



**WRONG
DIRECTION**

KELLY JENSEN

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

WRONG DIRECTION

By Kelly Jensen

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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Photo Description

Two young men are engaged in a sweet and tender kiss. One is naked, the other wears only a towel. They seem to be in a bathroom, and are silhouetted by light from a window.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I had such a good feeling about this year. It's my last; I'm on track to graduate near the top of my class, I'm working towards a degree in a field I love, and I even managed to score one of the coveted singles in the nicest upperclassmen dorm. There's only one problem. Him. The guy whose single is attached to the other side of the connecting bathroom. The mess I could maybe ignore, it's the singing I can't take. Every night while he takes a bubble bath—yes, a bubble bath! It's only a few weeks into the year and I don't think I can take it anymore. Actually, I know I can't. I'm gonna go over there and say something before I lose my mind!

So, how'd we get from there to the picture above? And what happens after that?

Make me laugh, everything else is up to you.

Yours,

Dys

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, humorous, coming of age, sweet, hurt/comfort

Word Count: 23,909

Dedication

For Dys, who introduced me to Alvaro and Daniel.

Acknowledgement

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WRONG DIRECTION

By Kelly Jensen

Chapter One

He was killing One Republic. Again. Not the band, obviously. That scream from the bathroom wasn't a desperate cry for help. More likely, Daniel Lundquist had his balls stuck in the drain, which did awful things to his rendition of "I Lived". Sounded more like he'd died.

I'd thought having a single room my final year at UCSB would be sweet, and sharing a bathroom with one guy had to beat sharing with the entire floor, right? Yeah, not so much. My neighbor couldn't find a key if it was stuck in a lock, and he left fruity-smelling bubbles all over the bathroom floor. Nightly. And stuff, acres of it, in loose formation across his half of the counter. The way his soldiers spilled into my territory was way undisciplined, man.

But the singing. Holy flapdoodle, the singing.

Clapping my hands over my ears—a futile gesture; unless you got a really good seal, hands did not make effective mufflers—I strode toward the door. This had to stop. Now. I wanted fond memories of this band. They were my youth and all such horse pucky.

Opening the door meant I had to use one of my hands. Duh. But I'd already accepted the fact my hands didn't really cover my ears very well. Not because they were stupidly small—I had long fingers. If someone bothered to look past the fact I'm on the short and slender side, they'd note there were *inches* of index finger there. Know what I mean?

Daniel had reached the chorus. I wrenched the door open with one of my slender but long-fingered hands, and strode into the bathroom connecting his room to mine. The scent of fresh-cut, sun-warmed mango confused me until I figured out I hadn't been magically transported to my grandmother's orchard.

"Listen, dude—"

My left foot got lost. One second it was under me, the next it had kinda flown up into the air. The bathroom turned on end, and the ceiling took the place of the wall as the very hard floor smacked me in the back. I managed to stiffen my neck and keep the back of my skull from connecting with the tile, but it was a damn close thing. I think I heard the crack, anyway. Then a wave of warm water sloshed over my side. Smelled like popsicles.

“Oh my God!” Daniel was there, in all his tall, wet, and handsome glory, kneeling over me with a worried expression made only slightly ridiculous by the bubbles clinging to his cheek. “Are you okay?”

Actually, I was feeling pretty speechless. I’d figured he wouldn’t have any hair on his chest, but he did. Not a lot, not a mohair blanket. More a sparse clump of delicate curls dead center. He had bubbles clinging to that, too. To either side were shiny pectoral muscles, obviously sculpted by the gods and then dotted with a couple of moles, just to make him human. Soap ran down the line between his abs and my gaze followed because I’m gay, and when I’m led to cock, I tend to follow. Daniel helped by scooting forward, his long, muscular legs parting to expose his bubble-wrapped package. The mingled scent of male sweat and fruit was just plain weird, and I briefly wondered if I’d think of Daniel’s dangle every time I smelled mangoes. That would be awkward next time I visited home.

“Alvaro?” I liked the way he said my name. In the three weeks we’d been neighbors, I hadn’t bothered to ask him to shorten it to Al. “Can you hear me?” Big, soapy hands were smoothing across my cheeks.

I tore my gaze from the leviathan—it was the bubbles, right? And I might have hit my head—and looked into his handsome face. I had dreamed about this face, and if I had words right then, I might have told him so. He had a jaw that defined the term square, a nose like the sharp end of an arrow, and eyes the color of a Santa Barbara sky. His mouth was just sinful, and most of my fantasies ended up there when they tired of wondering what he was packing elsewhere.

“Ugh.” Eloquence is me.

I tried to sit up. Daniel helped by putting his cock in my face. I mean, it was right there, dripping white soap that looked a heck of a lot like something else onto my sodden T-shirt. He had his arms around my shoulders and was actually hauling me toward my seven seconds in heaven. I opened my mouth, wondering if it would fit. Wondering if it would taste like mangoes. His hand groped the back of my head. I did the only sensible thing and nestled my face against his thigh. More hair there, and it made a nice, wet prickle against my cheek.

I was so close to his penis, I could say hi, so I did. “Hi.”

“Hello?”

Daniel's crotch retreated to a safe distance as he scooted backward. He still had a big hand tucked around my shoulder, and he used it to lean me against the side of the tub. I let myself be manhandled. I think I was a little bit dazed. Having a glorious cock thrust into your face could do that. Add in the brush with death and the scent of mangoes, and I was delirious.

"Did you hit your head?"

"Don't think so," I managed. "You know you're naked, right?"

"I was having a bath."

"And singing."

Daniel continued to crouch beside me, uninhibited and deliciously fleshy. Not paunchy fleshy, just with lots of skin, and every inch slicked with soap and moisture and looking so damned lickable. The guy might not be able to carry a tune, and he was the Wrecker of Bathrooms, and he lived in an absolute sty, but God, he was gorgeous.

I should stop staring and ask if he was gay. I could blame the head wound I didn't think I had if he looked at me weird.

"We should take you to the clinic," he said.

I waved him off. "Nah, 'm fine. Just a bit dazed."

"I feel kinda responsible. You slipped on my bubbles."

"Hey, could have happened yesterday, or the day before."

His blond brows flipped upward. I mentioned he had blond hair, right? He was the whole Scandinavian package. "You fell yesterday too?"

"No, but I could have. You leave the floor like this every day." I was starting to get my ire on and it was doing funny things to my head. I wondered again if I'd hit it, maybe so hard I didn't remember doing so. "And your stuff is always on my side of the counter, you leave your shorts on the floor and I'm pretty sure there is something growing in your hamper. Do you have to leave it in here? Thing stinks, man—not like mangoes. What's with the fruity stuff anyway?"

"You don't like mangoes?"

That's what he took from all that?

"My *avó* grows mangoes. I love them. Totally beside the point."

“Avó?”

“Grandmother.” I flipped a hand in the vague direction of the hills to the west of Santa Barbara. “Farm.” We were getting sidetracked. “Look, I really don’t want to switch up rooms. There aren’t any singles left, and I’m sick of sharing floor space with everyone else’s boxers. Can you just...”

He was looking at me like I was about to announce the fact I’d solved the theory of everything. He also sorta had a wounded puppy thing going on. If his eyes had been a little browner, or just brown instead of blue, all my own bubbles would have popped. I had a thing for brown eyes. But gazing into his fantastically blue and guileless pair, I wondered if I might not develop a thing for blue eyes. Would fit nicely with my thing for everything else Daniel Lundquist. And the bubbles on his skin had been drifting down to leave land mines on the floor, and I knew his cock would be fully exposed. Just thinking about it had saliva pooling around my tongue. Hadn’t I embarrassed myself enough for one day?

“Can you just put some clothes on, please?”

“Sure.” He hopped to his feet, dick swinging free.

I’d like to say I didn’t stare, but I did. Gay, remember? Also, very human. I stopped short of smacking my lips and making nomming noises. For his part, Daniel seemed fairly oblivious to my attention. He snapped a towel from his hook and tucked it around his hips—low enough that I could still appreciate his structure. His ass looked as good wrapped as it had bare. Firm, not really round, but enough for a firm grip. I’d never really been an ass man, anyway—comments upon which should be saved for another time, thank you very much.

His package made a considerable bulge in the front of the towel.

Daniel extended a hand toward me, and I looked at that instead. Gosh, he had long fingers.

“Can you stand up?”

“Yeah, hold on.” I grasped his hand and got to my feet. Then I indulged in a silly moment of just holding his big hand before I let go. “Thanks.”

“Hey, this is my fault. I should have put a towel on the floor. I’ll get a mop.”

“That’d be good.” Put some clothes on first, yeah? Or not...

“Sure you’re okay? Maybe you should lie down for a bit.” His forehead scrawled into pleasant wrinkles. “No, wait, if you hit your head you’re supposed to stay awake.” He thumped my shoulder. “Go sit down or something, but don’t close your eyes.” Another thump. “You’ll be okay.”

With one long stride, he left the bathroom. I drew in a steamy, mango-scented breath and blew it right back out with a sigh. My plan hadn’t exactly gone as planned and... my elbow hurt. I cradled it, fingers grazing the knobby part, and hissed as pain flared along my arm and dug into my shoulder. So that had been the cracking sound. I’d whacked my elbow on the way down.

I had a feeling I could have broken it and not have noticed or cared, which disconcerted me more than the sodden mess seeping across the bathroom floor. This was my last year at school. It was supposed to be my best year. I was going to make my grandmother proud. I didn’t have time to be distracted by tall, wet, and handsome.

But, seriously, I’d known going in there he’d be naked, right?

Chapter Two

I'd forgotten to lock the bathroom door. I was leaning over the counter—I'd had to clear a space, as usual—peering at myself in the mirror, wondering if the sensitive patch between my eyebrows was going to erupt into a zit. Twenty-one-year-olds shouldn't still have to deal with acne. Not that I'd ever had a great rash of it? Bless my half-Brazilian skin. But every now and then some mountain would pop up on my neck or between my brows. The neck thing, I didn't get, but I knew the one between the brows was an Irritation Situation. I had thick, dark brows and sometimes I plucked a couple hairs from the center. I didn't want one big caterpillar crawling across my forehead, okay? I wanted two definite brows.

So, anyway, there I was, leaning and peering, when the door opened. Feeling like I'd been caught jerking off, I rocked back. My elbow was still sore—it had only been two days—and it hurt to bend it all the way or straighten it right out. So I'd been careful with it. In this instance, careful meant sweeping half of Daniel's crap off the counter and onto the floor.

"Ah, fudge." My grandmother thought coarse language was a path to the devil. A path, singular. There were many roads to hell, my friend.

I ducked down to start picking up the scattered bottles and jars, and discovered, first hand, heads did not make a coconut sound when they knocked together. Daniel must have ducked too, because all of a sudden I saw stars and pain was ringing across the top of my skull and down my neck. I slumped backward onto my butt and sat there, the spread of my legs constrained by the towel wrapped around my hips.

"Holy..." I gingerly probed the front of my head, expecting to feel shards of bone and maybe some goopy stuff. Daniel dropped to the floor opposite me, knees poking out of his long shorts as he folded his legs. Through the tears in my eyes, I could see him rubbing his forehead. "Are you—" A strangled giggle took up residence in my throat.

Daniel peeked beneath the fan of his fingers. "You okay?"

"Maybe? Do I still have a head?"

"A hard one." He'd started doing the delicate probing thing.

"No brains spilling out," I assured him. "What about me?"

“None of you have brains spilling out.”

“None of me?”

“You, your twin, and the other guy who keeps rocking side to side.”

He was seeing three of me. Not good. I held up my hand, the one not being used to hold my brains in, and spread all five fingers. “How many fingers?”

“Hmm.” Daniel squinted and winced, then waved me off with a definite five fingers of his own. “I’ll be okay. Just need to close my eyes for a second.”

I rocked forward. “No! No closing your eyes. Not if you hit your head.”

His eyes had drifted partway closed. They flipped open, bluer than blue. “You sorta hit my head.”

“You didn’t have to duck at the same time as me.”

“My stuff was all over the floor.”

“Like that has ever bothered you before.”

“I cleaned up the bubbles, didn’t I?” Hurt darkened his expression. “And I did my laundry.” Something more than hurt pulled at his face, making him wince. Then his eyes fluttered closed again.

“Daniel!” I scrambled up to my knees, losing half the towel, and patted his cheek. “Open your eyes, buddy. Listen, we really should take you to the clinic.”

“Nooooo.”

Okay, we had something in common. Except he sounded like a wounded cow, which I absolutely never did. “Then let’s get you somewhere, um, quiet”—because the bathroom wasn’t?—“and some water.”

No, I wasn’t studying medicine and neither was Daniel, obviously. Actually, we were both engineering students, but with vastly different focuses. He was computer science, I think. I was materials, explanation of which would have to wait for another time because Daniel had just dropped to his backside and leaned against the counter.

“Don’t go to sleep on me, buddy.” Definitely my buddy now. I’d nearly killed him, so I owed him a life or something. I pried open one of his eyes and marveled at the fact he hadn’t flinched away from my thumb. It was right there, next to his eyeball. “Do you feel dizzy?”

“Little bit.”

“We really should go to—”

“Can’t afford it.”

“You don’t have insurance?”

“I kinda let it lapse.”

He’d probably lost the bill, even though that stuff was electronic and automatic and how the hell did someone let their insurance lapse? Of all the...

I took a deep breath. “Okay. Can you get up?”

“I’ll be fine.” He looked down at the mess of bottles and jars. “I’ll clean this up in a while. When it all stops swirling around.”

Wow, I had hit him really hard. Why wasn’t I slumped deliriously next to him? My head hurt, but I wasn’t seeing double or feeling like throwing up. “Are you feeling sick?”

“I think I’m just hungry.”

“You’re...”

