left wrist just above the bracelet. I released my hold, pushing myself up, straddling his ass and running my hands down the length of his arms and onto his back. I swirled my hands around between his shoulder blades, pressing deep, feeling those taut muscles.

Aaron groaned. I ignored my cock and refused to think about the fact that there were only two layers of fabric separating my dick from his ass. This moment wasn't about me. It was about Aaron, about his feelings, his anger and his fear. This was about making him feel safe.

"Jeremy," he said so softly I almost missed it. "I'm sorry."

"It's okay. You haven't done anything I can't forgive," I said earnestly, letting my hands trace the lines and bends of his shoulder blades, I leaned down and kissed the top of his spine.

"Yes, I have." I felt him start to twist, and this time I let him. He lay on his back, my legs still straddling his hips, looking up at me. He reached his hand up and brushed my bangs to the side, running his fingertips over my forehead. "I hurt you."

I couldn't help the chuckle. "No. You hurt the door. I just had the unfortunate luck of being on the other side." He gazed up at me and worried his lip. "It was an accident," I said, and moved my hand to cup his face. It was rough with stubble, and I couldn't stop my thumb from stroking along his cheekbone.

"It's more than that. I am so sorry, Jer. So fucking sorry. I said such awful things to you. I hurt you physically. And I... Shit. Jeremy. I don't know how to tell you." His trembling hands hovered over my thighs, like he wanted to but was too afraid to actually touch. Just a fraction of an inch away, I could feel the heat coming off them, and I realized I had the answer to a question I'd asked myself days before. Yes, Aaron was worth all the mire I had to wade through. I placed my hands over his and pressed them down onto my thighs. Aaron let out a hiss and tried to move them away, but I just pressed harder and arched up into the touch.

"I can handle the words, you know. You aren't the first person to yell at me." I ran my hands up his arms and over his pecs, letting my fingertips barely graze over his nipples.

His breath caught.

“We can’t do this, Jer,” he said, his navy eyes glossed over. His chest rising and falling in heaves. His erection pressing up against my ass.

“Yes, we can.” I bent down and took his mouth with mine. My tongue darted in and claimed his, stale breath and all. It found my favorite tooth and stroked it, before moving back and tracing his lips. I felt Aaron’s arms wind around me, scratching down my back and squeezing at my ass. My hips started moving of their own volition, and his followed suit. I pushed all other thoughts out of my head. The heat between us was all that mattered.

And then it was gone. Aaron shoved me off of him with a grunt and was suddenly across the room, standing there in all his naked glory, his hair sticking up in every direction, his cock—his glorious cock—jutting straight out, while mine pushed angrily against my zipper.

“We can’t do this. We can’t.” He shook his head.

Confusion came flooding in like the tide during a hurricane. I collapsed back on the bed trying to wrap my head around what was going on. Trying to figure out how two minutes ago, I was thirty seconds away from coming, and now I was lying alone on a bed while a naked, seemingly bipolar man muttered angrily and paced the length of his apartment.

What was wrong with me? I was a bit nerdy, geeky. I was klutzy and awkward. But Aaron knew all that, and he still wanted me; his wide open pupils and the erection of steel that had been pressing against my ass, had sent that message loud and clear. There was nothing obvious, except... except what was so obvious I hadn’t even considered it.

“Is it because of the HIV? Because you’re afraid I have it, or you have it, afraid that we can’t be safe?” I asked dejectedly. My heart was in my throat as my gaze drifted out the window, past the streetlights, to the blinking red signals from boats in the harbor. Boats heading out to the dark water. I wanted to sail away too.

HIV. That was the one thing I couldn’t change. I couldn’t change what my status was. Hell, I didn’t even know what my status was. The test may have read negative a few weeks ago, but in forty-six days I could very well be looking at two lines instead of one. I turned back to him and sighed, “Is that what’s happening here, Aaron?”

“What?” The pacing stopped. “No, Jer. It’s not the HIV thing,” he groaned, scrubbing his hands across his face. “That would be easier,” he muttered.

Easier?

I pushed myself up away from the safety of the bed and walked to where he stood by the couch. I stood an arms-length away and studied him. His body was trembling. Goose bumps covered his skin. That invisible shield he'd been wearing at the clinic was gone. He had nothing protecting him now. I took another step and brought my hands to his arms and caressed up and down the roughened skin, trying to rebuild the connection. "Talk to me," was all I could say.

He brought his forehead down and rested it against mine. I felt his whole body shudder as he took deep breaths and exhaled them. His skin felt cold as I took his hand in mine and pulled at it to bring him close, but his leg bumped the coffee table. I heard a *thunk* and the tinkle of glass. I quickly put my palm against his chest and pushed back gently. Aaron was still naked. Vulnerable. I didn't want him to get cut.

"I'll get this, why don't you go find a pair of pants and some shoes," I said.

I grabbed the broom, and I could hear the sliding of drawers and the rustle of fabric behind me as Aaron got dressed.

I was hunched down and sweeping up the glass when I heard the door click. I groaned, picture frame in hand. *I'm going to kill Dustin and his ever-impeccable timing.* I looked up at Aaron. His eyes were darting from me, to the door, to the glass frantically.

