



TRAPPED

A Love is an Open Road Story



KENZIE CADE



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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

TRAPPED

By Kenzie Cade

Introduction

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

What Is Love is an Open Road?

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

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

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

Words of Caution

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

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

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

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

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Photo Description

Two men in a cabin room. One is lying on the bed with the other leaning over him. The man lying on the bed is resting with a smile on his face. The other is looking down with a happy smile, seemingly staring at the first man's lips.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

“That’s me. The one in the hat. Why did I think this weekend away would be such a good idea? Ten of us, all sleeping in one cabin in the middle of winter, freezing our balls off. I must have been crazy, especially as I had to go and wake up [guy on bed] after he drank enough to sink a battleship last night. He was like a man possessed. And now I can’t stop staring at his mouth. What’s wrong with me? I’m not gay, he’s not gay. It’s fucking ridiculous. What am I gonna do?”

Almost anything goes with this prompt. But I would LOVE to see lots of smouldering tension and steamy ‘almost’ moments. Contemporary preferred, no shifters or supernatural please.

Sincerely,

Anna

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: gay for you, bodyguards, friends to lovers, couples therapy, mild homophobia, retreat, familial expectations

Word Count: 24,208

Acknowledgements

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Chapter One

Gavin

“Left! Left!” I shouted over the echoed gunfire coming from nowhere and everywhere at once.

Section Twelve—the security firm where I worked for the past seven years—operated out of Connecticut. Our boss’s ridiculously lavish family estate had been long ago been transformed into a sort of military training facility created to keep men like me—and especially my reckless partner—on our game.

“Motherfucking left, Moyer!” I growled then took off after my partner, who veered right. The asshole worked my last nerve.

I narrowed my eyes when I caught a flash of him darting into an unsecured room. *What the ever-loving fuck?* I was fairly certain I’d kill my partner by end of day. Or at least maim him.

“Eight minutes,” Eric kept a running count down in my ear.

“Got it,” I grumbled to no one since I wasn’t about to tap the earpiece and reply to my boss, who would want a sitrep I wasn’t ready to give.

With my back to the opposite wall and my gun at the ready, I tipped my head slightly to check out the room. One shadow was all I saw. Drew better hope he was in there alone because if someone got a shot at him before I did, I would find a way to resurrect the asshole then kill him again. Hypothetically.

“Clear,” Drew called from inside the unknown room, and I took him at his word.

Leading with my pistol, I ducked around the corner and through the brick archway. Inside, moonlight shining through the uncovered window was the only source of light, leaving the corners obscure and fair play for anyone and anything stalking us. The vests we wore bore the capability of illumination, but also, in cases where stealth was a factor, they went dark, leaving Drew and me virtually undetectable. Except, apparently, in this room where moonlight bounced off the fucking LEDs like nightlights. I had two fucks to give and they were wearing thin.

“Christ, Moyer,” I snapped in a harsh whisper. “What the hell are you thinking?”

I dropped my aim to the floor, no immediate threat in sight. The shadow I assumed was Drew crouched near the farthest window shrugged. “It was a hunch.”

“A hunch? A damned hunch you couldn’t fucking clue me in on? For the love of Santa, dickhead, get your head in the game. You could have been killed.”

“Killed,” Drew deadpanned, and I could just see him roll his big doe eyes.

I was definitely going to murder my partner. “Don’t fuck with me right now, Junior.” I didn’t have to see Drew to know he was glaring. I only used that name when I wanted to get my point across.

Between the two of us, I had more years in law enforcement—raised in a military family straight into Dallas PD, then SWAT, and finally finding my way to Section Twelve. It wasn’t ideal, and it would never make my father happy, but I was trained, lethal, and fucking on point ninety-nine percent of the time. I forced myself not to rub at the twinge in my left side that reminded me of the one percent. The price for losing my focus.

“Get your fucking head in the game,” I snapped. “You have a hunch you talk to me about it. That’s how this works.” It’s how it had always worked. For the past four fucking years—save the past seven months. The wound in my side throbbed again.

Goddamned one percent.

“Maybe I don’t want it to work that way anymore,” Drew came back. I couldn’t see his eyes but I just knew those green depths were blazing red. Half of me expected to see them glow in the dark.

“What the fuck do you mean by that?”

“I mean—”

“Maybe next time you’ll save your lover’s quarrel for behind closed doors,” a deep voice sounded from the back corner of the room.

I whipped around, gun at the ready, but it was too late. My vest danced in blinding blues and reds.

The soundtrack of screams and gunfire à la pick-a-warzone-any-warzone cut off, and silence rang in my ears, throwing me off balance. In the corner, Team Delta, otherwise known as Mack Vangilst and Rine Schultz, wore matching grins.

Scratch that. I was murdering three dumb bastards tonight.

“Team Delta wins this round,” Eric sounded off in my ear—all of our ears.

I started ripping at the Velcro strapping me into the laser tag vest. I needed to get the hell out of there before I really followed through and couldn’t find enough places to hide the bodies.

“Slow down, killer,” Rine called, strutting forward—fucking strutting. “What’s the rush?”

“Right.” Mack joined him. “Losers buy tonight, and I’m mighty thirsty.”

“Mighty thirsty?” Drew snorted, slipping out of his vest, and I looked down at my own, still struggling. Why was the damned thing determined to trap me? “What are you,” Drew continued, laughing, “in a western?”

I paused, ignoring the rest of the fuckers in the room. Getting drunk and laid didn’t sound like such a bad idea. I didn’t even have to go to the same bar. Drew had fucked up—he could pick up the tab.

“Davies, Moyer, I’ll see you in my office at oh-nine-hundred,” Eric ordered before he signed off.

I didn’t look at Drew. The asswipe was the reason I was in this mess in the first place. Fucking Naples and the fucking setup of a job. My healed wound pulsed again. Finally freeing myself from the deathtrap of a vest, I tossed it to the side and stomped toward the door.

“Gavin,” Drew called behind me to a chorus of howling laughter chortled by the other two yahoos. “Oh, come on, Gav,” he tried again, sounding amused. It only served to piss me off even more. “It was just one time. You won’t die from losing.”

I turned the corner, ignoring my partner. I’d never been so pissed. That Naples job had messed with Drew’s head, and I was fed up. Tonight I would go out, get drunk, fuck the first chick who’d spread her legs, and go the fuck home. I needed to get my head on straight too, because in the here and now, I was entertaining thoughts of putting in for another partner. And even as angry as I was, something deep down cracked inside at the thought of being paired with someone else.

“In,” Eric barked as he walked past Drew and me. We’d been sitting outside his office for the past thirty-two minutes.

Eric could be late, habitually so, but when he called a meeting, he expected his crew to be on time, even if we had to wait on our tardy boss. The man had eyes and ears everywhere. Though it wasn't much of a mystery in the office, where surveillance equipment was handed out with coffee in the morning.

I was the last to trudge into the office. I closed the door behind me and landed myself in one of the two chairs in front of Eric's desk. I'd always felt like a truant teen in the principal's office when I sat before my boss's giant cherry desk.

Eric Wilkin made an already imposing figure without lounging behind the penis-enhancer of a monumentally enormous desk. He was built like a brick shithouse, but then again, so was everything that he owned. His house, his Humvee, and Section Twelve.