“I skipped breakfast because I was running late and then a lab ran over and I had a thing with the RA, about the rats? Have you heard anything in the walls? Anyway, lunch didn’t happen. I was just gonna go out now and get something, then you freight-trained me.”

“I freight-trained you.” I pondered all of that for second—except the part about the rats—and concluded this strapping young lad had not eaten all day. How had he not passed out somewhere on campus? “You don’t keep any food in your room?” Which, really, should be a blessing for us all, because his room already smelled weird. Then there was the possibility of—

“Meant to shop, but got sidetracked.”

I was sensing a trend.

“Okay, let’s get you something to eat. Then we’ll reassess the concussion potential.”

“Yeah.”

He pulled himself up using the counter and I stood alongside. He looked down just as I felt the stir of air across my groin—my bare groin. We both looked up, and I’m pretty sure our cheeks heated at the same instant. With, you know, a blush.

“Seems one of us is always naked in here,” I said.

“It’s a bathroom.”

Right.

Swallowing, I bent to pick up my towel, only to find my progress halted by a hand at my ear.

“Watch your head,” Daniel said.

“Thanks.” Towel retrieved, I tucked it around my hips. Daniel turned toward his room. I grabbed his elbow and jerked him back a step. “Wrong direction. We’re not eating anything we might find in your room. C’mon.” I led him to the opposite door. “I’ve got some peanut butter. We’ll get a sandwich into you.” I stopped on the threshold and he nearly ran up the back of me. “You’re not allergic to peanuts are you?”

“Nope.”

“Good.” I could handle the guilt of giving him a concussion, especially as his lack of organizational skills had contributed at least half of the fault. But killing someone with a peanut butter sandwich? Not going on my résumé. Nope.

I moved forward; he didn’t.

“Where’s all your stuff?”

“What do you mean?” I turned around to find him staring at my room. Took him about half a second to take it all in. Singles are small. I had a bed, a desk, and a closet, same as him. Main difference between our rooms? You could see my bed. And my desk. And my floor.

Daniel gesticulated wildly. “Were you robbed? Did they take your TV?”

“What? I don’t have a TV.”

“You don’t have a TV?”

“No, I use my laptop.”

“Oh.”

“Aren’t you computer science? Like, shouldn’t you be using your computer to do everything but jerk off?”

His forehead acquired those scrawly wrinkles again. “Ah...”

“Um, yeah, sorry. I meant...” An image of Daniel handling himself interrupted whatever I’d been about to say. Squashed it flat. I stared at him, and I’m pretty sure, behind the blue glaze of his eyes, he was thinking the exact same thing, but probably not enjoying it as much as me. I swallowed. “Sandwich?”

“Sure.” He looked around again, anywhere but me. “So, you just didn’t bring much away with you?”

I scanned my room. A bright patchwork quilt adorned the bed, lending a much needed splash of color to the bland space. My desk hosted a closed laptop and wireless mouse. The shelf above had a neat row of books.

“I have stuff, it’s just all put away.” Also, I didn’t have much stuff. I’d figured out first year I didn’t need everything *and* the kitchen sink while I was away. “Besides, I’m only an hour or so away from home. I can go back and play with my toys whenever I want. Not that I’ve had time so far this year. How about you? Where are you from?”

“Bakersfield.”

So, not Norway or Sweden or someplace like that. He didn’t have an accent or anything. He just had the whole Viking glory going on. And disregard of casual nudity.

I opened my closet, which I’d outfitted with a system of shelves because hanging stuff took up way more space. I kept my small supply of sandwich making stuff in there. Away from the bed. I could not abide crumbs in the bed.

“Get home much?” I handed him my half-loaf of bread and pulled out a couple of paper plates. “It’s what, two and a half hours?”

“More like four and a half on the bus.”

“You don’t have a car?” How did he not have a car?

“Sold it to fund a project.” Daniel plucked a slice of bread out of the bag and folded it into his mouth. His cheeks bulged and his lips parted with every chew.

Clearing my throat, I turned away so he couldn’t see the way I’d just tented the front of my towel. I should get dressed. Put on something tight enough to squash my lust. Or invite him to roll around on my bed. A quick glance over my shoulder nearly stopped my heart. Daniel was studying my back, the lower portion specifically. Heat crawled across my cheeks again, then down my neck

and over my shoulders. My complexion probably covered it, but bless his Scandinavian heart, Daniel's skin showed every emotion. He was about as pink as I was. He swallowed, throat bobbing, drawing my gaze. I swallowed... and commenced choking on my own spit.

Yep.

After a series of quiet hacks, I graduated to lung-tearing barks, doubling over as cramps seized my lungs. Daniel thumped me on the back, and I dimly cataloged that as his way of dealing with infirmity. Nothing a big hearty thump couldn't cure, right? I caught the edge of the open cupboard, gripped it, braced, and waited out the next spasm. Then I sipped cautiously at the air. All good. A deeper breath, a proper breath, and oxygen flushed my veins once more.

I wasn't going to die. We weren't going to have to exchange some weird buddy pact. I kinda hoped this wouldn't be the last time Daniel thumped me, though. His hands were warm and big. And warm.

Chapter Three

Over the next couple of days, I got a little nervous every time I used the bathroom. The doors had locks, but I knew for a fact neither of us remembered to engage them. We were guys; we'd been peeing together since kindergarten. We'd been tormenting our sisters (if we had them) for much, much longer. What was a little peep show between friends?

Friends.

Daniel and I might be friends. After destroying my loaf of bread and licking my jar of peanut butter dry—I let him do it, the sounds he made would stock my spunk bank for a year—Daniel had suggested he return the favor and actually buy me lunch somewhere.

I accepted, which put me in front of the mirror again, checking for Irritation Situations. I'd dressed before I stepped into the shared bathroom, which pretty much guaranteed Daniel wouldn't blunder in and try to break any part of me.

Or so I thought.

His door swung open with a bang that nearly shook the skin from my bones, and he fell through backward, landing on his ass. He had something in his arms. Something big and colorful.

"What the ever-loving fairy?" Fudge got boring. Also, fairy was an entertaining word in all respects. One long step and I loomed over him. "You okay?" Towels. He had a stack of folded towels in his arms.

Daniel looked up at me, eyes wide and so pretty I'd probably never have a thing for brown again. "I think this bathroom is trying to kill us."

"It's only when we're in it together that these things happen."

"I didn't know you'd be in here."

"Well I'm not naked, so by the law of averages, we should be safe."

He lifted the towels and I recognized the first two on the stack. "I washed your towels," he said.

"You—" He'd washed my towels?

Disparate urges pulled at my tongue—none of them directed toward licking something, which was unusual for me. He'd touched my stuff without

permission. I hadn't even noticed my towels were missing. He'd washed my towels—done something pretty sweet. Was it a gesture?

Man, his eyes were gorgeous.

“Thank you.” I took the stack from his arms and wedged it onto the side of the vanity. My side, 'cause his was all cluttered up. Turning back, I offered him a hand up, which he accepted, warm fingers closing over mine before giving a quick jerk.

Seconds later, he looked down at me from his superior few inches of height and smiled. “You're welcome. Ready for lunch?”

He had a faint, dark smudge near his hairline. A bruise matching the one I had above my brows.

Is this a date? I'd wanted to ask a couple days ago, when he'd issued the invitation. But the whole choking on my spit thing had sort of worn out my throat. I'd also expected him to forget—seeing as he'd bumped his head and all.

Mutely, I nodded.

A smile lit up his face. Glowing, Daniel said, “Great.”

“The towels, you, ah, didn't have to do that.”

One shoulder hitched upward. “I needed to make up a load. And you were right, smelled like something had died in my hamper. I'd have taken care of it last week, but my schedule has been turned upside down.” He scratched his cheek, his long fingers drawing my gaze. “I've been running around like that chicken, you know?”

“Yeah.” I did know. “Well, let's go.”

He turned toward his room, visible through the open door.

I shook my head. “I'm not walking through there, I might catch something.” He might have done his laundry, but the sty remained intact. Unmade bed, a heap of something at the end. Desk littered with crumpled wax paper squares from the burgers they sold at Edward's, the closest café to our hall. He had three computer monitors, all awake and showing lurid wallpaper. Cases stuffed under the desk. Books everywhere. And, pride of place, in the center of his not-so-abundant floor space, a computer with spilled guts. “Or cut myself stepping over that.”

“You're wearing shoes.” He wore a smile, one of the wry kind, but his eyes were doing interesting things. Revisiting the puppy dog expression from the

other day, lined with something deeper. Something that looked an awful lot like want.

My breath quickened and my pants tightened. I didn't understand the urge that turned me away, pushed me through the door to my room. But when I heard him follow, I relaxed. We exited my room, thundered down the stairs in happy harmony, and emerged into a brilliant afternoon scented with sunshine and salt.

"So." I cast about for conversational gambits. "Nice day." I didn't even have a cock in my face. But awkward moments could happen anytime.

"Yeah. Do you ski?"

Holy non sequitur. "Um, no. Californian, born and raised. I'm allergic to cold and the idea of snow terrifies me."

"Really?" Daniel's eyes widened comically. "Have you ever seen snow?"

"Well, we get a dusting up in the hills now and again. Nothing to write home about, which I wouldn't, because I'd already be home and..." I stomped on the brakes before I rambled my way into family confession time. "You like snow? Why are we talking about snow?"

"Just making conversation."

There could be a reason he was single. Was he single? I was single and not loving it. Then again, I had a plan. My plan had included a hookup or two last year, but relationships and college didn't mix. We were at a delicate age. Building our lives. Anything we drew from the wool bucket right now had to fit, had to be considered part of the future tapestry.

"Do you, ah, have a girlfriend?" Indelicate, but sometimes that worked best.

Daniel chuckled. "No, I don't. I'm gay, so not really into women." He tilted his head as if waiting for a certain response.

"Oh." Not the response he was looking for, obviously, but my heart had started galloping and my palms were all sweaty. "Oh." This would be the perfect time to share my own preference and the fact I had a catalog of fantasies starring him. Or not. "So, lunch."

"What about you? Got a girlfriend?"

I breathed out and somehow didn't land in a deflated heap on the sidewalk. "Nope. Not into women either."

His grin was electric. “Glad we sorted that out.”

“Yeah.” Hard to talk when you’re flat as a pancake. “Lunch?”

Lunch was good, right up until Daniel tried to pay. I put my hand over his and tingles shot through my fingers, up my arms, and straight down to my groin. My dick jerked out of a happy slumber, stretching out to investigate the confines of my underwear.

“Let’s split it,” I said.

“I invited you, though.”

“That’s wonderfully old fashioned, but this isn’t a date.” Was it?

I sucked in a quick breath and held it. Lunch had felt kinda like a date. We were sitting across from one another, and every now and then one of his knees would bump mine and we’d exchange a charged look. The sort that grabbed you by the testicles and squeezed. Sometimes it grabbed my lungs. Mostly the ’nads, though. We’d talked about our majors, and we’d alternately dissed and praised our tutors, professors, TAs, and fellow students. We’d exchanged dreams. I wanted to discover something. So did he. In a different area, but the same motivation drove us. We both wanted to create, inspire, live. I just wanted to do it more tidily than Daniel did.

“Maybe not, but friends can treat friends, right?” he said. “And I owe you for the peanut butter.”

“You could have just bought me another jar.”

“I thought this would be more fun.” One corner of his mouth crooked upward, poking a dimple into his cheek.

I swallowed and managed not to choke on anything, including my tongue. “It was fun. Is.”

His fingers twitched beneath mine. I glanced down, drew my hand back, and immediately regretted it. Daniel took the advantage, whisking the check off the side of the table. He shifted, obviously digging into a pocket for his wallet, and produced a ragged square of leather bound by frayed stitches. The thing looked old and shoddily made, or—

“Were you a boy scout?”

Daniel glanced up from the business of counting out bills. “Yeah, why?”

I gestured toward his wallet. “I remember that project.”

“Really?” He paused to admire his handiwork, thumb teasing one decaying edge. “Yeah.” His voice had taken on a breathy quality. The situation in my pants continued to respond to external stimuli. Daniel glanced up, bright smile tempered with nostalgia. “The good old days, heh?”

“You make it sound like we’re about to pack our bags for the retirement home.”

“Nah, but some days I feel old, you know? It’s like, one day I was a boy and then adulthood happened and now I’m in college and I’m supposed to know what I’m doing. And I do, I s’pose. I mean, my career is all set. I already have a placement offer.” He did, lucky badger. “But...” He fingered the edge of his wallet again. “Ever feel like there’s a piece missing?”

I didn’t misplace things. My room was testament to that fact. I had been carefully ordering my life since the day my mother disappeared and my father took me home to live with his mother, before disappearing as well. I knew what I wanted to do with my future, where I wanted to go, who I wanted to be. There were no missing pieces. Not anymore. Except... when I looked at Daniel, met a gaze the color of the sky, clear and unclouded, I could hear an echo inside me. And echoes only happened in hollow places.

Disconcerted, I reached over and plucked the check from Daniel’s loose fingers, glanced at the figure at the bottom and pulled out my own wallet. The bills I set on the table fluttered. My fingers were trembling. My heart had acquired a horrible, panicky rhythm. But worse than the feeling I was stomping all over a sapling before it had a chance to establish itself, was the quiet on the other side of the table. The presence of Daniel, solid and silent, watching me make an absolute fool of myself.

Could I make a graceful exit?

“I invited you.” His voice was all small and distant.

“Seemed like you could use a hand. What with having to sell your car and the insurance thing.” Exactly the wrong thing to say. Daniel’s brows pulled down and his lower lip jutted out just enough to incite another round of feverish fantasy, later, when I wasn’t doing my best jerk impression.

I considered, then rejected the use of friends can treat friends. More fitting might have been friends don’t embarrass friends. “Listen...”