Suddenly, in one precise moment, everything came together, as if a director had cued *Action!*

"Jer..." I could hear quick footsteps as Aaron came toward me. The door kept opening, blocking from sight whoever was on the other side. I looked down at the frame with the broken glass and the black-and-white photo, and I could feel all the blood drain from my face.

I heard Aaron let out an anguished gasp.

And from the doorway I heard a voice, "Well, this is a bit of a surprise. Hello, Aaron, J."

I knew that voice. I'd last heard it two days prior. And my heart cracked a bit as I realized it was the voice that belonged to the man whose photo I held in my hand. A photo of Aaron kissing his cheek.

It was the voice of the man I'd called boyfriend, partner. Greg.

Chapter Ten

I couldn't breathe. Greg and Aaron had had an affair. Greg and Aaron had slept together. How long? Was it still going on? Were they laughing at me the whole time? God, I was an idiot.

I closed my eyes and focused on breathing. Air in, air out. I was a fool. The tears I hadn't felt in weeks prickled behind my eyes. I dug my fingernails into my palms, trying to regain control over myself. Over something, anything. Because, at that moment, it seemed like the world was spiraling around me, and there was nothing I could do to stop it. I couldn't stop it, any more than I could stop the virus which was probably multiplying exponentially in my blood stream, as I sat crushed and devastated on the floor. Pathetic.

A thunderous roar filled the room as voices started shouting in unison.

"You! Don't you think you've caused enough damage?" Maggie's voice thundered.

"You motherfucking son of a bitch! I'm going to fucking kill you, you fucking prick!"

Fucking perfect. Another situation I couldn't control. My over-protective brother and an overbearing bartender. I let my consciousness slink further away as I saw Dustin advance on Greg, and Maggie grab his arms to pull him back. I let everything go, until I sat there, on the hardwood floor, empty. Aware of things going on, but not willing, or able, to process them.

I saw Aaron standing three feet away from me, slumped and defeated, his wet eyes focused on me. "I'm sorry." I saw his lips move, but I couldn't hear the words. I couldn't hear anything but the blood pounding in my ears. I shook my head and looked around the room again. I didn't understand how this could happen? How did I get here?

I pushed up off the floor. Aaron took a step toward me, but I held up a hand and stumbled back.

Dustin and Maggie had Greg cornered in the kitchen. Greg had his hands up defensively to counter my brother's clenched fists and Maggie's pointing finger. I watched them gesture, saw their mouths move in angry snarls, and was beyond thankful for the momentary deafness that had settled over me.

Aaron reached out, but I brushed his hand away. After one final look, I turned and walked out of the apartment, down the stairs, and out onto the street.

The air tasted like salt water and exhaust fumes.

Déjà vu.

Only this time, instead of Aaron walking into me, I was walking away from him. Away from everything. He didn't need me. I had been so stupid to believe that.

I let my feet carry me away from the bar, down the street and around the corner. It was Friday evening, and the Old Port teemed with activity. Waves of people flowed into bars; laughter and music flowed out from the open doors and into the street. I walked through it all, using it like a camouflage. I wanted to put as much distance as I could between me and McIntyre's.

I walked and walked until the streets were quiet. With the silence and distance came clarity. What was I doing? I'd been asking myself all kinds of questions. Most I didn't have answers to. But as I walked what became most clear was that I was just running away. Things had become difficult, and instead of dealing with them, I'd evaded them, avoided them. *Just like Greg.*

I didn't want to be that person. I didn't want to turn out like that. Floating about, never happy with what was in front of me. Always wanting more. I wasn't sure what I wanted. But, I still had that empty feeling in my chest. Walking away hadn't filled it.

There was only one thing, one person, I could think of who could.

I took two steps through the doorway and stopped dead in my tracks. Holding his head in his hands, sitting on my couch, was Aaron.

"Hi," I said softly.

"Hi, Jer." He twisted his fingers together as he spoke.

"How'd you get in?" I shut the door and walked over to the couch, curling up on the end.

He let out a sad chuckle. "Dustin actually. He and I had a long, long chat." My eyes widened; the thought of that was a bit frightening. "Yeah, you might want to call him before he bullies a cop into filing a missing person's report on you."

“Dustin can be a bit much to deal with, I’m sor—”

“Don’t,” Aaron started. “Don’t you dare apologize. You haven’t done anything to apologize for. I should have told you in the beginning when I figured it out. Instead, I got...”

“Pissed?” I offered when his voice trailed off.

The sound of a long sigh filled the otherwise silent room. “Well, pissed is one way to put it.”

I brought my knees up and wrapped my arms around them. “W-when did you figure it out?” It was the one answer I didn’t want to hear. I didn’t think he’d known all along. I didn’t want to believe it. But there was still this piece of me that was so incredibly frightened that he had. I squeezed my knees tighter.

“That night. After the clinic. You’d gone into the bathroom, and I was sitting on the sofa, trying to wrap my head around what was happening. The day with you was so...” He paused, and a shy smile formed on his lips as he continued, “...unexpected. And the night, well, that had just been hot. Jesus. Watching you wrap your plump lips around... well, around a cucumber, put all sorts of crazy thoughts in my head. You were so fucking sexy.”