"What the hell happened out there, Davies?" Eric demanded in that flat tone, his dickhead voice.

As Eric's deep timbre vibrated through me, agitation crawled beneath my skin. I narrowed my eyes. "Don't know. You should ask Hunch over there." I threw a gesture in Drew's direction, refusing to glance his way. "He was following his gut."

Arching an eyebrow at me then glancing at Drew, Eric folded his beefy arms across his chest. He didn't say a word, letting the silence speak for him.

I knew Drew would break. He always did. A smile threatened to curl my lips at the knowledge. I tamped it down. I had to remember the fuckup that put us in this situation, aka Drew, not the good times. I could maybe save those for later.

"It was a feeling, boss. I was wrong," was all he said.

Then Eric's eyes narrowed, and I felt the chill. "You were wrong?"

"Yessir."

Eric's gaze snapped to me. "And where were you?"

"What do you mean where was I? You have eyes in the facility. I was fucking left in his wake when he ran off without thinking. The dumbass didn't even secure the room."

"How do you know I didn't secure the room?" Drew threw back, fire in his tone.

“The enemy skulked in a corner and waited for you, *Junior*,” I raised my voice. “You didn’t even go near them. Mack said as much.”

“Oh, fuck you. You weren’t even there.”

“Because you didn’t wait. You didn’t tell me where you were going. One second you were behind me and the next you were running into a dark fucking room with no backup.”

“You’re my backup!”

“Not when you go off half-cocked, I’m not. Fucking hell, Moyer. I’m pretty damned good at reading your mind, but not when you lose it.”

“Enough!” Eric barked. “Jesus Christ, you two are acting like children. I don’t know what the hell is wrong between you, but it needs to be fixed. Pronto.”

Chest heaving as if I’d run a race, I closed my eyes. I didn’t know if we could be fixed. For four years, Drew and I had been partners and best friends. We’d had each other’s backs through thick and thin. Then Naples happened, and it fucking changed everything. As Drew grew more distant, erratic, and hotheaded, I had no idea how to draw him back. I was beginning to wonder why I even wanted to.

“Fine,” Eric bit out when neither of us spoke. “If you’re not going to make an attempt, I’ll do it for you.” He slid a colorful brochure over the shiny finish of the desktop then sat back.

Drew was the first to reach for the paper. When he didn’t speak, I swung my gaze over in time to see my partner blanch, all color draining from his face.

What the hell? I took the paper. “*Reparation: Couples Retreat*,” I read aloud. When the words didn’t compute, I switched my focus to Eric, squinting.

Eric, for all the stoicism he presented on a daily basis, looked as if he was about to bust out laughing.

“I don’t—”

“A couples retreat?” Drew’s wobbly voice cut me off.

“Yes.” Eric’s lips twitched, though he sounded for all the world like the biggest, toughest asshole I knew him to be.

“What does that mean?” I asked.

Drew gaped at me.

Eric snorted when his gaze landed on me. “You’re a smart kid, Davies. I think you can figure that one out.”

I could, but everything I came up with didn’t make sense. The temperature in the room rose and I felt clammy, uncomfortable. I shifted in my chair. “We’re not a couple,” I denied. “We’re not gay.”

The questioning glance I got from Eric in response didn’t bolster my confidence. In fact, it confused me even farther. Then Eric quirked a brow at Drew whose face blazed the brightest shade of pink I had ever seen. My world was full of too many “what the fucks” over the past two days.

Then Eric looked at me again and said, “It’s not about being a couple, or even being homosexual or bisexual.” His pause was supposed to mean something, though I felt left in the dark. “It’s about working out the problems in your relationship.”

“We don’t have a relationship,” was my quick reply.

“Don’t be dense or an asshole. Your partnership is a relationship that has worked wonders since the day you two were paired. You guys are the best, and you know it. But something happened in that house in Italy, and if you won’t talk to me or each other about it, maybe you’ll talk to a trained professional.”

“So send us to therapy.” My heart raced and my palms were sweaty. I had no idea why. And why was Drew so damned quiet all of a sudden?

“No.” Steel laced Eric’s voice. “This is your best bet. I need you guys back to one hundred percent as quickly as possible. You’re going to the retreat or you’re taking leave. Your choice.”

I couldn’t breathe. Were the walls closing in around me? There was no way I’d be able to face my father for Thanksgiving and tell him I’d been put on leave. I was enough of a disappointment as it was. But how was telling the major I was attending a secluded couples retreat for couples therapy any better? Was there nothing I could do to make my father proud? Since I was twelve years old and Lance’s cat scratched my eye, every turn I made had been a fucking dead end.

“We’ll do it.” Drew’s voice broke into my thoughts.

Eric smiled.

“What?” The word came out strangled and wet.

“I said we’ll do it. I love this job. It was all I was meant to do.” He finally looked at me, his big green eyes understanding. “You do too. It’s eight days. What’s eight days? We can do this?”

Could I? Would I be able to handle not telling my sister? I told her everything. But if I told Jenna, she’d tell the major. But I had to do it, and I’d have to tell Jenna. And part of me wanted to work this out with Drew, or at least give it a try.

Turning away, I shut my eyes and nodded. “Okay,” I said softly. “We’ll do it. It’s only eight days.”

Only eight days. It didn’t sound like much, but I had a sudden feeling it would be everything.

Chapter Two

Andrew

The cozy warmth of the blazing fireplace wrapped itself around me as I entered the large cabin, melting away the frigidness of the blizzard spinning away outside. I'd barely made it up the mountain for the lack of visibility and three feet of snow that met me.

"Welcome to Reparation!" A bright-eyed blonde with a nametag proclaiming her to be "Melanie" greeted us from a waist-high desk centered in the foyer. With her bronzed skin and platinum hair, she looked like she'd be more at home on the beach than on a mountain.

"Sounds like rehab," Gavin muttered behind me.

I rolled my eyes. Even on his best day, Gavin was a pessimistic bastard. That was wrong. It wasn't so much that he saw the world through shit-colored glasses. He was just generally a gruff guy. Except ever since the cock-up of a day in Naples, my life had gradually fell to fuck all and he'd turned into Captain Asshat.

I didn't spare him a glance. I couldn't. Instead, I pasted on the brightest smile I could muster, certain I failed when the curve of Melanie's lips faltered. "Thanks," I said. "We're... uh... checking in."

The gleam in her eyes returned. Sunshine had nothing on that smile. "Wonderful!" She clapped her hands—actually clapped her hands. "You must be Mr. Davies and Mr. Moyer."

The way her eyes switched back and forth between us told me exactly what she thought. I didn't have to look at Gavin to know he was uncomfortable. I could almost hear it.

"Actually," I began, "I'm Andrew Moyer, and this big dunce is Gavin Davies. We're work partners. That's all. Not gay."

As soon as I said it, I could practically feel him relax behind me. Partly because the breath he blew out drifted over my neck, but mostly because I felt Gavin like a part of me. We'd been that way since we first met. Or at least, I had.

Gavin wasn't gay. I wasn't either. That much was true. No, my preferences leaned in both directions. It especially leaned in Gavin's, not that he knew. But then again, it's not like I'd ever told him.