Daniel put his listening ears on, but with an obvious filter. His jaw still had a slightly belligerent set. I'd taken my unease and used it like a club—and why did I feel all panicky, anyway? Wasn't as if he'd asked me to go steady. He had touched a nerve, though, one that brushed way too close to the surface for my liking.

“I need to head over to the guidance office to check on some application stuff. So...” I slid out of my side of the booth. “Um, thanks for lunch?”

He didn't follow me out of the diner.

Chapter Four

He was murdering Kelly Clarkson. Not just one song, but two. Somehow, he'd slipped from "What Doesn't Kill You" into "Dark Side". I guess he had a theme going? Of course, I liked Kelly Clarkson. What a voice! And she was cute. I didn't fantasize about her, but could appreciate her assets.

I began to suspect Daniel had been in my room. More specifically, somewhere in the vicinity of my iPod. Either that or we had the same taste in music—only I didn't do more than hum along to my favorite tunes.

Weren't people supposed to sound better in the shower?

I had my head against the bathroom door. Just my forehead, really, a spot in the middle that tingled now and again when Daniel produced a low note. The scent of mangoes wafted through the imperfect seal. Yesterday it had been coconut and Maroon 5. The day before, "Uptown Funk!". Not sure who sang that one, but I knew Bruno Mars fit in there somewhere. Daniel had actually done a pretty good job of it before leaving strawberry bubbles all over the walls. Yeah, the walls. The floor had been wiped clean.

We hadn't spoken since lunch, three days before, and I felt beyond bad. Sick to my stomach. The swirl in my gut had an awkward, unfulfilled-crush emptiness to it. It matched the hollow space Daniel had exposed at the diner with his whole "missing piece" speech. I was wallowing—in misery and stupidity.

I pushed away from the door and launched myself toward my quilt, performing a perfectly dramatic belly flop. The pillow smacked me in the face, and the hard mattress pushed air from my lungs. Flatness descended upon me, pressing my body into unyielding oblivion. Even my dick showed no interest in saving itself. It lay squashed beneath me, trapped and useless.

Woe was me.

It had been a while since I'd indulged in a bout of hopelessness. My grandmother had rules about lying in bed after dawn. Idleness was another path to the devil. But a planner like me could even use wallowing time constructively.

Fact: I liked Daniel, and had done since the moment we had met. Liked as in wanted to lick every inch of his mango-scented body. Kiss bubbles from his

lips, fondle his package, taste it. My fingers itched to explore every line of musculature from the smooth planes to the ridges beneath. I wondered what he'd sound like when he came. If he would sing or just breathe. If he'd say my name—Alvaro, not Al—his tongue caressing every syllable.

His tongue.

My ass clenched, and my dick readied itself to poke a determined hole through the mattress.

Another fact: My like was more than physical. I wanted to get to know Daniel. He obviously needed someone to look out for him. Make sure he ate, remind him to pick up his laundry, cheer on the small successes that made his eyes shine like solar flares. He needed a friend. If he was asking me out to lunch, he needed a friend.

Yet another fact: Sex complicated friendships and I didn't have time for complication. Complication wasn't a part of my plan.

I should have let him pay the check at the diner, invited him back for reciprocal blowjobs and then moved on.

Because that would have worked out so well.

Chapter Five

I hadn't heard Daniel singing last night, which saddened me. I know. I actually missed his off-key renditions of select Top 40 hits. The absence of sound and fury (or bubbles, as the case may be) also worried me. Barely a day had passed since the beginning of the semester where Daniel hadn't bathed and sung.

The door to his room stood ajar, and the detritus from the latest hurricane to have swept through clogged the narrow passage.

"Daniel?"

Ever tried to prick your ears? I had, to no avail. Human ears didn't change shape. You could turn your head toward a sound, though, or toward where you hoped there would be sound. I angled my head in the direction of Daniel's room, toward the gap of the open door. The hum of several computers tickled my cochlea, but nothing else. Well, nothing but the distant sigh of the ocean, which formed such a constant to our days I'd tuned it out before the end of my first semester on campus.

"You in there?"

Something moved, breathed noisily. Hopefully not a rat. The bathroom door was stuck. I dropped to my knees to tug a wad of fabric from under the bottom edge. The bright design caught my eye and I shook out my prize. I was holding a pair of briefs emblazoned with a Superman logo. Awesome.

Ignoring the irrational urge to stuff them into my pocket—seriously, there was a reason no one collected cast-off underwear from men; we did awful things to our skivvies on a daily basis—I dropped the briefs and stood up in the doorway.

"Dan?"

His voice rose from the bed like a specter. "Here."

"You sound awful." Captain Obvious, reporting for duty. I picked my way across piles of stuff, skirted the torn-apart computer guts, and pulled up in front of the bed. Daniel lay huddled under the covers, curled on his side, facing me. Light, filtered by the ineffectual blind pulled down over the small window, glanced off his cheeks, leaving his eyes and mouth in shadow. "You look sick. Are you sick?"

“I’m sick.”

“What happened? Do you have a fever?” I spread a palm toward his forehead.

“Don’t think so.”

His skin was clammy, sort of cool, but I could feel the warmth of him underneath. Not a feverish temperature, just the heat of another being. It was an oddly intimate moment. Daniel’s vulnerability pulled at me. My need to care for him clawed at my insides, my fear of getting involved adding the sharpness.

“Have you been to the clinic?” I asked, knowing the answer would be no.

Daniel shook his head, his forehead brushing my palm, then extracted a hand from his nest of blankets and gripped my wrist. “I’ll be fine. Just need to let whatever it is work through my system.”

The fact he could talk boded well for recovery without intervention. “Can I get you anything? Water?” He didn’t have a nightstand. Only the good Lord in heaven knew what he’d done with it. Maybe he’d sold it? Clothing littered the floor where the nightstand should have been. A gray sock curled around an emaciated water bottle. He’d sucked the thing dry. I picked it up. “Got any more of these?”

“In the closet.”

I really didn’t want to visit his closet. Stepping into his room had named me his caretaker, though, so I had to either see it through, or run out on him—again.

The closet door wouldn’t budge when I tried to slide it back. Another wad of fabric was wedged underneath. Another pair of briefs, these ones speckled with a bright paisley pattern. I didn’t comment. As expected, Daniel’s closet was the tenth circle of Hell. Perhaps even the eleventh. The smell... there was a reason this guy bathed in fruits of the forest nightly. He needed a reprieve.

“I think there’s something rotting in your closet, man. Smells really bad in here.”

“It’s a rat, pretty sure of it.”

I jumped backward. “A rat? You have rats in here?”

“Something in the walls. I think one died in my closet.”

“And you didn’t pull everything out to find it?”

“I meant to.” He paused to shift and groan. “Ever eaten the fish sandwiches at Edward’s?”

“No, and I’m going to take your condition as a warning not to.” I spied the water on the floor of the closet, half hidden by Stuff, capital intended. After plucking one from the plastic casing, I dodged clothes-mines on the way back to the bed, loosening the cap as I went. I handed him the open bottle. “Here. Is your stomach upset? Should I get a bucket in here?”

“No, just chills and cramps.”

“You should take a bath, might make you feel better.” What scent went with chills and cramps? Coconut?

“I just wanna lie here until the world stops spinning.”

“How long have you been there?”

“Since last night? What time is it?”

“After two. Did you have classes today?”

“A lab. I texted my partner. He was cool to do stuff on his list. But I need to get in there tomorrow sometime.” The plastic creaked as he sucked at the bottle. I didn’t watch his mouth. The guy was sick, and I wasn’t that perverted.

“Want me to run you a bath? I could help you in there. I really think getting cleaned up would make you feel better.”

Daniel didn’t answer for a while, and the quiet buzzed with all the things he wasn’t saying. Or maybe my own guilt filled the pause. I’d walked away from him three days ago, after ruining a nice lunch and turning his gesture upside down. We weren’t friends, even though he’d made all the right moves.

I was a dickhead.

“I can manage on my own,” he finally said.

“If managing on your own means lying in this sty until the rats in your closet come out to nibble on your cooling corpse, then no, you’re not managing.” My words bounced back against my ears. The sting of heat quickly followed. “Wow, um. I’m sorry, that was...”

“I think harsh is the word you’re looking for.”

“Yeah.” I swallowed, managed not to choke. “Um, would you believe I actually care? I know I seem kind of, ah...” Oh, blast it. “I worried when I didn’t hear you singing last night.”

“I thought you hated my singing.”

“And yet you do it every night.”

“A guy’s gotta get his kicks somewhere.”

My eyes narrowed so much I could barely see. “Seriously? You’ve been deliberately pushing my buttons?”

He made a sound that might have been a moan, except his lips held a very specific curve.

“Are you laughing at me?”

“Yeah, and it hurts.” He curled a little tighter in an obvious attempt to uncramp his belly.

Lacking inspiration for a response—a smart retort would wake me up in the middle of the night, no doubt—I backed away from the bed, tripped over a pile of something and flailed my way to a graceless landing. Something crunched, right after it bit my shoulder. I hoped it wasn’t a rat.

Daniel flapped at his bedclothes, coughing as he laughed.

“I’ve been at this college for three years without breaking anything. Three weeks next door to you and I’ve nearly killed myself... three times?” Three was the magic number, even if it had been four weeks now. I sat up and wrapped my long fingers around the back of my shoulder, feeling for blood, bits of bone, a bite mark. Dead rat parts. “I think I fell on your computer.” One of his computers.

“S’okay. That one’s just for spare parts.”

A steady throb took up residence at the back of my shoulder, right beneath the bone. Gritting my teeth, I pushed to my feet and trod a careful path to the bathroom door. “I’m going to start your bath.”

Daniel answered with a snort and a moan.

He had five different bottles of bubble bath. I recognized the brand—weird, I know, but Vó, my grandmother, liked bubble baths too and ordered the stuff from catalogs. While the water thundered into the tub, I picked up each bottle in turn, unscrewed the cap and sniffed. They all smelled like soap, but each carried a strain of something else. Hey, the strawberry one was called strawberry daiquiri. He also had coconut haze, mango orchard, and... chocolate fondue? I chose—wait for it—tequila sunrise. Once the soap hit the water, the familiar scent of citrus rose in a cloud of steam. He hadn’t used this one in a while. Maybe he didn’t like it.

Yep, sitting there on the edge of the tub worrying Daniel might not approve of my choice of bubbles.

A shuffling at the door jerked me out of mild reverie. Daniel was leaning against the jamb, looking tired and drawn. He was also naked. I looked at his cock. I didn't mean to, but it was right there, dangling limply from a nest of blond hair. After what seemed like an hour, I dragged my gaze upward, taking in the details of his abs, pecs, shoulders, making sure they matched what I'd tucked away in my fantasy locker. He watched me do it, a half smile playing about his lips.

“Do you—”

“Can I—”

I gestured toward him, indicating he should continue.

“Do you have a towel I could use?” he asked.

“Didn't you just wash all the towels?”

“I washed yours.”

“What of yours did you wash?”

“Shorts. Socks.” He lifted his chin. “What were you going to ask?”

“If I could, um... clean your room up a bit. Just the bed maybe? So it's, ah, fresh when you get out of the bath. I know I like that when I'm not feeling well.”

Rather than growl or grumble or look as if I'd insulted his manhood, Daniel simply nodded. “That'd be nice, yeah.”

I stood and made to step past him. Daniel didn't move from the doorway. “Thank you,” he said.

“I didn't really do anything.”

“Yeah you did.”

We were sharing a moment, one of us was naked, and my thoughts were racing toward all the ways I could fudge it up. I drew in a breath against catastrophe and held it until my lungs burned before letting it out slowly. “Towels are in the cupboard under the sink.”

Chapter Six

I pushed open the door and stopped as a cloud of steam rolled out. Mangoes. That bottle had been the least full, so I had guessed it was his favorite. Or maybe he knew it was my favorite.

Not sure when I'd decided I liked one over the other.

The bathroom was empty, floor mopped up, the sodden towel Daniel had used on it lying in a crushed heap against his door. Steam fogged the mirror and collected near the slit window over the tub. Santa Barbara had an extraordinarily temperate climate. We didn't really do summer or winter. We just kind of cruised from spring to fall. So it never really got cold. But there was something about a warm and steamy room that seeped right into your soul, regardless of the temperature outside. I'd had a long day, the evidence of which curled loosely around the back of my skull, throbbing only when I moved too fast. My shoulder ached a little. My elbow had even remembered to twinge. I was tired, hungry, and listless.

I wanted a bath.

I didn't use one of Daniel's bottles of bubbles, though they tempted me from their row along the edge of the tub. Instead, I bobbed in clear, soft water and inhaled the tattered wisps of scent left over from his bath. Closed my eyes and drifted a little.

I meant to sort some of my projects and deadlines, but Daniel wandered into my mind instead. Big smile, sparkly eyes. Sunlight glancing off of his blond hair and broad shoulders. I thought about his dick, which I had seen twice now. He'd seemed fairly unconcerned both times, as if nudity didn't bother him. His nudity didn't bother me. In fact, my own cock had poked up out of the water, looking for attention. I stroked it halfheartedly, not really in the mood. I lacked the energy for self-love. Still, hands-on always felt good, and a pleasant warmth from the contact spread through me, relaxing me further. By the time I got out of the tub, my headache had melted, my elbow had forgotten to twinge, and my shoulder felt okay.

Daniel's door opened just as I finished tucking my towel around my hips. I glanced up, took in his gloriously bare chest, and glanced down. Naked.

"Have you given up doing laundry altogether?" I'd done a load for him the day he'd been sick. A week ago. I'd done another a couple of days later.

He looked down, studied his own nakedness. “I was just about to go to bed. Just ducked in to clean my teeth. You were so quiet, didn’t know you were in here. In fact…” He cocked his head. “You’ve been pretty quiet all week.”