I sucked in a breath, and then I started coughing. I think I was choking on my own spit. *Fucking sexy?* I’d never heard those words used to describe me. I was just your average beanpole. Too skinny, dull brown hair, nothing special. I pounded on my chest a couple of times.

“You okay? Do you want some water or something?” Aaron looked at me with eyes full of concern.

I shook my head slightly. “N-no, I’m fine,” I sputtered. *Cough*. “R-really.” *Cough*. My eyes started to tear, and I banged on my sternum again, trying to regain control. I needed to get it together. *Fucking sexy?* The thought sent more spit down the wrong pipe, and the coughing intensified.

The couch shifted a bit as Aaron pushed off of it. I watched through my watery eyes as he went into the kitchen and after a couple of tries, found the cupboard with the glasses. He filled one with water from the tap and handed it to me before sitting back down on the couch, a little bit closer than he’d been before. I sipped the water gratefully. I closed my eyes, taking a deep, uninterrupted breath and felt a hand rubbing small circles between my shoulder blades.

“Just breathe, Jer.” Warmth spread from his hand all through my torso and down into my limbs. I melted into his touch, inhaling deeply. Aaron’s musky scent filled my nostrils. I took another breath. “There, that’s it,” he whispered. “You sure you’re okay?”

“Mmm...” I hummed. I could feel his breath on my cheek. I opened my eyes and found his face just inches from mine. Emotions I couldn’t identify were shining from those navy eyes. I melted a little bit more.

Aaron’s Adam’s apple bobbed as he cleared his throat and shifted back a couple inches on the cushion. Taking the warmth of his hand with him. “Um, where were we?”

“Fucking sexy,” I said. The wistful words came from my mouth. I squeezed my eyes shut. *Shit.*

Aaron chuckled. “Well, you were. You are.” I groaned. He sank back into the cushions, leaving his hand just inches from my foot. “Ah-em. Anyway, yeah, so you were in the bathroom, and I was trying to figure it all out. Thinking about everything. The clinic, coffee, the way you got all shy and flustered, turned red, and called me Snookums. All these random thoughts were bouncing around in my head.

“Then that kiss. Jesus, that kiss. I’d felt it in my fucking toes. Then I thought about the asshole that fucked around on you, and how he left you, and I got angry. I wanted to hit something. How could someone do that to you? You were sweet and funny, and you brought a kind of calm, well, maybe not calm, but that night with you in my apartment, there was some kind of balance. I hadn’t felt it before, certainly not with Mal.”

His whole body stiffened, and his lip turned up at the last word. I reached my hand out and placed it over his. He turned his palm over and intertwined his fingers with mine, giving them a slight squeeze before he continued, “Yeah, Mal. There I was waiting for you, warm and tingly. Feeling a little bit hopeful, a little bit horny and all kinds of confused, and your phone buzzed. Mal’s picture lit up on the screen.

“All those emotions focused, and I got fucking pissed. I picked up your phone, and then I saw the name. ‘Greg’. The douche-bag that had fucked you over was the same asshole that had done it to me. Gregory Fucking Maletta. I don’t know why I hadn’t put it together sooner. I was pissed at myself. I had been so stupid.”

I uncurled my legs and moved a bit closer to him. His body was rigid, and his voice had grown thick. I squeezed his hand a bit tighter and brought it into my lap, clasping it between both of mine.

“I was so angry. So confused. I felt like such a fool. God. There I was, suddenly the unintended other man in your relationship with your partner. I felt like such an asshole. All these thoughts ran through my head. But, I didn't know about you. I didn't. I wouldn't step in on someone like that.” His voice was laced with desperation.

“I believe you,” I whispered, stroking the back of his hand with my thumb, trying to offer some reassurance.

“Thank you.” He brought our hands up and leaned over to press his lips against my fingers. “But what I did next, what I thought next, I am so incredibly ashamed of. Somehow in that moment with everything twisted around, I was upset, and I still had just enough of a buzz to cloud things. Instead of being pissed at Mal, or Greg, I got...”

“Pissed at me,” I said in a soft, but matter-of-fact voice. Aaron leaned his head back on the couch and tried to pull his hand away, but I pulled it closer, hugging it to my chest.

“Jer.” He looked at me with sorrowful eyes, and heaved a sigh.

“It's okay, Aaron. I got pissed at me too. Wondering what I'd done. Thinking I hadn't been man enough to keep my man from straying. It's okay.”

“No, it's not. It's not okay. You didn't do anything wrong,” Aaron said. “And it took a bit, but eventually I realized that I hadn't done anything wrong either. The only person who wasn't man enough was Gregory Maletta. The only blame to place is on him. A fact I didn't get my head wrapped around until after I'd so rudely kicked you out.” He pulled at his hand again, but I didn't let go, instead I followed it, and ended up pressed against his hard, warm chest. I felt the press of his lips on my forehead.

“And then, when I saw you again, I felt so ashamed, especially after the bathroom. My behavior was unforgivable. I couldn't face you and not feel all the self-loathing amplified a thousand times over. So I lashed out, and behaved like a total ass. For me, it was easier to have you hate me because I was a jerk, than to have you hate me because Mal and I were fucking.” I listened to the breath flow in and out of Aaron's lungs as he sighed. I wrapped my arms around him and squeezed.