Melanie giggled. "Don't worry," she said with a knowing wink that had my cheeks heating. Was I that obvious? "Your secret's safe with me." Apparently I was.

"Good to know," I murmured back.

While Melanie *click-clacked* away on the keyboard with her too-long acrylic nails, the morning sun glared off the desk surface, blinding me with the beginnings of a headache I was not in the mood for.

"Okay," she dragged out the word then blinked up at me, holding out two cards. "Here are your room keys. You'll be staying in the Briar Suite—which, I must say, is my favorite. You'll take those stairs." She pointed to the staircase to our right. "Your suite is the last along the breezeway. Orientation begins at three, and dinner is served at six."

"We're sharing a room? But—"

She cut me off by sliding an envelope across the counter. "Your personalized schedule is in here. You and your partner will meet with your counselor in the morning. Group activities are every day at two." When she glanced down at her watch, I opened my mouth to speak and again was thwarted. "You have an hour before orientation. Feel free to tour the cabin and the grounds. It'll probably be best to acquaint yourselves with the other couples as you'll be spending the week with them. We are in close quarters and all." She finished with a knowing look.

"I'm sorry. Melanie is it?" Gavin stepped up beside me, finally acknowledging the situation. He gave the girl his most charming grin, and her cheeks pinked. I patted myself on the back for not clawing her eyes out. "Would it be possible to get separate rooms?" Gavin continued, leaning over the counter. Then he mock whispered, "My partner, here, he snores like a freight train."

"I do not," I gasped. "And just so we're clear, you're the one with the best impression of a foghorn." The sniff I gave came because of the temperature change—*not* a snit. I do not huff or pout. Though I did glare at the asshole when he quirked an eyebrow at me.

"Oh," Melanie said in that too sweet tone that I wanted to douse in gasoline. "We've got a full house this session. Sorry."

“Well, shit,” Gavin swore under his breath.

Her shocked expression at his expletive brought a smirk to my face. If she only knew.

“Come on,” I said, swiping the envelope and keys from the counter. “Nothing we can do about it.”

“We can go to a hotel,” he supplied.

I took off to the staircase, dragging my luggage. “You stay at a hotel. I’m not hauling this crap back outside in the fucking snow and down the mountain to find somewhere in the nearest town—which is not for at least twenty miles.” I waved the envelope in the air without looking at him. “Good luck.”

His growl reverberated off the peaked ceiling and wooden walls. “Fine.” Heavy footfalls followed behind me. I held back my sigh.

When we reached the room, Gavin slid around me, extracting a card from my hand and opening the door. He wasn’t all bad. He wasn’t bad at all. He was just pissed.

“Thanks,” I mumbled as I slipped into the room only to slam into his back. “What the fuck, Gav? Move.” Letting go of my suitcase, which promptly dropped to the floor, I shoved my partner.

He grunted but barely budged.

“What’s your problem, Davies?” When I glanced up at him, I knew.

Though his face remained blank, his deep blue eyes locked onto the king-size bed across the room. He swallowed hard enough I could practically hear it.

My chest constricted, and I could barely breathe. For four long years, I’d held onto a pointless flame for Gavin—my best friend and my partner. I knew better, falling for a straight man, but knowing and doing were two different things.

The longer I watched him, stricken expression painting his features, the angrier I got. Why did this all have to fall on me?

I shouldered past him. “Fuck you, man. It’s a big bed. It’s not the first time we’ve shared a room.”

His eyes widened at the same time they landed on me. “I’m not... I didn’t...”

“Hell, it’s not even the first time we’ve shared a bed. It can’t be that. So what’s your problem?”

“It’s not,” he denied.

“Then what?”

He cleared his throat. “Nothing.”

“It’s not nothing.”

Gavin eyed the piece of furniture as if it might jump out and bite him. He gave it a wide berth, making his way to the opposite side of the room to begin unpacking his shit.

“Christ, you’re an asshole,” I groused and plopped down on the end of the bed.

“I’m an asshole?”

“Yes,” I snapped. “What do you think, I... gay will rub off on you?”

“You’re not gay,” he growled.

“I’m not.” I sounded like a broken record. Even worse, I wanted to tell the truth. I almost did. “You know what? Grow the fuck up or sleep on the couch for a week. I don’t care which.”

“Or you could sleep on the couch. You know my back—”

“Unbelievable! It’s a huge goddamned bed. You’re being ridiculous. What are you really afraid of?”

When he lifted his head, Gavin held my gaze, unwavering anger heating his own. I wanted to scream or throw things at his head. Or both.

Instead, I scooted back on the bed. “Do whatever the hell you want to, Gav. Just keep it down. I’m taking a nap before the festivities begin.”

Toeing off my shoes, I rolled away from him, facing the wall. I shut my eyes tight enough to see stars, but I was too worked up for sleep to come. I didn’t really expect it to anyway. Nor did I want it. Fucking nightmares were a bitch.

“This is our sixth trip to Reparations.” Sally Ann, a bombshell in her mid-fifties, beamed up at me. She seemed like a sweet little grandma with a dirty streak. I liked her immediately.

“Um... wow,” I choked. I mean, six times at a couples therapy retreat? Sounded like reason to call it quits to me.

Beau threw his head back, his deep laugh echoed off the walls. “Do you see his face, hon?”

When Sally Ann giggled, her silvering curls bounced up and down which happened to be surprisingly adorable for a woman in her fifties. “He’s all flustered. How cute. Are you sure you haven’t been snatched up by your young man over there? I can’t imagine anyone seeing that look on your face and not wanting to gobble you right up.”

“Hardly,” I muttered then cleared my throat. “Nope... uh... no. No snatching to be had here.”

Beau’s laugh morphed into chortles and snorts and I wondered how he was still breathing. I was about to offer to get his oxygen (if he, in fact, had any) when he gasped out, “For the love of god, Sal, tell the poor boy before he blows a gasket.”

She gave a very unladylike squawk then patted me on the cheek. “Sweet boy, we don’t come back every year because our marriage is in danger of failing.” She threw Beau a meaningful gaze. “Not any longer. Not for the past six years.”

Confused, I squinted at her.

“This place—Mickie and Marty—they saved us. We come back on the anniversary of that trip five years ago to celebrate that time.”

Beautiful. The adoration on her face when she grinned up at Beau, and the open love on his face for her when he returned the expression.

“Wow,” I breathed.

“Indeed, my friend.” Beau patted me on the back with a heavy hand. “Indeed. So tell me about you and your man.”

I sputtered. “My...? No, I think you have the wrong idea. He’s my friend—work partner. We... we’re just having some issues at work is all. Our boss sent us to work our shit out up here so we don’t hurt anyone else in the field.”

While I spoke, my gaze drifted around the open room, finally resting on Gavin where he sat in an armchair near the center column fireplace. A blonde woman—I think her name was Brooklyn—perched herself on the arm of her chair while Whitney Benning—the divorce lawyer footing the bill for her lavish lifestyle, aka her husband—ignored her in exchange for a phone call near the foyer. My eyes narrowed in on where her fingers grazed the side of Gavin’s neck and teased the too long ends of his hair. He needed a trim again.

At my side, Sally Ann chuckled. “Dear, you keep telling yourself that, but friends don’t look at each other the way you look at him.”

“I... I’m not... How am I looking at him?”