“Not sure I make much noise anytime.”

“You hum sometimes. Talk to yourself too.”

Yeah, I did. But not fully consciously. “When I’m making lists, mostly. Well, um, g’night.”

I took a backward step and reconsidered. Walking away from Daniel had led to spectacular injury over the past couple of weeks. A quick glance over my shoulder showed the path was clear—floor free of bubbles or wadded up underwear, sodden towels or misplaced bottles of stuff. Before I could move, a pair of fingers hooked over the edge of my towel. I gasped as the back of his hand brushed my skin. Daniel stepped in, tugging me toward him. He had a very specific look in his eyes, one that echoed within me, sending tingles to my extremities. A part of my brain scurried into a corner and cowered. Another part searched for the sore spot. I’d obviously slipped and hit my head. Again. In this bathroom. One of us was naked—that was how it worked, right?

Yet another part lifted my chin in invitation.

He didn’t kiss me right away, though I had no doubt we’d get there. You didn’t stand this close to a guy—so close you could hear his heart beating—and not connect in some way. Lips, tongues, fingers, hips. Small puffs of air tickled my lips as he tucked his nose in next to mine. The fingers at my waist seared my skin. I was as aware of them as I was his total proximity. The heat of his body reflecting from mine, his breath against my lips. His other hand captured the side of my face, big thumb tucking around my ear, fingers spreading through the longish curls at my nape. He exhaled and I inhaled. A spark jumped between our lips, and I lifted my chin a little higher, desperate to feel his mouth on mine. Still, he teased me, his nose bumping closer. Our cheeks rubbed together, evening stubble rasping audibly.

I shivered.

How he moved in closer, I have no idea. We had been close, then we were closer, his hips pushing against the front of my towel, his chest brushing mine. He chose that moment to kiss me, no doubt in response to the whine building in my throat, the sound I thought I’d kept to myself, but maybe hadn’t. Warm lips touched down, gently, then firmly, the foreplay a deceptive tease. His kiss didn’t ask permission, didn’t warn, it simply took.

I groaned.

Sound rolled through my chest and up my throat, got lost in the dance between our tongues. Remembering I had hands, I reached for him, slipping one between us to flatten over the patch of hair between his pecs. The curls tickled my palm. I skimmed my other palm along his jaw and disbelief rolled through me—the scene echoed one of my fantasies so closely, I might wonder if he'd done more than snoop at my iPod.

He tasted of mangoes. Could have been my imagination, but the scent of warm fruit enveloped us. His lips moved over mine as if we'd been made to kiss each other. I tried to tease his tongue. He outplayed me. I caught his fuller lower lip and sucked on it, remembering how he'd all but pouted at the diner. He used my distraction against me, nudged me, backed me into a flat surface—maybe his door—and leaned in, the heat at his groin warming a spot against my towel.

His stomach was damp where we touched, and the tease of skin against skin dragged another groan from somewhere down low. I wasn't the only one making sounds. I wasn't the only one trying to poke a hole through my towel. Angling my hips forward, I ground into him. He complained into my mouth, a hitch and a gasp, his lips stilling against mine.

Feeling as if I'd gained the upper hand, I did it again, thrusting and rubbing, the cotton loops of fabric working across the head of my cock in maddening torment. Then the towel was gone, dropped between us, tangled around my ankles. Cool air licked across my ass. I clenched and a spark shot up my insides. I moaned. Warm fingers wrapped around my erection and gave an experimental tug. Another deep and guttural sound danced up from my gut. Not to be outdone, I reached for him, for the hot rod flattened against my hip. He gasped into my ear. Whispered something.

“Alvaro.”

I could have melted like a popsicle in the sun, then and there. My knees weakened and if I'd had the mental capacity to congratulate myself on having encouraged him to use my full name—well, I wouldn't be standing in a sweaty bathroom being kissed senseless by my college fantasy.

I managed a reply. “Want.”

Not much, but enough to work with. I bumped my hips forward to underline my meaning. My cock slid along his palm, then his fingers wrapped me up

again, providing thrilling friction as I rocked backward. Forward. His dick twitched and pulsed against my palm. I stroked toward his pubes and back, teasing out the length of his shaft, measuring and admiring. Our lips were only tangentially connected, catching and releasing as we became fascinated by what we had in our hands.

Hips acquiring a rhythm, we knocked into each other, eventually fell into step, pushing when the other pulled. Fastening my mouth to his chest, I sucked until the flavor of his skin swirled about my tongue. Sweat and soap, and something else I'd yet to define. The essential Daniel. Teeth grazed my ear, then nipped—the sharp pain shooting down my spine, before spreading inward, beneath my gut, to grab at my balls. Squeezing. His large hand wrapped us both together, and the slide of my cock against his nearly tipped the balance. Hot, heavy. I pushed, desperate for more friction. He pulled, heeding my command.

The sound of our lust echoed from the close walls, thick as the steam collected in the corners. Gripping his hips, I rocked into him, and stood there, legs trembling as he worked us toward a spectacular finish. I didn't feel the hand creeping over my ass until his fingers slid into the cleft, searching. One touch and I lost it. A spasm worked through me, pulling my spine straight, then collapsing it like a tower of blocks.

I fell into him, crying out senseless words. Between us, I could feel him jerking and spurting, his jizz combining with mine. I thrust a hand in there for no good reason other than I wanted to be a part of the mess. Nuzzling the mark I'd left on his skin, I gave into the shudder traveling up and down my backbone. Lips brushed my forehead, and I felt him nosing through my hair. He stroked my hole again. A cry tumbled out of my mouth. I gripped his hip, worked my fingers into the firm meat of his ass. Thought about returning the friendly stroke, but my legs were threatening to buckle.

Next time.

Would there be a next time?

The stray thought sobered me. Gently, I disentangled myself, taking a single step back. Cooler air swished between us. My fingers and belly were wet and sticky, cock not entirely flaccid but completely happy. Daniel still held us both, the grip of his warm fingers simultaneously wonderful and just slightly painful. I tended to get super sensitive after I came. My fingers were wrapped around his. One by one, I unstuck them. Clenched my teeth and hissed. Daniel's breaths were short and sharp. Carefully, we separated.

My back was up against his door. Taking advantage of the solid surface behind me, I leaned back and looked up. Except for loosening his hold on my dick, Daniel hadn't really moved. Side-on to the counter and mirror, half of him was in shadow. But I could make out the slackness of his jaw and the glaze of his eyes. He'd come hard. The evidence stiffened my fingers and dried on my stomach.

"That was some kiss," I said.

His grin transformed his face, returning the spark he'd previously shot through his cock. "Yeah." He dipped down to brush his lips to mine. "Got carried away. 'S your fault."

"How is it my fault?" Our mouths were so close, every word bounced back to tickle my lips.

"Been stoking me. Teasing me."

"You're the one who wanders around naked."

"The way you look at me, Al."

He'd shortened my name. I didn't complain. Instead, I tried a simple sentence. "I like looking at you."

A moment of quiet bloomed between us. I nestled my shoulder blades against the door behind me and panted softly into the pause. Daniel did much the same, without the leaning back part, then he caressed my cheek with the back of his hand, before curling his fingers around the back of my ear. The sweet and gentle gesture surprised me. Breath caught in my throat. Perhaps sensing the moment had become too heavy, Daniel withdrew his hand. His chin dipped and his gaze slid sort of sideways, as if he wasn't willing to look at me full on.

He was waiting for me to fudge it up. Flip his gesture upside down and step on it. Bend and break it.

The opening beckoned and I prepared to take it... then didn't. Leaning forward, I kissed his chin, one side, then the corner of his mouth. My tongue poked at the seam of his lips and found a playmate as he opened for me, welcomed me. The kiss wound on, long and languorous, until I ran out of air.

I couldn't pull back far, not with the door behind me. I tipped my chin down instead, putting a little distance between us. "I need to get to bed. Exhausted. And I have a full schedule tomorrow."

“Yeah, me too.” Daniel tucked his nose in beside mine in a gesture that had already become familiar and welcome. “Sleep well.”

“You too.”

I liked having sticky hands about as much as I liked having crumbs in my bed. Spreading my fingers, I studied the strands of spunk webbing them together and let my mind wander a bit. Whose stuff was that? Mine or his? Both, obviously, and the combination, the fact we were already mixed in this way, unsettled my gut.

I took a cautious sniff and winced. In the moment, the smell of semen worked. And if my heart was involved, I might fool myself into thinking I craved this scent.

But my heart wasn't involved.

Yet.

Using my shoulder, I nudged open the bathroom door and smiled at the sight of Daniel washing his hands.

“A return to the scene of the crime,” I said.

“Needed to clean up the evidence... and I didn't want to wake up stuck to my sheets.” He offered a slow wink. “Did that enough at thirteen.”

“Right?”

I scrubbed at my hands, then grabbed a washcloth and worked it over my belly. It was at that point I realized we were both naked and neither of us had ogled. Not openly, anyway. We'd crossed a threshold of a sort.

Finishing up, I rinsed out my cloth and hung it over a rail. Daniel left his in a clump by the side of his basin. In the morning it would be stiff and crusty. My fingers itched to straighten it out, rinse it for him. Hang it neatly over the rail mounted on his side of the counter. Feeling the prickle of his attention, I glanced up.

Daniel was watching me, a half smile wavering along one side of his mouth. “You're something of a neat freak, aren't you?”

“You just noticed?”

He laughed, stomach tucking in as he did so, inviting me to admire the cut of his abs. Then he leaned close, the heat of his skin reaching out to tickle mine.

His lips moved next to my ear. “But there’s a riot waiting to happen inside, isn’t there.”

Before I could examine that little nugget, refute it, be embarrassed by it, Daniel withdrew. He waved as he exited the bathroom, pulling his door mostly closed behind him. And I’d been too occupied to admire his ass as he left.

Darn it.

Chapter Seven

“You sound happy!”

And that made my grandmother happy, obviously. Her voice sounded like sunshine, which was a weird concept, and not one I ever examined too closely. Logic and grandmothers didn’t really mix, not all the time, even though Vó, or Vovó, as I sometimes called her, was an incredibly logical woman.

She had raised three sons on her own—my grandfather had died young—and then had raised me. In between all that childrearing, she ran a successful mango orchard and somehow found time to tend to a few chickens, goats, and one lonely cow. She also grew all her own vegetables and made amazing quilts. Adelina Madeira was a one-woman cottage industry, and I loved her with every ounce of my soul.

“I am happy.” If I didn’t confirm the fact verbally, she’d start in with the questions. “My research is going well and I’m on track to meet all of my deadlines this semester.” And nothing made me happier than being on track.

A clucking sound bounced off of my ear. Wincing, I pulled my cell phone away until she’d finished with the nonverbal part of her reprimand, then settled the slim device back against the side of my head and waited for the inevitable. “I am glad your work is going well, Varo.” I never invited potential friends to use that variant of my name. Not because I didn’t like it, but I could only be Varo for Vovó.

Yeah, I really had turned twenty-one in August.

“But you need more than work to make you happy. Now, tell me about Daniel.”

I choked, recovered, whispered, “What do you mean?”

“Will you bring him home to meet me?”

“Why would I do that?”

“He is your boyfriend, yes?”

“No?”

“You are not sure?”

“No, I mean, no, he’s not my boyfriend. What makes you think he’s my boyfriend?”

“You talk of him very often.” I did? “And all these questions about the bubble bath last week. You plan to buy him a gift?” The level in the mango bottle had gotten a little low, all right? “And you sound happy.”

“We’re just friends, Vovó. He’s my roommate, sort of. We share a bathroom and he likes bubble bath and it’s the same brand as the one you use and...” I sucked in a ragged breath. “We’re friends.”

“Friends is good. I was very good friends with your *avô*.” She meant my grandfather. Spelled the same, pronounced quite differently.

“I’m not getting married to Daniel. Holy flapjacks. We’re just friends.” Thank goodness I never discussed my sex life with her. She’d have had me married to Peter Walsh my first year at UCSB. Time to employ diversionary tactics. “Hey, have you heard from Naomi?”

“*Ai*, Noêmia has not called me in two weeks. Last I hear, she is in New York trying to be a model. Can she not be a model in Los Angeles? She could get discovered there, it happens all the time...”

And on it went. Naomi was the cousin everyone used as a yardstick for measuring everything that, well, didn’t quite measure up. I’d heard a rumor I was the measure for upright dorkiness, which used to bother me. No one ever used me as a diversionary tactic, though, and honestly? I liked Naomi. She called me every other month to tell me stories that made my hair curl. My hair was already curly, and I watched a lot of gay porn. Really, I shouldn’t have been surprised by anything.

Crossing one ankle over the other, I leaned back into my pillows and let the phone fall just away from my ear. I could still hear Vovó prattling on, and the sound of her voice was as soothing as a summer breeze over hot skin.

Chapter Eight

My groan should have rattled the window. It reverberated through my bones, making me quake. My legs were locked against a tremble, but any second now, my knees were going to give out. But not before Daniel finished sucking every last drop of my soul through my cock.

He knelt before me and I had my hands fastened about his ears. His short blond hair brushed my fingers, but I barely felt it. The mouth he had wrapped around me held all of my attention—the stretch and slide of his lips, the press of his tongue.

“Ngah.”

With another wordless cry, my hips rocked forward. I thrust into his mouth, felt the back of his throat close over the end of my dick, and lost any sense of time and place. I shot my load and tipped over into the oblivion of melted knees, at some point sinking down the wall, my cock pulling from his lips on the way. I landed in a huddle on the bathroom floor, conveniently onto one of Daniel’s discarded towels. I sat thus cushioned, legs flopped outward, and just breathed.