“But Jeremy, what if...” I could feel his breath catch and raised my head up to look at him. His eyes were full of tears, and I raised my hand to his face, stroking the scruff with my thumb. “Jer, what if I was the one to get Mal sick? What if I got him sick, and now you’re sick too? How could you not hate me? How could you ever forgive me? How—”

I could only imagine the guilt he must be feeling. The unfounded guilt. I placed my index finger over his lips to stop him. “Don’t. Don’t go there, Aaron. I don’t believe that. Greg already tested positive. You didn’t. You might never. I don’t know if it works like that. I don’t know if someone can test positive before the person who infected them. It sounds highly unlikely, but it doesn’t matter. You didn’t go out trying to hurt anyone. You were in a non-exclusive relationship with a guy. It’s not your fault that he didn’t tell you about the terms of a relationship he was in with someone else. You have no fault here. Don’t do that to yourself.” I cupped his face in both my hands, and leaned in to kiss away an escaped tear.

I was moving my mouth to his other cheek when suddenly his lips were against mine. It was a chaste kiss, our lips sliding over each other. Our arms wrapped around one another. I ran my hands up and into his hair, all while our lips were pressing into each other over and over until Aaron broke it off and buried his face against my neck. “Thank you,” he whispered.

I let out a breathless laugh. “Aaron, there’s nothing to thank me for. I haven’t done anything special.”

“Yes, yes there is, Jer. Ever since my birthday, you’ve *been* so much more than special.”

Chapter Eleven

Scratch. Scratch. What the fuck was making that sound? A sleepy haze blanketed my brain. I tried to roll over, wanting to bury my head under a pillow, but as I shifted, I felt an arm tighten around my waist. And a rock hard erection press against my ass. *A what?*

I felt hot breath in my hair, and heard a deep sleep-filled groan. *Aaron.* I snuggled back, pushing my ass into his groin, and let out my own groan as he nudged it forward.

We'd fallen asleep talking at some point during the night. I found out that my grumpy Aaron volunteered at the teen center. *My?* Underneath that gruff exterior was a kind-hearted soul, putting on the tough face for the world. *I don't know how you did it, Jer,* he'd said. *But you did. You got under my skin, and I like you there.* So yes, My. If I had anything to say about it.

And now we were lying on my couch, his body curved in behind me, so very close. I could feel the tight muscles of his thighs as they pressed against mine. The muscles in his forearms as they bunched when he squeezed around my belly. I swear I could even feel the slight poke of his nipples on my back, and I definitely knew I could feel my dick grow thick.

Scratch. Thump. Seriously, what was that? I started wondering if my house had a mouse infestation. I grumpily pushed myself up. "What?" Aaron's sleep-filled voice came from behind me.

"Just trying to figure out what that sound is," I said quietly.

Thump. Thump. Rap.

"Shit. Someone's at the fucking door. What time is it?" I asked, but didn't wait for an answer before I crossed the room. "It's Saturday. Don't people know to not to bug me until noon?" I muttered.

"Obviously not," Aaron groaned. "Didn't you call Dustin last night?"

"Yeah, I sent him a text, which he answered. I don't think this is him," I replied.

I felt Aaron behind me as I reached out for the door. Opening it, I wish I could say I was surprised by the person on the other side.

"Greg," I said resigned. "Why are you here?"

“You changed the locks?” Greg asked, instead of answering my question.

“I thought we made it clear we don’t want to see you.” I didn’t answer his question either.

Greg raised his eyebrows. “*We?* Isn’t that sweet? So how ’bout a threesome to celebrate?”

“Mal, you son of a bitch.” Aaron’s voice boomed from behind me.

“Jesus Christ, Aaron. You really need to learn how to take a joke. You always were an uptight bastard.”

This had to stop. Now. I stretched my hand behind me just to touch, to reassure him. I had this.

“Greg, you need to let go. Leave us alone. It’s time to move on,” I said evenly. “I’m not going to put up with this. You leave. You don’t come back. It’s easy. I won’t file a restraining order. I have nothing more to say to you.”

The door was halfway shut when I heard, “Wait ’til your window is up, and then tell me how you feel...” I froze, before turning back slowly to look at him, my mouth agape. Greg was standing there with one hand on his hip and his brow furrowed, looking at us like we were the ones who had done him wrong. Where the hell did he get off...?

I didn’t realize what I was doing until I felt a sharp pain in my left hand and saw Greg holding his hand to his eye.

I heard Aaron’s rich bark of a laugh behind me, and Greg’s whine, “What the fuck, Jeremy? I can’t believe you did...”

I shut the door, and Aaron’s arms were around me pulling me back to him even as I reached to turn the deadbolt. I could still hear Greg cursing on the other side, but I didn’t care. If I was honest with myself, there was a tiny part of me that was proud of myself. I couldn’t help the muttered rambling, “Fuck him. Really. Was he serious? Wait ’til my window is up? How could I have ever...”
Oh fuck.