“Like you want to rip Brooklyn’s manicured nails from her fingers and feed them to her.”

“I do not,” I gasped. I only barely stopped myself from clutching my hand to my chest, a move that would have made my southern belle mama proud.

Beau opened his big mouth to say something but was interrupted by Marty’s call to dinner.

As we all made our way to the other side of the fireplace where the dining area sat, Sally Ann grasped my elbow and slowed my pace. “Your secret’s safe with us, dear, but you really should think about getting on that. Men like that don’t stay single for long.”

It was my turn to snort. “Shows how much you know. Gavin’s both straight and a womanizer. To top it off he’s a total dick.”

“And yet, you still love him.”

“I don’t...” The denial cut off in my chest with a twist that left me breathless. When I could think again, I did my best to avoid the insinuation. “Of course I do. He’s my best friend and partner. I’d do anything for him.”

“Even give up your happiness?” she asked.

I didn’t remember stopping, but when Sally Ann walked off, I was left to watch Gavin pulling out a chair for Brook the trophy wife.

I was suddenly hit with the reality of my situation. An entire week of seeing Gavin cater to flirting, bored housewives. Of sharing a bed with him and not being allowed to touch. Of talking but never saying what I needed most to get off my chest. My stomach roiled, and the band around my chest constricted.

When Mickie walked out of the kitchen hoisting a tray of wine and beer, I beelined for the table. I needed a drink. Maybe if I was numb enough, getting through this tragedy of a retreat wouldn’t be so difficult.

Chapter Three

Gavin

Even after five months, running still hurt like a son of a bitch. Pissed me off every morning. Back when the doc told me to lay off for a while, I'd made myself hit the pavement. It was the only thing that cleared my head.

Only, at the Kumbaya retreat, there was no running in three feet of snow, so I'd headed to the gym before the sun came up. Which meant Drew would be dead to the world for at least two more hours. Likely more with how much he had to drink the night before. Probably a good thing. Drew would've freaked out with how close he was to me when I woke up. As if he'd gravitated toward me in the middle of the night.

I wasn't going to get all weird about it. I refused. It was what it was, and Drew was right. This wasn't the first time we'd slept in the same bed. It probably wouldn't be the last. The thing was, it was the illusion of coupledness that freaked me out. I loved Drew. We'd been through the unimaginable together, but something about having people look at us like there was something going on...

I shook my head. I wasn't grossed out exactly. Uncomfortable was a better word. Who would look at Drew and me and think I was fucking my best friend?

Never mind whatever the fuck was going through his head these days. I hated to admit it, but Eric was probably right. Getting Drew into therapy was the best idea, and if I had to tag along for moral support, I'd do it. It was the kind of thing we did for each other—even when the other wasn't aware.

Cutting off the treadmill, I snagged my towel and water and let the band carry me to the end where I hopped off. Sweat poured off me, my heart rate soared, and my breath came clear and easy. In other words, I felt like a million bucks.

I ducked out of the small gym, careful to avoid Brooklyn Benning-Myers. She was a pretty woman. In any other situation I'd hit that without second thought, but I made it a firm rule not to fuck married women. And whether she wanted to face the music or not, Brooklyn was locked down tight into her marriage. Unless she was willing to risk that prenup she'd gone on and on about over dinner the night before.

“Hi, Gavin.”

I glanced up to see Valerie and Wendy headed my way arm in arm. I wondered exactly what their issues were, what brought them to a couples retreat. They seemed to be so happy.

“Good morning, ladies. How’s it going?” I grinned. I may not have wanted to be in the middle of Bumfuck Ice Age, but when life hands you lemons and all that.

Valerie’s brow scrunched. “Have you seen Drew? He didn’t show up for breakfast.”

I glanced down at my watch and chuckled. “Probably still asleep. He’s not an early riser on the best of days. Considering he drank enough to pickle his liver last night, I’d say it’s a safe bet he hasn’t moved since I left the room.”

“That’s so cute,” Wendy singsonged, batting her eyes at me then looking over at her wife. “Isn’t it cute, hon? The way he takes care of his man?”

“He’s not my—”

“Adorable,” Val deadpanned with a mock glare in my direction. “Think you could tone down the perfection a little. Some of us have to work to live up to those kinds of standards.”

Wendy snorted and swatted her wife’s arm.

“He’s not... We’re not... together. We’re not a couple,” I stuttered.

Wendy gaped at me while Valerie gave a disbelieving grunt. “Sure you’re not.” As she rolled her eyes, she tugged on Wendy’s hand, pulling her into the gym.

I stood there for a minute, attempting to identify the uncomfortable squirming in my belly. It was exactly what I’d been talking about. Exactly why I didn’t want to be here. I shook my head, trying to convince myself I could look past it for these people I didn’t know. It was a week.

No one else stopped me on my way up to the room I shared with Drew. As quiet as I could be, I let myself into the room to find Drew still conked out—one arm flung over his eyes and one leg hanging off the side of the bed. I snorted. The guy was a mess.

After a quick shower, it was time to wake him up. I’d done this before. And trust me; the saying “waking the beast” had nothing on Drew Moyer. He might

be slight and sweet tempered, but the man was a fucking bear when he was awoken from his rest.

Before I opened the door, I heard it. At first it was faint, a whimper. But then it turned into a cry—Drew’s cry. I couldn’t tell what he said through the closed door but when I opened it, my breath caught in my chest.

On the bed, still in a dead sleep, Drew wailed and fought against the sheets, now tangled around his legs. His fists pounded the bed. Then he yelled it. “Gav—get down!” So clear I almost dropped to the ground. The scar in my side pulsed at the memory of that scream.

Racing to Drew, I dropped onto the bed and gripped his shoulders, shaking him slightly while doing my best to avoid his flailing arms.

“Drew. Come on, Drew. Wake up.”

Tears streamed down his cheeks, and I felt the answering burn at the back of my eyes. It seemed that fucking day would haunt us for the rest of our lives.

“Drew,” I tried again, jerking his shoulders into the bed. “Open your eyes for me, buddy.”

Beneath my hands, Drew stilled and my shoulders relaxed. “Jesus Christ,” I whispered, my panting breaths slowing.

As if weighed down, Drew’s eyes dragged open at a snail’s pace. He blinked up at me, his ice-green eyes unfocused.

“Hey, man. Good to have you awake.”

He stared up at me as if the words didn’t compute, his eyes opening and closing quicker. Then without warning, he lifted from the bed, wrapped a hand around the back of my neck, and pulled me into a kiss, the mash of lips hard and messy.

Shocked, my eyes shot wide. I gasped and he apparently took that as a cue to plunge his tongue into my mouth. Warmth rushed over me as the hardness of his body pressed into mine. In the heat of the moment, confusion set in, and before I knew what I was doing, my tongue came out to play, dancing with his. Then he moaned into my mouth, and I stilled. What the hell was going on? What was I doing?

Drew doubled his efforts do draw me into the moment, but I was lost. Shoving him away, I jumped from the bed and wiped my mouth with the back of my hand.

“What the fuck, Drew?”

His kiss-swollen mouth opened and shut without words. That mouth, those lips had just melded to mine. My best friend kissed me. Something weighty clenched in my gut. I had kissed him back.

I backed toward the door.