Daniel sat beside me, his own fine ass cushioned only by his shorts. He had a hard-on and a wet patch, both visible just to the left of his fly. I flailed a hand toward it, indicating I would like to hold it, perhaps even suck it—after I recovered.

“It’ll keep for a minute,” he said.

His tongue tip poked out to investigate one corner of his mouth, efficiently swiping up the last of my semen. He rubbed the back of his hand over his lips anyway, a gesture of satisfaction, of wiping one’s mouth after a good meal.

I smiled. “Feel like I should say something witty, like, you look like the cat with the canary. But all I can think about is the fact we keep having sex in our bathroom.” And the pressure of his lips and tongue. What his cock would feel like in my mouth, the weight of him against my palm.

Daniel chuckled. “It’s neutral territory. Enough of my mess to keep me comfortable, not enough to freak you out.”

“Mess really makes you comfortable?”

“Life is messy!” He hadn’t spoken loudly, but it was a small room. The statement echoed.

“Yeah, I suppose it is. Hey, did you ever figure out what was in your closet?”

“It was a bag of oranges.”

“A bag of... It really smelled like something had died in there.”

“I know, surprised the hell out of me too.” Daniel indicated his crotch. “Hate to sound impatient, but I’ve got a lab date. Wanna take care of this before I head out?”

Such was the pace of our sex life. Three weeks of hand jobs and blowing each other in the bathroom. And we hadn’t managed to injure ourselves in the process. The naked rule was variable, but it was a bathroom, as Daniel liked to point out.

I got to my knees, shuffled forward, and helped Daniel unzip his shorts. He worked them down to his thighs. I grasped the gorgeous erection jutting up from his blond thatch, worked his foreskin down below the glans, licked my lips, and got busy.

Cock, glorious cock.

Daniel had an awesome penis. If sucking it didn’t make my jaw ache, I could quite happily forget the fact I had a plan that didn’t include hours on my knees. The scent of his skin—man, sweat, and mangoes—tended to obliterate thought, as did the feel of him against my tongue. The ridge around the head of his cock and the way it caught my lips as I pulled back. The firmness of his shaft, the girth. The slip of his hood. That spongy feel when he nudged the back of my throat, the urge I had to open for him, swallow him.

His taste flowed across my tongue. I shoved my other hand down there and fondled his balls, squeezing between, giving the sac a gentle tug. Daniel’s moans translated into rumbling grunts. I felt rather than heard them. His hips bucked up toward me, and I made no move to restrain him. Sucking deeper, I invited him to fuck my mouth with no apology to my grandmother for the crudeness of the urge.

I wanted him inside me.

Daniel came with shuddering force, and bitter fluid splashed down my throat. I coughed, swallowed, breathed, and coughed again. Not my finest

moment. But as I pulled back, he caught my chin and lifted my face toward his, and kissed the mess from my lips and chin.

Panting hard, he touched his forehead to mine, kissed me again—hard and fast. “God, you’re beautiful.”

No one had ever called me beautiful before. My grandmother often said I looked like an angel, but she loved me. What I lacked in traditional family structure, she made up for with near-stifling affection, and a healthy fear of the devil.

I smiled. “Anyone ever tell you you look like a Viking?”

“Nope. I usually get surfer comparisons, so I’m gonna take that as a compliment.”

“You should.”

His smile faltered, took on a hesitant quality. “If I asked you out, on a date kinda thing, would you... you know, come?”

I swallowed the urge to make a quip about the word “come”. The impulse shot to my gut and made trouble with the butterflies doing aerial turns down there. “Why don’t you ask and find out?”

“What are you doing Friday night?”

“Going out with you?”

His smile widened again. “Where do you want to go?”

“I’m easy. We...” No, we *did* have to go out, but... “We don’t have to do anything special.”

“You can pay your half if you want.”

Buoyed by the moment, and the taste of sex in my mouth, I simply nodded.

I could fret later.

Chapter Nine

And fret I did. For three whole days. The fact we didn't run into and suck each other off in the bathroom any of those days only added to my stress levels.

A date meant Daniel wanted more than casual sex, right? We'd managed to avoid all such conversation. Besides, we were guys; we weren't supposed to do deep and meaningful.

I tried on every article of clothing I owned—treating myself to an uninspiring fashion show. The mirror mounted on the back of my door cut off my head. Probably a good thing as I'm sure I scowled the whole time. I owned boring clothes. Cargo shorts with lots of useful pockets, clean jeans that had only just lost the creases my grandmother had ironed into them over the summer, and an array of T-shirts advertising everything from computer hardware to take-out burritos. One button-down shirt had stowed away in the bottom of my duffel. Uncharacteristically, I'd put it away without ironing it. Fingering the wrinkled cotton, I studied the bright Madras print.

Daniel wore bright colors. It was one of the things I liked about him. And, despite the mess, his room had a cozy feel to it—colorful sheets, posters of varying artistic merit, the ever-changing patterns on the monitors crowding his desk, the piles of clothes creeping out of every corner. His underwear. I had confined my use of color to the happy clamor of the quilt on my bed.

Color was messy. Daniel thrived in his mess.

Relationships were messy.

I let go of the shirt and reached for the T-shirt on top of the pile on my bed. The burrito one.

Burritos could be messy.

Daniel had to knock twice to get my attention. I had flipped on my laptop to get a few more words down on a thing I had to write, one of the many things I had to write. I'd heard the first knock, but had discarded the notion it was meant for me. Figured someone down the hall had taken TGIF seriously and couldn't remember which room they lived in. The second knock sounded closer—because my desk is right next to the bathroom door. Wondering why Daniel hadn't just let himself in, I reached out to push the door open. I rarely bothered latching it.

“Hey.” Framed by the doorway, Daniel made a pretty picture. He wore a pair of faded jeans and a well-fitted baby blue T-shirt advertising nothing but the fact he worked out.

Putting my laptop to sleep, I mumbled a return “hey”, and concentrated on standing up without tripping over my chair. “I just need to”—I waved a hand in front of the burrito logo—“get a clean shirt.”

Daniel followed me to my closet and leaned in as I slid the door open. I’d refolded all of my clothes, of course, and the stacked stripes made a pleasing sight. He reached for the shirt with the madras print. “Wear that one.”

“It’s not ironed.”

“So? It’ll be fine. Five minutes and your body heat will de-wrinkle it.”

“You don’t think it’s too, um, colorful?”

“Nah, I like it. Will look great with your skin.”

I couldn’t hide how pleased his comment made me, and Daniel couldn’t hide how pleased my reaction made him. We stood there and smiled inanely at each other for about twenty seconds, which was a long time if you were counting. I wasn’t. I had more important things to do, such as remember what his mouth felt like when attached to various parts of my anatomy.

“Are we in a hurry?” I asked, tilting my head in the vague direction of the bed.

Daniel grinned. “No, but I did kinda want to go out? Much as I’m enjoying the sexy times, you’ve got more to offer.”

“I do?”

“Yeah, I wanna hear about your avocado farm.”

My brows bunched together. “I don’t live on an avocado farm. We have a couple of trees, but my... Ah. *Avó* means grandmother. She’s from Brazil.” Hadn’t I clarified that the day I’d slipped in the mango bubbles?

“See, this is the stuff I want to know.”

Apparently not.

Daniel gestured impatiently. “Change your shirt and let’s go!”

I hadn’t realized how much I actually knew about mangoes, and the cultivation of them, until I started to share the business with Daniel. My

knowledge carried us around the top end of the lagoon and off campus in the direction of People's Park.

"You let me talk about mangoes for way too long," I said.

"You talked about your grandmother too. She sounds like a great lady." His tone was wistful. "My grandparents live on the East Coast, so I don't get to see them much. In fact, it's been years. Is she your only family?"

I sucked on my lower lip. One of the reasons I didn't do relationships was conversations like this. Not that my situation was unique or unusual. Compared to a lot of guys I'd met—particularly those whose sexual preferences fell outside of what a lot of folk considered normal—I had it good. When I had told Vó I liked boys, she'd wanted to know when I might bring one home to meet her.

"My mom split when I was about a year old and my dad had a panic attack and dropped me off at his mother's. With Vó. Then he disappeared too. We get a postcard now and again. Last one was from Alaska. He said he was salmon fishing up there."

The fact he'd been in the same hemisphere, and somehow attached to the same continent, had filled me with unreasonable excitement. I'd actually thought he might visit.

Heh.

I forestalled the inevitable questions and/or platitudes with: "What about your folks?"

"Oh, well..." Daniel craned his head back and looked up at the sky. "They're just your usual parents, I guess. Nothing too exciting."

He didn't want to talk about them.

I followed his gaze, checking out the streaky clouds stretching toward the shore. My thoughts tumbled and frayed. Questions I wanted to ask Daniel were tossed up there first—not because I didn't want to know about his parents, but because I suspected asking would be uncomfortable for both of us. Might also foster the impression we were engaging in something more than recreational sex.

The idea they might not see what I saw, though, not appreciate their son's sunny aspect and cheer, saddened me. Surely they smiled fondly when they heard him try to sing. Celebrated his achievements at school, were proud he

already had a job lined up for after graduation. He was a nice guy. Good looking and apparently successful.

I liked him a lot. I wanted to take him home to meet Vovó.

Something heavy knocked me sideways. Only then did I register the sound of skateboard wheels hitting the dirt and a series of loud curses. I had an idea I'd heard the wheels approaching for some time, maybe even a voice shouting, but I'd been lost in my thoughts. Up in the sky with the clouds.

I swayed on my feet, but didn't fall. Daniel caught me, one long arm wrapping around my middle and hauling me upright. "You okay?" he asked.

Too stunned to answer right away, I patted myself down, checking for injury. Both arms and legs worked, and I could breathe. Apart from feeling slightly discombobulated, I thought I might live. Daniel's arm remained tucked around my ribs the entire time.

"What happened?" I asked.

"You were staring up at the sky. I think you were in the sky. I called out to you, so did the kid on the skateboard." Apparently deciding I was okay, he let me go, but stayed nice and close. "You really need someone to watch out for you."

"You applying for the job?"

"Kinda thought I already had it." He leaned in closer. "Course, with all you do for me, we could say it's a reciprocal agreement."

"What do I do for you?" Heat crawled across my cheeks as I considered possible answers to the question.

Daniel surprised me. "You've been doing my laundry for three weeks. Did you think I wouldn't notice? You changed my sheets again too, didn't you?"

"I've just been making up loads. You did that one time, remember. Do you... it's not that I'm trying to organize you, it just seemed like you didn't have time or forgot to keep up with it."

"It's okay. I like it." He tucked his nose in beside mine, the kiss that wasn't a kiss.

I wasn't uncomfortable with public displays of affection. We were in a college town, after all, and nothing short of taking a leak in the shrubbery while wearing our underwear on our heads—in broad daylight—really disturbed the

natives. But I was uncomfortable with public displays of affection when I had yet to decide how fully committed I was to the guy canoodling with me.

It felt so good, though. Being wanted. Having a guy like Daniel show me how he felt in front of anyone and everyone.

I gifted him with a quick kiss and stepped back, away from the lusty haze surrounding him. Public fornication was frowned upon too. “So, um, are we eating on this date?”

Daniel studied me a moment, expression bemused, then nodded. “Yeah.”

After dinner, Daniel wanted to play mini golf.

“Mini golf,” I said, just in case I’d heard incorrectly. “With the little windmills and waterfalls.”

“Yeah.”

“We could go see a movie.”

“If I wanted to sit in a dark room, I’d go back to the hall. It’s a nice night, we should make the most of it.”

I couldn’t argue with that. “Okay. I’ve never played golf of any sort, though, so I’m going to suck at this.”

“As long as we don’t hit each other over the head with the clubs, we’ll have fun.”

“You’ve jinxed it now.” I slapped a palm to my forehead. “I can already feel the concussion coming on.”

Daniel knew where to go, so I just walked alongside, trying not to burp. That was the thing about being on an actual date. There were rules regarding behavior. Surprise expulsions of gas moved from a casual whoops or let’s-light-this-baby-up to I-wonder-if-he-smelled-that? Burps were not as fraught, but still not polite. I’d always supposed dating a girl would be difficult—the whole equipment question notwithstanding. Dating a guy seemed just as bound up by expectation.

“Have you dated a lot?” I asked.

Daniel glanced over at me before answering, his blond brows set into twin arcs of surprise. “Not really. First year I had this thing with a guy, but he never wanted to go *out* out, you know?”

“You mean he wasn’t out?”

“I don’t think so. I never actually asked because, well, we didn’t talk. We just...”

Did the nasty. Unreasonable jealousy wound through me.

“What about you?” Daniel asked.

“Um, not really? I knew I liked guys in high school, junior high, but no one else seemed to, so that made me pretty much alone with my, ah, desires. There was this one guy, I suspected he was gay? Mostly because he either avoided me or tried to burn a hole through my crotch with all the staring. I did go to prom, though. I took a friend. Shelly. She didn’t have a boyfriend or a date, and we both wanted to get dressed up. It was fun.”

“I took my girlfriend.”

“You had a girlfriend in high school?”

“Didn’t dare not. My parents would’ve...” Daniel inspected the sky again. Dusk had swept in over the coast, and the sigh of the ocean seemed louder.

Gathering up my courage, I asked the difficult question. “Do they know?”

“Yeah.” He sounded so disconsolate. “But, out of sight, out of mind.”

I reached for his hand, meaning to offer an awkward pat, the sort you dropped onto the head of a child you didn’t know. Daniel smiled as our fingers entwined, and my stomach pinched and rolled. Panic pulled out its shiny claws and dug in. I wished he wouldn’t smile at me like that.

I wished he would always smile at me like that.

I didn’t want a boyfriend, but I had accepted this date. I’d made conversation. We were paving a path to the devil, or my own personal demons, with deep and meaningful conversation. And I was unarmed. Unarmored!