I felt all the blood drain from my face. I flinched away from the body that held me. What if I’d cut Greg? What if I broke skin? His skin? My skin? So stupid to let my temper get the better of me and fucking punch someone. *Shit, shit, shit.*

“Relax.” I felt Aaron’s breath against my ear as he pulled my body flush against his. “You got him in the eye. I didn’t see any blood. Let me look at your

hand.” He put his hands on my shoulders and gently turned me to face him. I shuddered as my body moved as directed.

Tenderly, Aaron took my left hand in both of his and studied it while placing soothing caresses along my palm. The intensity in his dark-blue eyes was almost too much, my breaths became heavy and audible as I watched.

Aaron brought his gaze to mine and held it as he raised my hand to his mouth and kissed my index finger. “Not even a hangnail,” he said in a rough whisper, before moving on to carefully inspect the next.

He studied each finger, kissed each one, all while pressing his thumbs into my palm, stroking back and forth. I stood there unable to move, unable to turn my gaze from his mouth. He bent his head and licked from the top of my middle finger, down to my wrist and gently teased it with his teeth before ever so lightly pressing his lips against my pale skin.

“I think you’re good, Jer,” he said huskily, before bringing his mouth down on mine. I felt my knees waver, and brought my hands up to grip his shoulders as he wrapped his arms around me. I opened my mouth, and his tongue moved in to claim it as his own. It was wet and desperate. And fucking perfect. His tongue swirled around mine, teasing, curling. A tingle shot from my belly to my spine, shockwaves running down it like a power line. My cock grew harder with each swipe of his tongue, and I knew there was a good chance I might come right there.

I tore my lips from his and moved them across his cheek then continued to his stubbly neck. Aaron threw his head back, letting out a groan that vibrated through his chest. I licked my way down, pausing to suck, just the tiniest bit, on the place where I could feel his pulse beating rapidly beneath my tongue.

Aaron moaned, a sound I echoed. My tongue continued its journey, but clothing was in the way all too soon. I ran my hands down from his shoulders to his pecs and squeezed, digging my nails in.

“I think this needs to go,” I breathed out.

“I think we need a bed,” Aaron countered, his navy eyes glazed over. His chest was heaving under my fingers, which I brought together to squeeze his nipples through his cotton shirt. His nostrils flared, and one of my hands traveled down his torso, tracing a path over the hills and valleys of his hard abs, until my fingers finally reached the throbbing bulge in his pants and squeezed oh, so gently.

“Bed,” Aaron growled. “Now.”

I reclaimed his mouth and pulled at his shirt, walking us to the guest room. Aaron's hands moved down and gripped my ass, and then I was on my back and feeling his weight pressing me into the mattress. I wrapped my legs around his hips and starting bucking and rooting against him.

"We need to be naked. I wanna be naked," I begged and pleaded. And then the weight was gone, and I felt bereft. Panting and dazed, I pushed myself up. My breaths stopped all together at the sight of Aaron bending over and pushing off his pants. His ass. Hard muscles bunching. It was something an artist would use for a muse. I reached out and stroked my finger down the curve of his cheek, before pinching the spot where his ass met his thigh.

I didn't even blink, and I was on my back again. Aaron on top of me, tearing at my clothes. He yanked my shirt over my head, and I felt his wet mouth clamp over my nipple. I arched my back, trying to get closer. Sounds of my whimpers and his growls filled the room. Aaron pushed up, and I felt a tug at the bottom of my pants as he yanked them off.

I couldn't breathe. Laying there, looking up at him, I couldn't imagine anything more beautiful. Toned, lean... and fucking hard! His cock, heavy, achingly purple. Standing there at attention. His balls were drawn up tight. I didn't realize what was going on until I felt the wrinkly skin against my lips. The orb within tight, as I gave just a bit of suction, before moving to the other and giving it the same treatment.

I took his cock in hand and gave it a couple of firm pumps, as I licked up the seam of his sac. *Holy God!* I felt pre-cum dribble on my fingers. I swirled my fingers, spreading it around that angry head and pulled down toward my mouth. I wanted to... *oh shit.* I made an anguished sound and stopped my movements. Tears prickled behind my eyelids.

Aaron moved back, and a rough hand cupped my cheek, tilting my chin up. "I know, Jer. I want to taste you too... Luckily, there's a lot of you." He crushed his mouth down on mine, and pushed his weight on top of me, pinning me to the here and now, as he ground his hips together with mine. My harder-than-diamonds dick slid alongside Aaron's as his tongue fucked into my mouth. Every inch of my skin was on fire. My hands pawed and grabbed at any piece of Aaron they could reach.

"Tell me you have condoms. Please, God. Tell me that," Aaron rumbled.

Shit. Fuck. Damn. Did I? I hadn't used condoms in months. I hadn't planned on this.

“Oh! Wait!” I unceremoniously pushed Aaron to the side and sprinted out to my coat rack where I’d left my messenger bag. Grabbing it, and looking through as I ran back. Files, papers, pencils, everything was tossed out as I looked for...

“Ah ha!” I proclaimed, as I held up my lunch bag of condoms and lube from the clinic. I stopped dead. “Holy fuck,” I muttered.

There, leaning back against my pillows, was Aaron in all his naked glory, stroking his hand up and down his shaft. His eyes near black with desire, staring directly at me.