“Gavin,” Drew finally said, and I held up my hand, shutting him down. He didn’t say anything more.

I didn’t want to hear it, couldn’t listen right then. And for the life of me, I couldn’t stop staring at his parted lips, his pleading eyes.

As I reached the door, I remembered I didn’t have shoes or socks on. It was a sacrifice I’d have to make. Twisting the knob, I flung the door open and slammed out of the room, pausing to lean against the wall outside. I’d come back later for my shoes when I was sure Drew wasn’t in the room.

Reparations worked like a well-oiled machine. Lucky for me, the meeting with the counselor that morning had been a simple meet and greet. I didn’t think I’d be able to talk about our issues today. Maybe not the next day either. Hell, probably not ever.

What the hell had Drew been thinking?

“So,” Drew broke the silence, “what are you thinking?”

My breath caught, and I couldn’t swallow past the lump lodged in my throat. We were going to do this here? Seriously? I turned away, unable to look at him. I hadn’t since this morning.

Since the kiss. Because damn if I couldn’t stop thinking about it.

“About the sculpture, asshole,” he hissed behind me. “What are you thinking about the sculpture?”

It was after lunch, and besides the informal meet and greet that morning with our counselor, I’d avoided being near or in the same room with Drew since the incident. It couldn’t last forever, and I knew it, though I wished for more time.

“A castle,” I blurted.

“A castle?” His unimpressed tone wasn’t lost on me.

“Yes.”

I finally faced him, though looking him in the eye was a feat. Instead, my gaze landed on his lips. Lips I remembered the feel of against mine—soft, warm, open, and wanting. I squeezed my eyes closed.

What. The. Actual. Fuck?

I had to get this out of my head, had to get *him* out of my head. “With a moat,” I said instead of what was at the forefront of my mind.

“Are you serious? A castle with a moat. With or without a drawbridge?”

“With, of course.”

“You’re an idiot.”

And just like that the band around my chest eased, and I could breathe without gasping. My friend was standing across from me, teasing just like every other day of our lives.

“I’m an idiot?” I shot back. “Remember the drawbridge at Castle Kreuzenstein? I don’t recall, which one of us was all butthurt because he couldn’t ride in with full armor and on a horse?”

Drew’s chuckle loosened something inside me. “I was not butthurt. I just thought it would be cool to have armor—”

“And a sword,” I provided.

“And a sword,” he repeated with a nod. “I wouldn’t have said no to a joust.”

“Who’s the idiot in this relationship?”

As soon as the words were out, I wanted to take them back. Talk about pointing out the spotted kangaroo wearing a tutu in the room. I was thankful when Drew went on as if nothing was out of place, though I was certain he hadn’t missed my flub.

“We’re not building a castle,” he said, softer than before while I studied the blocks of ice and snow before us.

We were near the edge of the clearing behind the cabin, experiencing our first team building exercise. Each couple—five in total—was charged to come up with a design and work together to complete it in a timely and efficient manner. I wanted to win. Not a surprise there. I had a thing with competitions. I liked to kick ass and take names.

“Do you know how to build a castle?” Drew asked, hands on his hips. He squinted at the white blocks of ice.

“It can’t be that hard.”

“That’s what she said.”

“Jesus,” I snorted. “Are you twelve?”

He grunted. “You started it. We’ll build an igloo.”

“An igloo? Anyone can build an igloo. A castle is a work of art, a masterpiece.”

“So you’re an artist now? Or is it an architect? Because a castle will take more than putting up a couple blocks.”

I sighed. He was right, and I knew it, but I didn’t want to admit it.

“We’re building an igloo,” he commanded.

“Fine,” I relented. “But it will have a moat. It’s all about strategic outlook. If you can get out but no one can get in, the place is safe.”

“Safe from whom?” He flung his arms out. “We’re in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by housewives and overindulgent husbands.”

“Yeah, well, safety first.”

I wouldn’t tell him it was because of Naples. Ever since that day, I’d made it my mission to protect him. Keep him safe. The wound in my side pulsed to life, reminding me of the moment I pushed Drew out of the way of the masked gunman—who turned out to be our charge’s boyfriend at the time. Fucking bored diplomat kids and their need for attention.

An hour later we had an igloo. A fairly perfect one—not that I’m bragging.

I’m not sure when or how it happened. I’d made it a point to keep us physically separated during the construction, but somehow by the time we’d finished our mini-igloo—it was a third of the size of an actual one—we were laying side by side under the dome interior of the ice cave.

“Gav?”

At the sound of his voice, I closed my eyes. “Can we not?” I asked, sounding more desperate than I’d hoped.

“We need to talk,” said Drew. I could almost feel his gaze on me like a physical touch.

Lifting my eyelids, I found him rolled to his side, facing me. “What is there to talk about? It was a mistake.”

When he opened his mouth and closed it without saying anything, my focus fell to those lips. The ones I'd been obsessing over since the incident. I still remembered their touch to mine, the heat, the softness, the wanting. His tongue peeked from its hiding place, and I couldn't look away, mesmerized by the glistening trail left in its wake. I blinked then realized he was closer, hovering over me. When had that happened? With his lips parted, I felt each of his breaths against my skin. My heart pounded in my ears and I couldn't get enough air. All I had to do was close the distance and I'd feel it again—the heat, the passion, the need.

“Yoohoo! Anybody home?”

Mickie's voice startled me enough to shove Drew away. *Motherfucker*. What in God's name was going on with me?

As I scooted my ass over the floor and out the tiny opening, I thought I heard Drew mumble something like “Not a mistake,” but I couldn't be sure.

For some reason, Drew was the only light in my tunnel vision. I didn't understand it, and it scared the fucking hell out of me. I'd never in all of my life been attracted to a man, so that couldn't be it. As my best friend, Drew and I spent countless hours together. Why now? Why when I looked at him did I feel like I would vibrate out of my skin if I wasn't near him?

I didn't know what had gotten into me, but I needed to think. To get away. A hotel room was sounding better and better. No. A hotel room with a willing, warm female—that sounded optimal. Wherever I decided to sleep tonight, it would not be in the room—in the same bed—I shared with Drew. No way.

Chapter Four

Andrew

Sleep hadn't been much of an option the night before. I tried, but after dinner, Gavin never came back to the room. It hadn't slipped my notice that the book he'd been reading the night before and his phone were MIA.

Worse were the suspicions. No. That's not true. The suspicions sucked, but the worst of all had been leaving the room in search of Gavin only to find him cuddled up with Brooklyn in front of the fire. Asleep.

The anger-tinged disappointment held me frozen for moments before I barricaded myself in the empty room I was supposed share with Gavin.

Gavin, who would have rather slept with a married woman than face me. I knew I'd fucked up. I couldn't say what made me do it. Either way, I was never drinking again. Except after spying Gavin's big spoon to Brooklyn's little, I really needed another drink or twelve. Though the only route to the liquor cabinet would have had me passing the lovebirds. No thank you very much. I chose to suffer in sobriety instead.

The door flung open while I sat at the edge of the bed talking myself into leaving the room. Rays from the beginnings of the sunrise filtered through the open blinds. It was the only light in the room. My gut clenched when our eyes met. I felt hot and cold at the same time.

Stepping into the room, he slowly closed the door behind him. The click echoing so loud in the strained silence of our room.