“Let’s go play golf.” Tugging on Daniel’s hand, I continued walking.

“It’s this way.” He tugged me in the opposite direction.

The mini golf place had a carnival feel. Bright lights, spinning wheels, screaming children and an abundance of sugary snacks. My stomach continued to dip and swirl with all the noise. Felt like indigestion.

Taking my grimace as nerves, Daniel solicitously guided me through my first swing. Hands on mine, placing my fingers properly on the smooth shaft of

the club. He stood behind me, the warmth of his body radiating through my back. The scent of him—man and mangoes—wafted over my shoulder. I started when his cheek brushed mine. We'd both shaved for the date and our skin adhered in a smooth kiss before he drew back to let me swing. We reenacted the date scene from every cornball movie to perfection, down to my titter as I missed the ball entirely and had to line up again with Daniel draped over my back like an octopus.

At the second hole, Daniel encouraged me to try on my own. Stupidly, I missed the warmth of him along my back. The poke of something half hard behind my hip. Sporting a boner in public was one of those things that made everyone uncomfortable, though, so I got it.

"Let's see if I can put someone's eye out," I said, swinging my club over my shoulder where it connected with a low hanging string of colored lights. Fearing electrocution, I lowered the club gently.

Laughing, Daniel waved me forward, and I took aim again, this time with the club connected to the ground. I putted; I missed. I then chased the ball around a corner and into a puddle. Sloshed it out and danced with it around the hole at the end.

"What's par on this hole?" I asked.

"Four. You only missed it by about ten."

"Awesome."

Daniel got it in three.

On the third hole I tapped my ball a little too hard. Chipped it, really. It flew up, off the fake grass, hit the windmill, ricocheted off one of the blades, and smacked a little girl in the forehead. She screamed.

"Oh my God." Dropping my club, I hurdled the small hedge between the third and tenth holes and stood before my victim, twisting my fingers into a knot. "Are you okay?" She continued to scream until her parents finally looked up from dealing with something in a stroller. I flapped and flailed toward their daughter. "Stray golf ball. I'm really sorry. I didn't think I hit it that hard."

I expected to be decked, imprisoned, and possibly sued. My last year of college would be irrevocably derailed. I would be assigned to a chain gang in Nevada where my knuckles would swell after months of swinging a massive hammer at rocks. I didn't realize I was shaking until Daniel's warm hand closed around my arm and the world shimmered a little.

“Steady,” he said. “She’s going to be fine.”

The girl had been given cotton candy and seemed totally absorbed in teasing a wad of pink from one side. Tears beaded her lashes, made colorful by the overhead lights, and a small red smudge marred the middle of her forehead. Her mother was looking at me with concern.

“I’m so sorry,” I said.

“It’s fine, really. These things happen.” The woman offered a genuine smile and tilted her head. “Are you okay?”

“Oh, yeah. Just... sorry.”

She patted my arm. “Nothing a little cotton candy can’t fix.”

Daniel helped me back over the hedge.

“I thought they were going to sue me, or drown me in the pond or something,” I said as he handed me my club.

“They signed the same waiver we did.” He brushed at my forehead, swiping a curl away from my eyes. “You okay?”

“Why does everyone keep asking me that?”

“You were shaking.”

“I got a fright.” As soon as I said it, I felt ridiculous. “I thought...”

“I wouldn’t have pegged you as someone with an overactive imagination.”

“I don’t think I do? I mean, I space out sometimes.” And had a rich store of sexual fantasy. “It’s more I’ve got a plan and being put in prison for killing a little girl really doesn’t fit into it.”

Daniel clapped a hand across his mouth, but not fast enough to cut off his laughter. Shaking his head, he said, “I don’t think that fits into anyone’s plan. Not really?”

Seeing the funny side of my statement, I allowed a chuckle. But my gut churned on.

Chapter Ten

A bonfire burned heartily behind us. We'd lingered in the periphery for a minute or so before leaning away into the cool darkness, wordlessly complicit in our desire to be alone together. The stretch of beach between the party and campus looked to be deserted. Daniel walked quietly beside me. Our hands brushed together now and again, each contact ringing across my skin as if I were a tuning fork. I had never been so aware of another person. We enjoyed a quiet that fell just short of comfortable, what with the charge between us, the jolt every time he touched me. I could feel the expectation of the evening creeping across my shoulders, and as much as I had enjoyed hanging out with Daniel, I knew we were walking toward an epiphany. Or maybe just a moment.

Daniel leaned in close as we skirted a hefty pile of seaweed and driftwood, and I briefly caught his scent. My cock had been at half-mast most of the evening, tucked into a convenient fold of my loose shorts. Now it rose inquiringly. I shoved my hands into my pockets, my shoulders lifting toward my ears as I made an attempt to draw in on myself, protect something more than the situation in my briefs.

“Cold?”

I shook my head. “No.”

Daniel put his arm around my shoulders anyway, and I resisted the urge to lean into his side. If he noticed my stiffness (either case), he said nothing. The wind kicked up and I did shiver. Daniel nuzzled my ear. I shivered again. Then his lips were on mine and time looped and whirled, stretched and swayed.

I could kiss Daniel forever.

His lips were warm and soft, but he didn't kiss softly. He kissed as if he needed me—as if contact with my mouth somehow sustained him. He kissed aggressively, and my own need swamped any objection I might have to his roughness. Innately, I trusted him in this.

My hands wandered up over his ribs, measured the girth of his biceps, and disappeared into his hair. His thumbs caught my ears, as they always seemed to do. He held me there, cradling my face as he ravaged my mouth, teased my tongue, nipped, nuzzled, and stole my sense. Hips connected in a synchronous rock, bouncing together, pulling a gasp from each of us as twin erections connected. It was just short of painful. Beyond amazing.

“God, Al.” Daniel panted against my cheek. “I want you so bad.”

“Feeling is mutual.” The words left a dizzy swirl in their wake. I knew what I was saying—I wanted him and had done since I’d first seen him. I just... How was anyone supposed to think clearly while being kissed toward the edge of sanity?

I met his fresh onslaught with my own desire. Twining my tongue around his, making him chase my mouth as I visited his cheek, blazed a path toward his ear, captured the fleshy lobe between my teeth and delighted in the gasp he gave me. Warmth wrapped my cock—his hand between us. He rubbed and I rocked. Crossing my arm over his, I returned the favor, and his groan raised the hair at my nape. He was so hard. Curling my fingers around the bulge in his jeans, I squeezed. Want suddenly felt inadequate. I needed him. I needed more than hands and mouths, getting off in a bathroom. I craved the feel of his body next to mine, the weight of him holding me down—over my back, or between my legs. He could take me any which way he wanted me. His finger had circled my hole enough times I knew he wanted the same.

Daniel pulled away. His hands had left my ears and were tucked into the back pockets of my shorts, long fingers kneading my ass. The wind had kicked up a little, and my shirt flapped at the waist, exposing my stomach. I looked up at him, lifting my chin the few inches required to meet his gaze full on, and melted beneath the intensity in his stare. The night hid the color of his eyes, but I could still imagine the unfettered blue.

“I want to make love to you, Alvaro.”

I had been wheeling through the summer sky of his eyes. As his whisper sorted itself into words, I plummeted, hitting the earth with what must have been an audible *thwack*. It hurt. Pain radiated out from my heart, catching my limbs in a palsy of fear. My head had started shaking back and forth in a slow rhythm even before I ordered it to.

“I can’t,” I said, edging away from him.

“You haven’t done it before?”

“No, no... I have.” Here was where I ceased to make sense, even to myself. “I just... not like this.”

“I don’t understand. You mean here, on the beach? No, no... back in my... your room. It’s too sandy and I didn’t bring stuff.” He leaned in and licked my ear. “I’ll be gentle. I’ll make it so good for you.” My ass clenched. “Let me love you.”

That word again. Why did it freak me out so much? I wanted him, didn't I?

I stepped back, dislodging his hands from my pockets. My ass immediately got cold. Still, my head bobbed back and forth like one of those stupid souvenirs from the ballpark. "We can have sex, Daniel. I'm good with sex. I want more sex with you. All kinds of sex." If I said sex again, some innocent lamb the next county over was going to implode. "But we can't make lo—" I choked.

"What?"

"This was a mistake. This date."

I might as well have dropped a piano on his head. Daniel rocked back, lines scrawling across his forehead. "How? What the hell is going on here? What did I do wrong?"

"You want to love me and I can't love you back. Not now, not this year. I need to concentrate on school. I can't afford to fall in love. I've got a plan. I'm not going to be like him. I want—"

I wanted so much, including the stricken man before me, swaying in place, his face crumpled in confusion. But I didn't want to make the same mistake my father had made. Daniel couldn't get me pregnant, but he could turn my head in the wrong direction. Distract me from my plan—from being a man Vó could be proud to call *son*. To prove to my father and long-lost mother I mattered.

"Who said anything about love?" Daniel shoved a hand into his hair, curled his fingers around the back of his head. "What do you think is going on here? Felt to me like we were both getting hard, and when that happens, we usually get off. Yeah, I want more than a blowjob in the bathroom. I like you, Alvaro. I like you a lot. That's why I asked you out. But I'm not proposing to you."

Ever laughed in church? I had. And when everyone turned to look at me, I felt about the same as I did right now. As if I'd committed some awful sin—had opened the door to the devil himself and declared myself his, forevermore. In other words, I felt like an absolute fool. But despite thinking I might have overreacted to Daniel's phrasing, I did know something more than friendship and a happy exchange of blowjobs was happening between us.

Scrubbing my sweaty palms over my thighs, I took another step back, caught my heel on a lump of seaweed or something, and landed on my ass. The warmth of the day had already evaporated from the sand. A chill seeped through my shorts and up my back. Daniel remained standing, now a short

distance away. Just out of looming range. I swallowed an object the size of the moon and looked down. Raised my knees and tucked my face in between.

“Sorry,” I muttered into the close darkness. “I’m so sorry.”

He stood there all silent yet stormy for a long time. I didn’t talk and he didn’t answer. The sound of his voice circled the inside of my head, though.

God, you’re beautiful.

I like you, Alvaro. I like you a lot. That’s why I asked you out.

Then I heard him walk away, the *shush shush* of shoes through sand. A part of me wanted to hurl questions at his back. Surely we weren’t done talking about stuff, about the mess I’d made. But the greater part of me understood tactical retreat. Daniel had a sweet heart, and as much I feared he wanted to share it with me, I also knew he had to protect it.

Chapter Eleven

I had a paper due on testing standards, processing specifications, commercial data, and patents for a material not invented yet. I'd done a similar project last semester using bio plastics. This time I was supposed to come up with my own material. My excitement for the project had waned, though. My material—another bio plastic, one of my own design—didn't seem inventive enough. Or viable. While staring a hole through my laptop screen, I'd decided my future in material engineering had dwindled to a pinprick. That my dreams were useless.

A future on the farm wouldn't be the worst thing. I'd worked every job there, every summer since I could walk. I knew all the hands and managers. I knew Vó meant to leave the property and business to me when she passed. It wouldn't make me wealthy, but it would pay to put my own son through college, just as it had done for me.

If I ever had a son.

I didn't want a daughter. What would I do with a girl? Teach her how to be a boy?

Why was I thinking about the kids I'd never have?

The screen of my laptop had gone black. Feeling the same way, I picked up my cellphone and called my grandmother.

"Varo! I was just going to call you." She always said that, as if she wanted me to know she'd been thinking of me, but not fretting.

"Hello, Vovó."

"You sound tired. Why do you sound tired?"

"I've been working." The black laptop screen mocked me. "What about you? How are you?"

"You did not call me to hear about what I am doing. I am doing what I always do."

"I like hearing it, though."

"Sweet boy." If she called me that in front of anyone, I'd die. Blush myself into a coma and die. But over the phone, it was okay. Made me feel kinda warm

and gushy, which I needed right about now. “How is your paper coming? Did you find a way to build something out of mango skins yet?”

The reminder of a failed project of last summer made me smile. “No, not yet. But I still think they have potential.”

“I know you will find a way.”

“I’m working on an idea for the sugars right now.”

“Clever boy.” Equally as embarrassing in company. “But why do you sound sad?”

“I’m not sad.”

“You are too quiet. And you have not asked about Noêmia. Tell me who is making you sad?”

I hadn’t consciously called her to talk about Daniel, but as soon as she asked who, I wanted to talk about Daniel. I didn’t, of course. “No one. I’m just busy.”

Her gentle sigh sounded like the ocean, extremely far away. She didn’t press, though. Just as she’d wait for me to call and announce she’d been just about to do the same, she’d wait for me to talk, then ask exactly the right questions.

She waited, and I studied the blank canvas of the dimmed laptop display.

I had tried not to think about him. Doing so usually conjured up the scent of mangoes and sex, and the sting of failure. It was a weird combination of memory and sensation that left me dizzy and queasy. I recognized the sensation.

Finally, I asked, “Do you think I’m too young to love someone?”

“I think you are too old to believe you don’t, Alvaro.” She hadn’t told me anything I didn’t already know, but I could pretend the wisdom had come from her experience.

“What does that mean?”

“I think you can puzzle it out. You’re my clever boy, remember? Too clever to run away from something you want.”

How did she know I had run away?

The laptop screen blurred. Blinking, I tested my voice with a quiet breath. Didn’t want my grandmother to think she’d reduced me to tears. She’d drive

down to Santa Barbara with a thermos of *moqueca*. She called it “soup for the soul” and it was pretty good. But I was due home in a couple of weeks and I could wait until then. Either let her comfort me, or...

“Vovó, I have to go. I need to finish this paper.”

“Should I be worried about you?”

“No. I’m... I’m going to figure this out. Just like you said.” I had no idea how, but just saying I would made me feel marginally better.

“I’ll see you next weekend?”

“Yeah and... thanks.”