“Now,” he growled.

When I remembered how to breathe, I tossed the bag to him and crawled up onto the bed. Staring up at him from the area near his feet, I saw him reach for the bag, grabbing what he needed out.

I kissed his ankle and then licked my way up his inner thigh, pausing to swirl my tongue around his knee. I lapped against the hairs of his thigh and moved closer and closer until I finally found those tight balls and nipped a bit before teasing the skin right behind them with the tip of my tongue. I heard him snarl and hiss; my dick jumped.

“Jeremy.” His voice was commanding; I heard the crinkle of a wrapper and I stopped my teasing and raised myself up to kiss his plump mouth.

“How do you want me?” I breathed out.

“In me,” he gritted out, as I felt his fingers sliding a condom down my shaft.

Oh, Jesus, fuck! My mouth fell open, and I looked down at him. His eyes were desperate and lustful. His legs spread beneath me, and I felt him buck up before his hand slipped in between our bodies and down past my cock.

My mind finally got with the program. I hunched back and knocked his hand away. Grabbing the open lube packet, I smeared some on my fingers, before working one into his tight hole. The greedy thing sucked the digit in, and Aaron arched his back with a moan. I pushed in a second finger, stretching and twisting. Aaron hissed, and his hips reared up, forcing my fingers in deeper. I found his gland, and as I pressed down, Aaron roared, “Fucking. Now. Jeremy. Put your cock in me. Right! Now!”

I pulled my fingers out and lined my dick up with its target and pushed in. I couldn’t hear anything; I could only feel Aaron surrounding me. His legs

wrapped around my hips, urging me on. I thrust all the way inside him. It was the most incredible thing I'd ever experienced. That moment was filled with passion, lust, and comfort. That moment, it was perfect.

Aaron raised his hips to meet my thrusts. My whole body was reaching out, needing to feel him; I wanted to crawl the rest of the way inside him.

My hips plunged forward, and my mouth sought his out. My tongue darting in and battling with his. I swallowed his whimpers and his growls. My arms wove under his shoulders, giving me leverage. I slammed into him, feeling his cock tightly pressed and rubbing against my belly over and over. I thrust hard, driving for the prize. I wanted that. I needed it.

"I'm gonna, I'm gonna..." I felt the wetness spreading between us. Aaron's eyes rolled back in his head, and his body clenched around me. God, he was beautiful.

And that was all it took. I reared back, and shouted his name. White lights danced behind my eyelids as my cock emptied itself into him.

I pulled out, making sure to hold the condom in place before heading to the bathroom to dispose of it. I brought a damp washcloth back and swirled it around his belly, washing away the cum before tossing it into the hamper. I crawled in next to him, and we lay there staring at one another, petting each other. I caressed his arms, and his hands ran over my chest to rest over my heart. I don't think I had ever felt so content. So safe. It felt like a gift.

"Hold on," I said, as a thought crossed into my consciousness. I twisted around and half hanging off the bed, stretched for my bag. I felt Aaron's hands patting my ass, then his mouth kissing and lapping at my cheek. I let out a groan.

"I want this too," he said softly.

"I've got something for you," I said turning back to him with my hand behind my back.

He raised an eyebrow. "Hmm... I can think of a few things I'd like." He gave my ass a light spank. My cock took notice.

"Well, I'm pretty sure you're gonna love this," I said, turning up the corner of my mouth.

"Oh, I'm pretty sure, I'll love any of it, all of it." There was tenderness in his voice, and he leaned in and brushed his lips to mine.

“Wow,” I said dreamily, trying to absorb the meaning behind his words.

Aaron chuckled. “What’s my present?”

I grinned and pulled my arm from behind me and placed the red bag between us.

“Skittles?” he laughed.

“These come without a gooey aftertaste,” I replied, unable to keep the smile from my lips.

“Come here,” he said pulling me on top of him. “I’ve got other things I want to make gooey right now.” He kissed me, and I laughed into his mouth, satisfied and happy.

Chapter Twelve

Forty-five days later

Twinkle lights. There were still twinkle lights. My knee was bouncing. I felt a firm hand pressing down on it, stopping the motion, and brought my eyes up to meet the eyes that were so similar to mine.

“I’m here for you, Bean. Always.” I smiled up at my big brother. Every step of the way, he’d been there. Dustin refused to wait at my house. I’d tried everything; I’d told him I didn’t need an entourage. I even went so far as to say that people would think three of us were in a ménage relationship. I’d received a pointed glare for that and quickly decided that my boyfriend and my brother needed to spend less time together.

“Thanks, D.” He let my knee go with a squeeze and leaned back in his chair.

I felt smooth, soft lips press against my cheek, as Aaron’s strong arm wrapped around my shoulders. “It doesn’t matter what happens in that office, Jer. We’ll get through it. Together.” I melted into him. Taking his other hand in mine, I brought it to my lips and pressed a small kiss to the back of it, the hairs tickling my lips. Intertwining our fingers, I placed our hands in my lap. Aaron had been tested a week earlier, since he’d stopped sleeping with Greg before I had. At first, he’d wanted us to make an appointment for the same time, but I told him if the results weren’t as we’d hoped, we’d each need our own time to grieve. Seven days ago, I’d sat with him and held his hand as we looked at that white stick and saw one line. *Thank God.*

My stomach jostled with the memory; I didn’t know if I should even hope for the same result. I felt Aaron’s hand in mine, felt the pulse in his wrist, and a warm feeling spread from my chest down through my limbs, soothing the ache in my belly.