I stood. It was impossible to look away from his flushed face and bedhead. God, I still wanted to kiss him as much as I wanted to punch him in his asshole nose.

He pointed toward the bathroom. "I'm... ah... I'm gonna hit the shower."

"Did you fuck her?" The words spilled out of my mouth before I even thought about them, which, now that I think about it, was beyond out of character for me.

He narrowed a glare at me. "Why would it matter to you?"

"It doesn't." But it did. "Just didn't think whoring around with a married woman while her relationship is suffering in the first place is a good idea. But,

hey.” I shrugged. “Why should I be surprised? You always did go for anything on two legs.”

“Not anything.” His goddamned smirk taunted me. As did the gleam in his eye that dared me to bring up the kiss.

And fuck if I was going to let it go. “Fool yourself all you want, sweetheart. But I was there too, and I distinctly remember your tongue in my mouth.”

His nostrils flared the briefest of seconds before he pounced. I’m still not sure how he made it to me so quickly. One moment he was leaning against the door, the next my world tilted and he had me pinned to the bed.

“It’s not enough that you fuck with our friendship. You have to fuck with my head too?” Gavin growled.

His tone screamed that I should have been scared, but I wasn’t. Turned on is what I was. The press of his body, the rumbling in his chest, even the way he pressed my shoulders into the bed with his strong, capable hands. I was putty, and he didn’t even know it.

“I wasn’t fucking with you,” I bit out, finding it difficult to breathe. “I couldn’t *not* anymore.”

“Fucking with me.” He shook me by the shoulders, rough and demanding. “Always word games with you. Say what you mean, Drew.”

Wrapping a leg around him, I gripped his back and twisted, throwing him off balance and rolling him underneath me. I refused to think because I couldn’t bring reason into this. I refused to think—to overthink. If I did, no telling how far I’d run before I stopped.

“I’m not playing games with you.” I ground my hips into his—hard cock meeting equally hard cock. “I’ve wanted that—wanted *you* almost since we met. You make it impossible not to. You’re damn bossy and frustrating and single-minded, but I—”

“You’re not gay.”

“I’m not,” I replied and ground harder into him. I could barely breathe for the anger and tension suffocating me. “You’re not either.”

When I dropped my mouth to his this time, Gavin didn’t resist. At first, he pulled me close, tugging my hips to his. God, his body beneath mine—firm and hot—it tested my control. What little I had. The feel of his cock lengthening

alongside mine made me want more. So much more. I needed to see it, touch it, taste it. *Baby steps*, I reminded myself. No need in scaring away the straight man too soon.

He ground his hips up into mine, sending delicious pleasure coursing down my spine. I groaned into his mouth, and this time, he didn't pull away. His fingers strayed, sliding against a bare strip of skin above my waistband. I shivered hard. Jesus, I thought I might come from that innocent touch.

The kiss turned from something I craved into something I needed desperately, my tongue sliding past his perfect lips, tasting all of him. I couldn't get enough. He grunted, and I hoped with everything in me it wasn't a protest because I didn't want to stop. I tunneled my fingers through his hair and pulled.

He grunted again, and this time it was accompanied with a sharp nip to my bottom lip. I jerked back and had enough time to glimpse the fear in his eyes, the uncertainty, before he rolled from beneath me, dumping me on the bed. It took everything in me not to cry out, to pull him back. I wouldn't force him to be with me. I couldn't. I knew him well enough to know Gavin Davies did what he wanted when he wanted. And apparently, at that moment, doing "whatever he wanted" included me.

Rejection crept around the periphery of my mind as I watched him stand above me.

Gavin didn't turn away though. When he pushed up from the bed, he stared down at me, his chest heaving. His eyes, though still frightened, were glazed and dreamy, and his lips red and swollen from my kisses. Mine. I did that.

He jumped when someone knocked on the door. The frightened look in his eyes told me it wasn't the first time he'd heard it. *Fuck*. He was worried someone knew.

"Everything all right in there?" Mickie hollered through the door.

Hard for me to believe only moments ago we'd been yelling. Because then that kiss had happened, and it's all I could focus on.

"Yeah," I called back. I didn't look away from Gavin. "We just have some things to work out."

"Good," she said. "Your counseling session starts in thirty minutes."

"Shit," Gavin swore. That got him in motion. He headed to the bathroom, leaving me alone to deal with what happened.

The shower turned on at the same time Mickie's footfalls echoed down the walkway. I dropped my head in my hands unsure if I'd irreparably ruined the best thing, the best *man* I'd ever had in my life.

"The fuck it is," Gavin seethed, his face red. I did little to defend myself. I deserved his anger, no matter how he chose to show it. He jabbed a finger in my face and kept talking. "You listen to me, you little prick. What happened that day happened because a spoiled little bitch wanted her daddy to pay attention to her."

He was wrong. "You're wrong."

"I'm not wrong, Drew. Marilyn Nova paid her boy toy to make it look like a drug lord had her. How in God's name could that possibly be your fault?"

"You," I pointed out, keeping my voice slow and controlled. Blinking hard then swallowing against the bile rising in my throat, I continued. "What happened to you is my fault, Gav. You got shot that day."

Mickie sat in an overstuffed chair in the corner in silence, observing our slowly heating argument. I wondered what her role here was. We could fight any time. We *did* fight all of the time. Which is why we were here in the first place. How was this supposed to help?

"Yes," Gavin bit out, his teeth clenched together. "I was fucking shot trying to keep that asshole from getting a round off into you."

"And instead he hit you."

"How is that your fault?"

"I was distracted," I admitted. The memories of that night in Italy flooded back, beginning with that goddamned phone call that started a chain of events I could never take back. And never forget.

"You are the most focused person I know."

"Not that day, I wasn't." I shook my head and squeezed my eyes closed.

"Andrew," Mickie cut in, speaking in an annoyingly passive tone that grated on my already frayed nerves, "go ahead and tell Gavin what it is that you've been keeping from him all this time."

But I couldn't, because if I did, he really wouldn't want me. Maybe I could handle him rejecting me, never feeling his lips against mine again. But if he

knew what happened that day, I was afraid he'd leave me for good—as a friend, as a partner, as everything. I was so stupid.

I shook my head again.

“C'mon, Drew.” Gavin sounded like he was closer to me than I thought. When I opened my eyes, I found him crouched in front of me, his eyes melted blue ice, pleading with me to tell him. Then he laid his hands on my knees, and I broke.

“I didn't mean to,” I whispered. “They called that morning, and I couldn't think of anything else.”

“What? Who are you talking about?” Gavin asked.

“My mom and dad. They called while we were at the beach. Remember when I left to check out the lifeguard station?”

His brows drew together. “You were gone for a while.”

“That's when I got the call. Mom left Dad.” After forty years of marriage, my mom and dad had decided to call it quits because “things weren't working for them.” And they'd decided it would be better to call me and tell me right away—honesty being the best policy and all—even though I was overseas and completely taken off guard.

“Okay?” He squinted at me like I wasn't making sense, but I knew he got it. He knew me better than I knew me. “That's still not reason to blame yourself.”

When I shoved his shoulders, Gavin tipped backward onto his ass. I went to the window and pressed my head against the cold glass, completely ignoring the beauty of the still whiteness of the mountain range before me. It didn't matter. None of it did.