“Always. I’ll make soup for you.”

Of course she would. But what comforted me more was the fact she had known who and what I was talking about—yet she hadn’t mentioned his name once. Grandmothers were wonderful people.

Chapter Twelve

They say you can't miss something you never had, but they are so often wrong. Seriously, whichever committee got together to coin all those pithy sayings obviously hadn't experienced as much life as I had. And I was only twenty-one.

I missed Daniel. After my phone call with my grandmother, I hadn't run to his room and declared my feelings. My life was not a romantic comedy. I did do his laundry, though. He hadn't been leaving much in the bathroom, not even bubbles, though the scent of his favorites lingered, hitting me square in the chest every time I opened the door. I didn't think a few washed and folded T-shirts and towels would make up for refusing him on the beach that night, putting words in his mouth. I did think it might give me an excuse to knock on his door, though.

Holding my neatly folded stack, I stood on his side of the bathroom, in front of the door to his room. I'd been practicing my laser vision again. His door succumbed about as easily as my laptop screen, which was to say it remained steadfastly untouched by my power.

Until it reached out and smacked me in the nose.

Disney fairies circled my head and sang in my ears as I rocked backward. I didn't land on my ass, but I did drop my laundry so I could clutch at my face. As soon as I touched my nose, I hissed and yelped at the same time. Then Daniel was pulling my hands away.

"Don't touch it. Shit. Wait..." Then he touched it, his fingers pinching the bridge of my nose.

I might have squealed. I definitely made an attempt to bat his hand away from the point of white-hot agony. "What are you doing? Stop!"

"If it's broken, I'm saving you five grand on surgery."

"It's not broken." It might be broken. Felt like someone had stepped on my face and squashed my nose sideways. "What does it look like?" Daniel pulled one of his hands away. A bright streak of blood bisected his palm. "Fairy wings! You broke my nose."

"Fairy wings?"

I flailed weakly.

“Why were you standing so close to my door?” Daniel asked.

This would be where I mentioned the laundry scattered about my feet. I looked down and blood dripped from the end of my nose, fell in slow motion, and landed on one of his towels. “I, um... ow.” I wanted to touch my nose. The original sharp pain had faded a little, only to be replaced by a steady throb in the middle of my face. “Towels. I washed your towels, and some shorts.”

Awkward silence ballooned between us. I remained downcast, staring at the ruined laundry. I didn’t want to see the look on Daniel’s face. Hell, I didn’t even want to hear him say thank you, or make some excuse. Taking a backward step, I waved toward him. “I’m gonna go get some ice.”

“I’ll get it for you.”

“No, you don’t have to.”

“Alvaro, wait.”

I shook my head. Big mistake. Blood flew from the end of my nose in a wonky arc. My thoughts tumbled into a lazy whirl. Turning slowly, I grabbed at the cloth hanging over my basin, wet it and pressed it gently to my nostrils. Then I chanced a look in the mirror. To my surprise, I did not look like a murder victim. The skin under my eyes had started to purple a little, but my nose looked normal. Blood clung my nostrils and upper lip, and now I could see it, I could taste it. Smacking my lips sent a sharp pain all the way into my brain. So did sighing.

Daniel appeared in the mirror next to me, worry lines in formation across his forehead, the corners of his mouth turned way down. “We should go to the urgent care place off Embarcadero,” he said.

“Can’t we wait until it looks like it might fall off?” I sounded as if I had a cold. Gingerly prodding the side of my nose, I turned this way and that, checking the angle. “Doesn’t look broken.”

“A break isn’t always obvious. We should get it checked out. And you’re gonna want some painkillers.”

The lazy whirl turned into a loop de loop of the bathroom, taking my brain with it. The steady reflection in the mirror was at odds with the movement. I gripped the edge of the counter and closed my eyes. Big mistake. The swirling sensation increased.

“I just need to sit down,” I mumbled, blinking, seeking a focus point.

Daniel helped me to the edge of the tub where I sat, and waited for my nose to stop throbbing. The pain wasn’t too bad. On a scale of a paper cut to Ebola, I checked in at smacked-in-the-face-by-a-door. But I couldn’t imagine it abating anytime soon. Sometimes you just knew when an ache would stay with you for a while. Like the one I’d been carrying somewhere in the vicinity of my heart for the last ten days.

“Maybe we should go to the urgent care place,” I said.

“Where are your keys? I’ll go get your car.”

Without arguing, I gestured toward my room. “Hanging on a hook by the door.”

Daniel’s face relaxed briefly into a smile. “If the zombie apocalypse happens, I’m sticking with you.”

“What’s that supposed to mean?”

“While everyone else is scrambling for a baseball bat, you’ll be loading boxes of supplies into your car. And you’ll know where the keys are.”

Smiling hurt, but I did it anyway.

Sporting a white strip of tape across the bridge of my definitely broken nose, I sat propped up by my pillow watching Daniel pace the length of my room. He had long legs—took him three strides to get to the door, three back to the window. The movement made me dizzy.

“I’m not going to die in the night, you know. It’s not even a bad break.”

Halting midstride, Daniel loomed over the bed and studied my face. “I’m so sorry, Alvaro.”

“Not your fault. Wrong place, wrong time. I’m surprised it hasn’t happened sooner. That bathroom is like a death trap.” That’s what I meant to say, anyway. But the painkillers were kicking in and every second word had a slur attached to both ends. Flexing my tongue as if the exercise would limber it up, I waved toward the bathroom door. “Go get some sleep. Haven’t you got a lab tomorrow?”

“Project is finished. How did your paper go? Did you finish the formula for your plastic?”

Conversation had been stilted in the waiting room of the urgent care. The presence of twenty other sick and wounded folk hadn't exactly made for a convivial atmosphere, between the quiet moans of the guy next to me and the girl who sobbed disconsolately on the shoulder of her boyfriend. Then there'd been the guy who fell through the door and probably broke his nose on the floor. His stunt had jumped him to the front of the queue, lucky badger.

"I did." My tongue tangled up a little on *did*, making it sound more like *thid*.

Daniel sat on the edge on the bed. "Need anything? Water? More ice?"

"No. I think I'm going to just sleep. What time is it?" Urgent care had a way of swallowing hours.

Lifting a hip, Daniel pulled his phone out of his pocket and woke the display. "One."

"I'm glad I don't have a morning class tomorrow."

"Same. So, um..." He glanced at the bathroom door, his exit, then back at me. "Why did you do my laundry?"

I blinked heavily at him, weighed down by the desire to sleep. The pain in my nose had faded to a gentle ache, and my tongue no longer wanted to move. Unconsciousness nipped at the edge of my thoughts. "Why do you sing in the bath?"

He appeared to give my question serious consideration. "Feels good. Singing makes me happy." He didn't add anything about button-pushing, or the fact his singing seemed to bother me. Instead, he arched a blond brow and waited for me to take my turn.

I'd meant to deflect him. Change the direction of our conversation. But his answer plucked at something inside me, tucked in next to a feeling I'd been carrying, the quiet longing that made me do stupid things. Singing made Daniel happy and... he made me happy. So I told him that. "You make me happy."

"I make you crazy."

"I think I need crazy."

"Like you need a broken nose."

"It's only a little bit broken." My eyes closed in another long blink. He was still sitting there when I surfaced. My thoughts bounced and swirled. "I missed

you.” Had I said that out loud? “And I think I might love you.” Well, flapdoodle. A skinful of painkillers and I was confessing my soul.

Daniel didn’t look shocked and/or horrified... aaaand I didn’t know how to deal with that right now. I let my eyelids drop down again. Then I let go.

Chapter Thirteen

When I woke, I was lying on my side and it felt like someone had taped a brick to the front of my face. And Daniel lay stretched out along the edge of the bed, also on his side, facing me. Eyes closed, lips parted gently with sleep, he breathed quietly and steadily.

God, he was beautiful.

I didn't question his presence in my bed—I simply thanked providence for the quiet moment set before me. His lashes were a shade darker than his hair, like his brows. This close—and while not lost in a kiss—I could see the subtle variations of color in both. Make out individual hairs. Light stubble prickled his cheeks and jaw, not much more than the night before. He didn't have to shave every day like I did.

While I stared, his eyes blinked open, the blue softened by morning and sleep. He seemed unsurprised to find me looking at him. A smile crooked the corners of his mouth.

“You didn't have to stay,” I said.

“I didn't mean to. How are you feeling?”

“Like a truck ran over my nose.”

“You should sit up, let the blood flow away from your face.”

I could also stand to take a leak and maybe brush my teeth. Daniel hadn't recoiled from the stink hole that must be my mouth, but he hadn't fully woken up yet. Clambering over him, I went to take care of business. I was cleaning my teeth when he wandered into the bathroom to do the same. Feeling lazy—or hazy from the knock of the painkillers the night before, I hung out while he cleaned his teeth. I'd already inspected my face, and I didn't look too bad. The bruising was minimal, thanks to quick attention and lots of ice. And now I was upright, the swelling had started to recede, taking most of the discomfort with it.

Daniel swabbed his face with a towel and let the wadded-up cotton drop to the counter where it clung valiantly to the edge before slipping onto the floor. One shift of his feet had it bunched into a corner where it joined a pair of discarded shorts. I smiled.

“What’s so funny?” he asked.

I couldn’t tell him his bunches of dirty laundry did weird things to my chest. “Nothing.”

“So, do you want to talk about last night?” Daniel asked.

“Last night?” Gently, I touched the tape over my nose. Only a small twinge met my questing fingers. “I broke my nose.”

“I mean, after that. We talked a bit.”

“We did?” I picked through my hazy memory of the night before. I recalled the long and awful stretch of bland clinic time and then being really, really tired. And thinking about Daniel, and how he’d been there, and how much I’d missed him, and...

The blush hit with a sudden and sickening intensity. Heat stung my cheeks. My nose throbbed. “Oh. Um.” I scrubbed the side of my hot face, palm heating up in the process. Wrapping my now warm fingers around the back of my neck, I searched for a more eloquent response. “Oh.”

Daniel’s eyes reflected his inner struggle. Flashes of hurt, questions, and a curious softness. “Listen—”

“Wait, just let me say something.” *Make this work, Alvaro.* “I was standing outside your door last night because I wanted to apologize. I freaked out on you that night on the beach and I think I hurt your feelings. I sort of trampled all over this thing”—I gestured between us—“and maybe ruined it. I can’t tell you how sorry I am. It’s not what I intended when I said I’d go out on a date with you.” Though, if I were honest with myself, with Daniel, I might have warned both of us it could happen. “I know guys don’t talk about relationship stuff, and really, that might be the best part about being gay. Or I thought it was. That I could just hang with someone, get off, and not...” I lost my breath and with it, my momentum.

“Not get involved,” Daniel finished for me.

“I told you about my dad. He didn’t finish college. He got my mom pregnant at eighteen, and I wrecked both their lives.”

“You don’t know that. Besides, it’s not as if we’re in the same situation.”

“No, we’re not and that’s kind of what freaks me out. I know this is different. I know I’m not going to turn out the same way. At least, most of the time I do. I’ve worked so hard to get here, Daniel. Scholarships and a million

hours on the farm when I wasn't studying. Not saying no one else has worked harder, I just... I don't want to be a drifter like my dad. I want more."

Nodding, Daniel took a step back. Resignation now ruled his face, his brows and mouth set in even lines. "Okay, I get it."

I reached for his wrist. "No you don't. Not quite." No rules governed the next part. It was my decision to make, and I might be too late. But I wanted him to know. If it hurt him more, I'd regret it later, but youth is selfish and I didn't want to carry this feeling bottled up inside anymore. "I meant it when I said you make me happy. I went on that date because I wanted to be with you. Spend time with you outside of this bathroom." I squeezed my eyes shut. "I really, really like being with you, Daniel."

I more than liked him, but love wasn't making me as brave as I might have liked right then. It was making me cautious. Smaller steps would still get me there, though. Steps taken with my eyes closed, because, damn it, I didn't think I could watch him leave. I didn't really want to hear him leave, either.

Daniel hadn't moved, and his silence was killing me. Well, near silence. I could hear him breathing. I still held his wrist loosely. Letting go, I ducked my chin and opened my eyes. Turned away. Further embarrassment stung my cheeks. My nose continued to throb quietly. I'd taken a single step when he caught my wrist, pulling me to a gentle halt. Stepping in close, he let go and framed my face instead, his thumbs slipping into place next to my ears, fingers disappearing into my hair. He tucked his nose next to mine, the gesture so familiar and sweet. And he did it carefully, knowing it might hurt, but apparently needing to establish that connection. Remind me of how we'd got started.

A tremble slid beneath my skin, head to toe.

"I really, really like being with you too," he said, his breath washing gently over my lips.

"Why?"

"Why? God, Al... Because you're you. I didn't mean to freak you out that night. I guess I came on a little too strong? But when I find something I like, someone... Hell, I'm an overgrown puppy. Maybe I got carried away. But... the way you look at me. You make me feel worthwhile, like the person I want to be. I need that. I want that. I want you." He paused for breath, and I took the opportunity to fill my own lungs. Then he delivered his punch line. "And you keep washing my shorts."

Laughing with a broken nose hurt. I managed to constrain myself to a chuckle, which jostled us a little.

Moving his nose out of the danger zone, Daniel rubbed his cheek to mine. “I have a pile of socks under my bed. I think they started a colony.”

“Stop making me laugh. Hurts.”

He dropped a light kiss onto my lips. “Okay.” Another kiss. “So, does us being in really, really like with each other mean we can have sex somewhere other than the bathroom now?”

And that, right there, was the best part about being male. Sappy conversation done, we were ready to get naked. Daniel caught my lips in a longer, more searching kiss. My knees began to melt. He backed up a little, pulling me toward his door. Our lips parted with a thrillingly sloppy sound.