“It’ll be okay, Jer. We’ll be okay,” Aaron whispered. I laid my head on his shoulder and took a deep breath.

“Yeah,” I murmured. “Yeah, we will.”

“Jeremy?” Carrie stood by the hallway, her clipboard in her hand. I rose to follow her, two men in tow.

After borrowing a chair from another office, Carrie got the three of us arranged and seated. She placed herself across from us and asked me the same questions as last time. My answers were different though. I'd been tested sixty-four days ago. My cheeks were red, as I smiled at her and pled the fifth when she asked me when I'd had sex last. I made sure to clarify that *yes*, we had used a condom. And then I opened my mouth and she swiped the white stick and then set her timer. *Twenty minutes.*

She kept talking. Explaining that I'd still need to get tested again. Three percent didn't test positive until six months after infection, though many of those already had issues with their immune system beforehand.

"So, are these your partners, Jeremy?" She asked, and handed me another lunch bag.

I sniggered, and put the bag on Dustin's lap. He blushed as red as any lobster I'd ever seen. Aaron let out a hearty laugh and kissed my cheek.

"Told you," I said to my brother, before introducing Dustin to her, and explaining our fraternal relationship. "This is Aaron," I said, and then clarified our not-fraternal-in-any-way-shape-or-form relationship by placing a full kiss on his ever-so-kissable mouth.

"I remember the last time you were here." She peeked at me over the top of her clipboard. I was certain from the light in her eyes, she was remembering my rambling about lack of need for a lunch bag. "I'm glad for you."

I reached for Aaron's hand and brought it to my mouth for a kiss. I was glad for me too. The past few weeks were enlightening. I'd learned a lot about myself. I realized my strength. My ability to not just let life occur, but to grab it and live it. Aaron inspired me. He wasn't the cause of it, he was my muse for it. We'd started going to the teen center together. He would play the guitar and tell jokes; I would help kids with math homework and try not to create a spectacle by jumping on Aaron. The man was sexy just walking down the street, but sitting playing guitar... *Yum.*

Aaron had changed too. He was right when he'd talked about balance. That's what we brought each other, and with it came a kind of peace and happiness I hadn't known. The grumbly Aaron didn't come out so much anymore—unless I wanted him too. More than once I'd picked a fight with him, with my sole, solitary goal being makeup sex. To feel him hold me down, growling and thrusting...

Beep. Beep.

Had it been twenty minutes? Carrie turned to look at the test. It had.

This was it. *Oh God.*

“Come here, Jeremy, and I’ll explain this to you.”

Aaron hooked a finger under my chin and gently pulled me to face him. He leaned in slowly, his gaze never wavering from my eyes as he kissed the word, *together*, on my lips. I squeezed my eyes shut to prevent the tears from escaping, and I felt his lips kissing my wet eyelashes. “Together,” I whispered.

Dustin took my right hand; Aaron took my left. I gripped both of them, and we all stood up and went to huddle around Carrie. I knew she was talking, but all I could see was the white stick stuck into the contraption behind her. My chest was tight, and I couldn’t breathe. I felt my knees give way and the tears break free. Two sets of arms held me up.

One line. Negative.

Epilogue

God, I wanted a beer. We'd closed on the house two weeks ago. Half of our things were still in boxes; I'd tackle those tomorrow... maybe. I'd just finished working on the yard. All I wanted to do was collapse on my leather sofa, suck down a beer, and not move for two days.

It was Saturday, and Aaron had to work late at the bar. McIntyre's closed at two, then he had to clean and lock up, so chances were I wouldn't see him until morning. I hated these weekends.

I kicked off my dirt-caked sneakers by the door and had my shirt off before I'd even made it into the bathroom. I turned the water on hot, stripped off the rest of my clothes, and stepped in. The shower was my favorite part of the new house. Big enough for two, black-tiled, with three different showerheads. I closed my eyes and let the water beat down on my shoulders, soothing away the ache and washing away the grime.

The bathroom door clicked. *Fucking Dustin*. "Do you mind, D? I'll be out in a minute."

Suddenly, I felt cold air and strong arms wrapped around me.

"Aaron."

"Hmm," he hummed against my shoulder, as one hand held me still and the other hand migrated south and stroked my dick.

"Ungh," I groaned. I leaned my head back against his shoulder, and his tongue snaked out and licked up my neck. "I—I thought—I thought you were working late." His hand moved down to cup and squeeze my balls.

"Nope."

The steam rose around us as his hand moved back to grip my shaft, then stroke up and down, I pushed my ass into his hard cock. Wanting more. Turning my head up to his, he crushed his mouth on mine. I opened for him, and his tongue claimed mine, caressing, exploring my mouth, swallowing my whimpers. I thrust into his hand. And then it was gone.