“They were the couple I measured everything against. If they didn't work out, then why bother?”

“What are you talking about?”

Still seated in her chair, Mickie cleared her throat from the opposite side of the room. “I think—”

“Not now, doc,” Gavin blew her off. The clear surface of the glass showed me his path toward me.

“I'm not a doctor,” she interjected.

“What the fuck ever.” Gavin’s hand landed on my back. “Talk to me, Drew. Just you and me.”

A thrill shot down my spine. When he said it like that, low and easy in my ear, I could pretend we were alone. I could pretend Mickie was nowhere in sight. Most of all, I could pretend the intimate quality to his voice, the tenderness in his touch meant something more than simple comfort for a friend. Because I wanted it to mean more.

I squeezed my eyes shut. I’d never been able to resist him when he spoke to me like that. “That was the morning...” I swallowed so hard it echoed against the pane. “The morning I was going to lay everything out. Tell you how I felt.”

“How you felt?”

“About you. We were flying home that night.” My eyes were still closed and I balled my fists against the iced window to ground me. “I had it planned. I had an entire nine-hour flight to say it.”

His hand dropped from my back, and I felt it like a gaping chasm between us. It was expected, but my idiot heart still wrenched in pain from the loss. “What are you talking about?” he asked. I would have laughed at the clear confusion had I not been choking back tears already. “You’re not gay.”

“I’m not.” My reply was whispered.

“We go out all the time.”

“We do.” And every single time Gavin went home with a different woman, a different flavor of the week, I died a little inside.

“You go home with women.”

“Do I?” When I opened my eyes, I met the reflection of confusion in his gaze.

“What—”

Frustration built in my chest to the point that I forgot my self-berating and instead turned and glared at him. “When was the last time you saw me take a woman home?”

Once again his brows furrowed. I knew he was thinking back to all the times we’d gone out, to the many bars we’d visited and the many times he’d stumbled away with a random hookup, leaving me alone in the bar. What he didn’t know was after he was gone, I’d always gone home alone. The thought

of sleeping with someone who wasn't him had twisted something inside of me for so long, I couldn't honestly remember the last time I'd gotten laid and enjoyed it.

"But you..." He trailed off, a slight quake shook his voice.

"No. Not in four years."

"So you're gay?" He didn't sound angry. He sounded... hurt. The way his shoulders hunched forward confirmed it.

I sighed. "Not gay. I like women, but I like men too."

"For how long?" He straightened up, his tone stronger.

I lifted a shoulder. "I don't know. High school. College."

"And you couldn't tell me?"

"When exactly was I supposed to tell you?"

"Any time would have been nice, Drew."

"So you could do what exactly? Beat the shit out of me for drooling over your ass? Thanks, but I think I'll pass."

"You really think I'm that big of an asshole?"

I rubbed the bridge of my nose. "No," I said, calming myself down. "You're not. You're a good guy—the best. It's why I've had such a hard time with this. I don't want to lose you."

His blue eyes went soft. "I'm not sure whether I want to be offended or flattered." Then those pouty pink lips I loved so much smirked. And God, the way my own tingled at the knowledge of their softness, their firmness, the way he demanded and gave. My breath hitched with the memory.

"I'm sorry." But that wasn't enough. It would never be. "For that and for..." My gaze dropped to where his bullet wound was hidden behind his sweater.

"Hey." Gavin stepped near and nudged my chin up with his knuckles. "That's not your fault. I'd do it again. To keep you safe. Even before—when all that was between us was friendship and the things I obviously didn't know about you. I'd never forgive myself if you were hurt."

"I'll never forgive myself."

"Would you stop?" He grasped me by the shoulders and gave me a slight shake. "I got shot. It happened. It hurt. It wasn't your fault."

“But if I would’ve paid more attention. If I wouldn’t have been worried about my family—”

“You should’ve been worried about them. You should’ve told me. But you didn’t and it’s over. Quit blaming yourself.”

“But the girl was taken.” I shoved him away.

“Because she wanted to be. She probably walked out with the guy. We only found out about her involvement because of you.”

I stopped, squinting. A lot that had happened that day was a faint echo of memory, but after the shot, there were flashes of a phone, a text message, a photograph.

“You made the call,” Gavin went on. “You got me to safety. Then you called the ambassador’s head of security, who found the girl and the truth. It was because of you.”

I couldn’t have said I remembered all of those things, but they sounded accurate so I nodded. “Okay.”

“You’ve blamed yourself this entire time?” The look in his eyes begged me to say no, begged me to give another reason for the decline in our partnership for the past several months.

Unable to answer, I dropped my gaze to the floor. I didn’t expect him to wrap his arms around me, but I fell into them anyway. After the first sob escaped my chest, the next was impossible to contain. I buried my face in Gavin’s chest and poured out every bit of hurt and sadness into him.

Chapter Five

Gavin

Pulling Drew into my arms was instinct. Above everything else, before this clusterfuck of a week, he was still my best friend. But now he was somehow more, and as much as I was afraid of it, there was no way I'd turn my back on him or deny him comfort, especially after glimpsing the torment swimming in his emerald green depths. Then he melted against me, and something clicked.

In my arms, he felt... right. Fear kept me from examining it too closely, but caught in the moment, I followed my instinct—the same as I'd done an hour ago in our room. My lips still burned with the memory of that kiss. And my heart still pounded with the fear of being caught.

The thump of Mickie's footsteps echoed on the hardwood, as did the click of the door when she left. It occurred to me that in the presence of someone else, my best friend was wrapped around me in a manner unbecoming even the barest definition of platonic. What's even more—I wanted him there, bound my arms tighter around him until I could feel the beat of his heart against my chest.

When Drew's cries turned into softer hiccups, I brushed my lips across his temple. "Let's take this to the room, okay?"

He nodded against me but didn't move, didn't release his hold from around my waist.

"You're gonna have to let me go," I said with a smile.

This time he shook his head, and I chuckled.

Letting go of my reservations, I skimmed a hand down his back to his ass. I squeezed my fingers around that round cheek, and he groaned. "I'm not going anywhere," I promised.

At his nod, I reached around and unlocked his hold on me, lacing a hand with his. Again, I forced myself not to examine how natural it felt.

The walk from Mickie's office to our room spanned the entirety of the cabin as we started from the furthest corner away from our room. I tried to ignore the way everyone got quiet when we walked past, but the itch at the back of my neck was near unbearable. The way my gut clenched and nausea roiled, I thought I might pass out. Drew must have picked up on something because he tried to pull away; instead of letting him, I held on.

By the time we made it to the room, I'd forgotten he was the one in need of comfort, so when I pulled him back into my arms, it was me selfishly seeking my own needs, my own solace.

"Hey." Drew's voice soothed the fraying edges of my world. My gaze locked with his, and all I saw there was understanding. At the feel of his hand against my face, my eyes dropped closed. "This doesn't have to be anything. We can go back—find a way to be what we were."

But I didn't think it was possible. Not anymore. I wasn't completely certain what was happening between us. It scared the fuck out of me. The only thing that frightened me more was losing him.