Hooking a finger in his waistband, I yanked him back toward me. “Wrong direction. I’m not...” Instant remorse smacked me upside the head. “Ah... if you want to go to your room we can.”

Grinning, Daniel took a hold of my shoulders and steered me backward. “Your room is fine. You’ve got stuff, right? You probably have a shelf in your closet with a label and everything.”

I had a drawer, not a shelf. And it wasn’t labeled. “Yeah, I’ve got stuff.” For making love. Not that what we’d been doing up until now hadn’t qualified for the gentler nomenclature, but...

I needed to stop thinking.

“Your nose going to be okay?” Daniel asked.

“So long as you don’t want to have sex with it, sure. Or plan to take me face down.”

“I have this fantasy of you riding me, actually.”

My ass clenched. My dick, which had stiffened as we kissed, passed the halfway mark on the hardness scale. “Out of curiosity, did you ever fantasize about riding me?”

“No, but I did picture myself on all fours at some point. And taking turns pounding each other into the mattress, which will have to wait until your nose is better.”

“Holy...” A groan mangled whatever else I might have said.

We kissed all the way to my bed. Every time our noses collided, a jolt of pain shot through my skull. Oddly, I didn't mind the increasing ache on the front of my face. The taste of Daniel's mouth seemed more important. Minty fresh, with a hint of him beneath. He played games with my tongue. I caught his fuller lower lip between my teeth and tugged it backward. Grinning, he came after me, claiming my mouth again. His groans filled my lungs.

When the back of my knees hit the edge of the mattress, it was tempting to just let Daniel roll me back. I could feel him hard against my hip. But if we fell onto the bed, we'd probably get about as far as pushing our shorts down and jerking each other off. My blood-starved brain tried to convince me that wouldn't be a bad thing.

I hadn't broken my nose for a hand job, though.

"Wait." I nudged Daniel backward. Malleable with lust, he stood where I left him, hooded gaze following as I yanked open a drawer and grabbed the stuff. I tossed the lube and a condom onto the bed and turned back to him, reaching for the hem of his shirt. "Won't be needing this."

In my richly varied fantasies, I'd had us undressing each other slowly. Pausing to worship each stretch of exposed flesh. I'd imagined a lot of licking. Here, in real life, it all happened very quickly. One minute we were dressed, the next we weren't... and one of my ears hurt from where my shirt had caught it on the way up. I'd been trying to avoid my nose. Then time slowed down. I'd seen Daniel naked before, but I hadn't had the opportunity to really look at him.

I put my hands to his chest, and the warmth of his skin seeped into my palms. I could feel his heart beating. Smoothing my hands downward, I watched my fingertips bump over his abs. I brushed the hollow of his navel with my thumb. Then I did it all again, this time spreading my fingers so they moved over the couple of moles dotted here and there. He hissed as I tweaked a nipple. Hot breath washed across my ear as he leaned into me, and then his hands were at my back, as warm as the rest of him, tracing a path downward, fingers dancing as mine had.

My cock ached. I looked down to find it more than ached. Moisture beaded the slit with one long string dangling toward the floor. Daniel was similarly affected. A gentle thrust had my dick folding its length against his thigh, smearing precum across his skin. I grabbed for the erection poking me in the opposite hip. So hot, so hard. Also leaking. Collecting moisture from the tip with my thumb, I stroked downward, pushing his foreskin away from the shiny head.

Daniel's groan heated my shoulder, then he bit me. Gently. It was the sexiest thing anyone had ever done. My balls hitched and my cock twitched. I had never imagined coming without being stroked, inside or out, but the proximity of this man, the scent and taste of him, the tender sting at my shoulder... If I didn't get a hold of myself, we wouldn't even make it to the bed.

"C'mere." Taking his hand, I shuffled back a single step and proceeded to climb awkwardly onto my bed, backwards. I got a foot caught in the edge of the quilt. When I tried to kick it free, it tangled around my ankle like a vine. All the motion had my aching cock bobbing and weaving, and let me tell you, not as pleasant a sensation as you might think.

"Hold on." A wide grin split Daniel's face.

"I'm not really the clumsy type. It's your influence."

He laughed, which had his abdominal muscles crunching in an attractive display, and his cock bobbing for attention. Yanking my foot out of the tangle of quilt, I reached for his erection. He angled his hips away. "Nope. If you grab that and fall off the bed, playtime will be over."

"I'm not going to fall off the bed."

Kneeling on the edge of the bed, Daniel crawled forward, over me. "Hope not."

I got lost in the next round of kisses. We rolled back onto the bed, arms and legs tangled together, skin to skin. Daniel met every thrust of my hips. From above we might have resembled a pair of complementary sine waves undulating together. We hadn't even uncapped the lube and already I felt like we were making love.

We were also fast approaching premature ejaculation again. I was, anyway.

"Stop," I gasped into Daniel's mouth.

"Is it your nose?"

"No... no." I'd actually forgotten I had a nose. Thinking about it then awakened the ache, so I determinedly thought about something else, like the near pain between my thighs. "If we keep rolling around like this, I'm gonna come, which will be super awkward."

"Kinda flattering, though." Daniel shifted and dug the lube bottle out from under his hip. "Ready for this, then?"

His other hand currently cupped one of my ass cheeks. He'd teased me back there twice already. One more clench and I might make good on my embarrassing promise. God, how was I going to get through prep without spoiling the fun?

"See, this is why we need to keep things in the bathroom. Being in a bed with you is just—"

Daniel silenced me with a kiss and rolled onto his back, pulling me up on top of him. I helped set us up by straddling his thighs, then shuffled forward so we crossed swords. Reaching between us, I gathered both our erections with one of my *long*-fingered hands and stroked up and down. After nearly making myself come, I had to let go. I leaned forward instead. Kissed him hard and deep. Daniel groaned into my mouth and I returned the sound with another kiss.

The brush of a slicked finger pulled another deep grumble from my throat. My back arched without any help from me, pushing my ass toward Daniel's hand. Much as I feared shooting my load before we got down to business, I couldn't *not* react to that finger, those two fingers, stretching me, teasing me.

Soon, I was begging. "Need you now." Leaning forward changed the angle of everything, and a spark of anticipation flared across my skin. "Enough teasing. Please." I attacked his mouth, bumping my sore nose in the process, not caring about the pain shooting down against the current of lust.

Daniel's fingers withdrew, and I released his lips long enough to sit back up and help him with the condom. I took slightly evil delight in slicking it down with lube several more times than necessary. The sound of his groans would echo in my ears long after we were done. His hips bumped up beneath me, jostling my seat. It was time for me to move, anyway. With Daniel helping me into place, I positioned myself over his pole and holy mother of everything...

So, so good. The burn, the stretch, that breathless moment of waiting for my body to say *yes*, we can do this, and then the halting slide, the feeling of being filled. His pubes tickled my ass and I was down. Settled. So *not* settled. If I'd thought my dick ached before, now it simply wanted to explode.

"I hope you're... close, because I'm... not going to last... long," I said, pausing to huff softly every third word or so.

"How about if I do this?" Daniel grabbed my poor cock and stroked it.

While trying not to blow my top, I managed to clench. "Then I'll do that."

"Oh my God."

His hips bucked upward, causing him to thrust just a little deeper. Praising all the blessed saints, I set to work, planting my hands on his ribs, lifting myself up, lowering myself down. He let me do it once by myself, and then his hands were there, fingers curled hard enough into my flesh to leave bruises. Felt good.

He bucked as I rocked, and the weird angle had us both hissing. “Wait, let me.” I rose up and sank down again, establishing our rhythm.

Every downward stroke hit that special spot inside. It was almost torture, but of the most exquisite kind. Up wasn’t as much fun, I didn’t want to lose him. Daniel helped. I hadn’t ridden someone before, and it was the most intimate thing I’d ever done. Until Daniel suggested it, doing so wouldn’t have occurred to me. Surely only porn stars did something other than crawl up behind their partner, or prop his hips up on a pillow?

But even though I was in the position of power, bottoming from the top, there was no question we were doing it all together. His hands tucked under my upper thighs, his strength helping me up and down. And I could watch his face, smile as he smiled, glory in the fact he looked about as stunned as I felt.

I watched him come.

Shouting, he bucked beneath me, hips thrusting up, cock reaching deep. He shuddered and jerked, the hands at my hips losing hold, then catching me again. His fingers dug into my ass. The beautiful blue of his eyes darkened. His mouth fell open. Then he clutched at my cock.

My turn to yell. The sensation of filling a tight space while my own tight space was filled never got old. This was why some men loved men. I thrust into his hand once, twice, hit my peak, fell over the other side, and rolled into the valley. I shot an impressive distance, my spunk stringing toward his shoulder. Felt like I came about three times, and whenever I thought it might be over, he’d twitch or I’d twitch and we’d both shudder and groan again.

Trusting one of my shaking arms to bear my weight, I reached between us to secure the condom and drew myself off his cock. Then I flopped to the side, leaving Daniel to take care of the mess. He didn’t move. He just lay there, belly glistening, shiny pearls in his little patch of chest hair. A streak across the shoulder closest to me.

I tried to speak, but words failed me.

Hearing my croak, Daniel responded with an “mmm-hmm”.

I drifted for a while, lost in that wonderful, warm post-climax haze. Being in bed for it was awesome. We should have moved shop sooner. Daniel's fingers brushed mine, and I offered a reciprocal nudge. I'd have held his hand if I had the strength.

He managed words first. "Tell me we're going to do that again."

I considered the state of my ass. Sore, but not unpleasantly so. I knew someone had been there and the thought of that someone, the warm presence at my side, made me smile. "Yeah." I rolled my head sideways. "Prolly not today."

Daniel met my gaze. "How's the nose?"

"What nose?"

A crooked grin pulled at one side of his mouth.

Neither of us moved for another little while, which meant we lay there staring at one another. Should have been weird, but it wasn't—until it was. "What?" I finally asked.

"Waiting for you to freak out."

I snorted. "I've been too well fucked for that." *Sorry, Vó, but sometimes a word is just a word.* "What about you?"

"I'm the one who wanted to move things into a bed. I am perfectly fine with all of this."

"Okay, good. Because if you freaked out now, things would be awkward."

He chuckled. "Nope. No freaking. We're good." He did hold my hand, then, squeezing with his sticky fingers. "This is good."

The light flicked on inside my skull. Oh! That's what he wanted to know. Doing it again, not freaking out... I gave his tacky hand a return squeeze. "We can make love anytime you want."

"Yeah?" He rolled his head back, shifting his gaze to the ceiling.

I studied his profile and tried not to think about what I might have just admitted—without the aid of mood-altering substances. Fear curled around the giddiness in my gut, but didn't clamp down. One, I was too well fucked to panic properly, and two... Putting the word "love" into a sentence about what we might do together hadn't knocked me askew. Instead, I had a warm glow thing going on in the center of my chest.

“Daniel...” I squeezed his hand again, urging him to look at me. He did. “I’m sorry.”

A familiar puzzle pieced together across his face. The struggle between speaking and not. We’d already done a bit of relationship talk, and we’d accepted the fact sex between us might now be called *making love*. That was a lot for one morning.

He breathed out, breath still minty. Still Daniel-y. “I get it. Not gonna say it didn’t hurt. And it’s not like I meant to tell you I loved you or anything. I guess it was kind of a misunderstanding. But I get why you reacted the way you did.”

“Want to know the worst part?”

One blond brow quirked upward.

“I think I hurt myself just as much. Heck, I know I did.”

“You never use proper curse words,” Daniel said.

“Sure I do. Just not the crude ones. Much.” If ever.

“That’s one of the things I like about you.”

“Yeah?” A beat passed between us, one filled with quiet breath. Then I chose to tell him what I liked. Seemed fair. He’d complimented me a dozen times or more over the last few weeks. “I like the way you smile. Reminds me of summer. Your eyes, too. But it’s more than that. You make happy look *happy* and I get the idea you’re not always in line with that, you know? Things get you down, but you seem to be always looking for ways to turn them around. Make everything better and brighter. That’s what I like best about you.”

The sunshine I’d been talking about dawned across his face. His cheeks pinked slightly with it, as if he were embarrassed.

I kissed his parted lips, just quickly. “You’re shockingly good-looking too.”

“Shockingly, huh?”

“Yeah.” I grinned and pulled at my tacky fingers, which were stuck to his. “Want to come home with me next weekend and meet my grandmother?”

Daniel’s eyes widened. The crook of his lips belied any shock, however. “You mean, as your boyfriend?”

“Yes.” Panic squeezed me on the *S*, but I managed to get the whole word out normally enough.

“Sure. I’d like that.”

Ever had a smile just take over your face? One second you’re sort of amused, next you’re smiling as if someone unhinged your jaw? God, I must have looked like a complete doofus, but I couldn’t stop. My wide smile hurt my nose, but I didn’t really care. The idea of taking someone home to meet Vó, finally, just had me all caught up in a big ball of happiness.

Obviously it was the thick smell of sex in the air. Addled the senses.

While I tried to reign in my glee, Daniel nosed my ear. “You know, when you smile like that I think I might more than like you, Alvaro.”

I turned my head, just enough to touch our noses together. Mine ached softly in protest, and I knew I’d have to sit up soon. Stroking his cheek, I murmured, “We don’t have to say the words to know what it feels like.”

“We don’t ever have to say them.”

“But one day I will, and not when I’m drugged to the gills. Because you deserve to know someone feels that way about you.”

Daniel’s lips pecked mine. “I think I already do.”

The End

Author Bio

If aliens ever do land on earth, Kelly will not be prepared, despite having read over a hundred stories of the apocalypse. Still, she will pack her precious books into a box and carry them with her as she strives to survive. It's what bibliophiles do. In the meantime, she plans to keep reading, writing about reading, and writing stories of her own.

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