His hands gripped my shoulders and pushed me against the wall. Our tongues found each other again, tangling and dancing together. His body wet and glistening, my hands stroked over his pecs and circled in to his nipples. I

took each in hand and twisted ever so slightly. Aaron ripped his mouth from mine, growling from deep in his chest.

Two years later, and he still turned me on like nothing else. No model, movie star, porn star, or human being could ever be as sexy as Aaron was right then. Navy eyes turned black with want and need, staring at me like I was a fucking feast. He dropped to his knees, and my cock was engulfed in wet heat. *Jesus.*

I looked down and watched the water pour over his dark hair and into his face. He bobbed his head sucking on my shaft, caressing it with his talented tongue. His hands rubbed up and down my thighs squeezing and scratching. Even in the heat of the shower, goose bumps erupted over my whole body and I started trembling. I looked down to see his eyes burning up at me as one of his hands slid between my legs. He growled around my cock and brought his head up, kissing the tip of my cock before shoving his tongue in the slit. The tingle in my spine told me the end was near, but I didn't want it to be over.

His tongue swirled, and my whimpers grew louder. My hand grasped at his hair as he thrust his mouth forward. I was in his throat, and his finger was in my ass. I screamed, my vision blurred, and I spasmed as he drank down everything my dick shot out.

His lips were back on mine; I could taste myself mixed with the salty musk of Aaron. I reached down to stroke his cock, to find it soft. "Aaron?"

"You are so fucking sexy, Jer," he whispered, as he nibbled at my earlobe. "I came when you did."

It was a good thing I was leaning against the wall, because I probably would have fallen over.

He reached over and turned the water off, then grabbed my hand and led me out and towed me off. I pulled him in for a soft, chaste kiss. "I love you."

"I know." Cheeky bastard. Some things would never change. *Thank God.* "Come on," he said, tugging at my hand.

I followed him to the bedroom, and he gently pushed me so I was sitting on the edge of the bed. "I have something for you." I sat there as he went to the nightstand and pulled out a small, rectangular box, wrapped in red paper. "Here, this is for you." He stayed hunched down in front of me as I held the box. It rattled when I shook it. I narrowed my eyes at him; he winked up at me. "Open it."

I tore off the paper and barked out a laugh. "Skittles?"

"Open them." Aaron's eyes held a bit of mischief, and... something else I wasn't quite sure of. I paused to look at him, balancing on the balls of his feet. I guess I took too long, because he grabbed the box and opened it for me.

"Eager? You need a Skittles fix or something?" I chuckled as I said it, but gazing down at him, I realized he'd gotten serious. My smile faded. "Aaron?"

His voice was husky when he said, "Hold out your hand, Jer."

I did as he asked, and he opened the box, and the tiny candies rattled out into my right hand. I looked down at the little rainbow, red, purple, yellow, gold... *Gold?* I felt my stomach jump and my breath caught in my throat as Aaron picked through the candies. My hand was shaking, and Skittles fell to the floor. I looked at Aaron with tears in my eyes. He was on one knee and pinched between his fingers was a gleaming gold band.

I had to hold back a sob, and his voice was choked when he spoke. "Two years ago, I was sitting in a clinic, miserable and pissed off at the world. That day was the best day of my life. It was terrifying, scary, humiliating, but I wouldn't change it for anything. That day brought me you."

I sucked in a breath. And as I gazed at him, his eyes overflowed. I reached my hand out and cupped his cheek, wiping the tears away with my thumb, and he pressed his face into my palm. "I love you, Jeremy Allen. I've had two years with you. We have a house. But I want more. I want it all. I want a family. I want to be your husband. Will you please, please marry me?"

I let the rest of the Skittles fall and moved to kneel in front of him. I brought my hands to his face and kissed his eyes, his cheeks, his nose, and finally placed a long, lingering kiss on his mouth. I felt his breath stutter, his hand shaking as I covered it with my own. I couldn't find the words. My heart was beating too fast. There was so much to say; so much I wanted to say. In the end, only one word passed my lips.

"Yes."

The End

Author's Note

The CDC estimates that in the US, fifty thousand people are infected with HIV each year. The clinic Aaron and Jeremy visit is based on the Frannie Peabody Center, located at One Spring Street in Portland, Maine. The Peabody Center, like many others around the country, offers free HIV testing, as well as other services to those testing positive... and yes, they have twinkle lights in the window.

For more information or to find a local testing center, these are some of the websites that I found helpful:

World Health Organization: <http://www.who.int/hiv/en/>

AIDS.gov: <http://www.aids.gov/>

AIDS Healthcare Foundation: <http://www.aidshealth.org/>

Frannie Peabody Center: <http://peabodycenter.org/>

amfAR: <http://www.amfar.org/>

The Body: <http://www.thebody.com/index.html>

Terrence Higgins Trust: <http://www.tht.org.uk/>

National Organization of People Living with HIV Australia:
<http://napwa.org.au/>

Author Bio

I live in the northeast corner of the United States in a tiny town just west of Portland, Maine. I'm a nocturnal creature, of the non-vampiric nature, and spend my nights awake, devouring books, scouring the Internet, and dreaming up beautiful men loving on each other.

Contact & Media Info

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