The more I thought about it, the more it made sense. Drew had always been more affectionate than my other friends. I chalked that up to his Southern upbringing. I'd met his parents before. The entirety of the Moyer clan was touchy-feely. It wasn't until an hour ago that I realized Drew's casual touches and hugs, the times he'd fallen asleep on my shoulder or when I'd woken up with him cuddled to my side, were him seeking what little connection he could find. My heart ached for him, for that desperation and loneliness.

"No," I whispered. "We can't."

The little bit of light in Drew's eyes dimmed as the hope in his expression faded.

"I don't think we can go back," I said. "But we can find our own way from here, yeah?"

"Yeah," he breathed, leaning forward.

This time when my lips touched his, the rush was gone. An urgency I'd felt—the thing that had pushed me into a frenzy during our previous two encounters—smoldered below the surface, igniting something within me. The need I experienced differed from anything I'd felt for any of the women I'd been with. Maybe because they had always been random hookups who had always known the game.

Suddenly, I knew deep down, I'd never be satisfied having only one time with Drew. He was my best friend and partner. But all of a sudden, he was so much more.

The insistent press of his tongue to the seam of my lips, the glide of his fingers over my shoulders and to my neck, the comforting weight of his chest

leaning on me—God, my mind reeled from sensory overload. The promise in his kiss—the sweet tenderness telling me without words how he felt—grounded me, but at the same time sent me floating. He was my anchor and my freedom, but reconciling those two was beyond my reach.

How had I been so blind? How had I not known?

When he fit the entire length of his body to mine, I quit thinking. Every inch of him touching me awoke something deep within I couldn't name, but didn't want to. Didn't need it. His body felt hot and hard against me, where I was accustomed to soft and curvy. But having him there felt natural. His hard cock brushed mine through our pants, and I dropped my head to the door with a thunk.

“Oh God,” I gasped, arching my hips into his.

Drew trailed his lips over my jaw and to my ear. “You feel so fucking good, Gav.”

“I do.” I cleared my throat and swallowed. “I mean you do. You make me feel that good. Better.”

“Just better?” Drew chuckled against me, and goose bumps rippled all over my body.

“More than,” I whispered and rolled my head to the side, giving him better access.

I ran my hands over his sides and back. He was hard in all the places I was used to soft and pliant. It turned me on, the strength I knew he held in the tension of his muscles. He might have been smaller than me, but it only lent to his pretty boy façade. Enemies and friends alike didn't expect him to be as strong, as powerful, as he was.

His fingers fumbled at my belt then the fly of my jeans, and I lost my train of thought.

“What—”

His mouth landed on mine again, sweet and passionate at the same time. “Need you,” he rasped against my lips. “Want to feel you in my hands, my mouth.”

Oh God. I forgot how to breathe when my pants opened and his fingers dipped below the elastic of my boxer briefs. His long fingers wrapped around the base of my cock, and my mind blanked.

“Fuck, Junior”—the name slipped out, but this time animosity was absent, instead obtaining the softness of an endearment—“that. Do that.”

His strong grip dragged up and down my hard length, and I had to make myself not hump into him. I wrapped my hand around the back of his neck and held him in place, thrusting my tongue into his mouth, controlling the kiss—promising anything, everything he wanted if he’d just keep touching me.

Drew stepped backward, and I was hard pressed not to go with him, especially since he was leading me by the dick—literally. When we made it to the bed, he turned me around and pushed me onto it. Then he grasped my waistband and pulled my pants and underwear past my hips. As he dropped to his knees, he met my eyes.

“You have no idea how long I’ve wanted this,” he said, grasping me again.

When he leaned forward, I’d anticipated the feel of his mouth, the stretch of his lips, so strongly that disappointment flooded me when he overlooked my cock. Instead his soft lips landed on the still pink scar at my waist. He breathed a kiss over it, and my breath sped. The gesture both gentle and heart-wrenching because I knew the guilt he carried for something he had no control over.

Lifting his head, he drifted back to where his tongue finally made contact with my needy length and licked a long wet stripe up the underside.

“Fuck,” I gasped and fell back to the bed.

“Later,” he replied, a smile in his voice. “This time I want you in my mouth. To lose it. I want to swallow you whole, all of you.”

His words ignited something primal in me, and suddenly I needed everything he’d voiced. With one elbow holding me up, I leaned up and tangled my hand in his dark locks, dragging him closer. “Prove it,” I growled.

When his lips closed over the head of my cock, desire blazed in his eyes. I groaned at the warm, tight suction.

“More,” I demanded, lifting my hips.

Drew didn’t hesitate and didn’t break eye contact, taking me down the back of his throat then dragging his lips back up, increasing his suction with each pass. With each movement, my skin felt too hot, too tight. He sped up, cupping my balls. Sparks lit up in my peripheral vision.

“God, Junior,” I choked. “I wish you could see you right now.” It was like nothing I’d ever seen in my life. A man—my best friend with his red pouty lips

wrapped around my dick. I wanted more. I wanted it always. And that scared the hell out of me.

Then his hand slid behind my sac, and I forgot to be afraid. “Jesus,” I whispered when he pressed a finger to the tight ring of muscles back there. I wasn’t averse to ass-play. I’d gotten off more than once with a woman playing there, but this was different. Drew’s digit was rougher, thicker, and my insides clenched with the anticipation of what it would feel like inside me.

Tilting my hips forward, I shoved harder into his mouth while pressing into his caress, hopefully telling him without words what I wanted. His eyes widened, and then the digit disappeared only to join my cock in his mouth for a moment.

When he pressed the wet finger back to my hole, I groaned. “Do it.” I was so far gone with his mouth sending me higher each passing second. I didn’t care that I sounded like a desperate slut. I needed it, needed *him* with everything in me.

As soon as he entered me, my world exploded. I yelled my release, spilling everything I was into his mouth. Greedy and wanton, he took it all, grunting his enjoyment.

Sated, I reached for him. Drew tore at his own pants, trying to open them. When he did, he guided my hand to his hot cock. I palmed it then wrapped my fingers around the hard length without question. Drew’s cock pulsed in my hand, hot and firm. The same, but different, as touching myself. In my hand, he felt long and slender, veiny and powerful. I swallowed, a near gulp, as my pulse raced through my ears. I wondered what he would feel like. Inside me.

Stroking insistent and smooth, I followed his direction until his hips jerked out of rhythm.

“Please,” he whimpered, and I rolled over him, straddling one leg and pressing my knee into his balls. Dropping my mouth to his, I swallowed every moan and cry he gave until finally, he stilled and spilled into my hand.

With our foreheads pressed together, I hovered over him while our hearts found their normal beat once again.

“Fuck,” he whispered.

“Definitely next time,” I promised with a lazy kiss. Definitely.

When I blinked my eyes open to watch the clock strike three, I realized we'd missed most of the day's activities. And no one had come to rouse us. It meant one of two things. Everyone thought we'd killed each other, or they knew what was going on and didn't want to disturb us.

I waited for the expected dread to set in. It didn't come. I won't lie—nervousness had taken up permanent residence in the pit of my stomach, but the fear that ran so rampant for the past few days was absent.

Examining everything to death would have ruined it—for both of us. So I tried to stay in the here and now. What happened when we left the retreat was still up in the air. Who was to say this thing between us would last past that? Hell, who even knew if it would last up to that point? Except deep down, I knew the only person I was trying to convince was myself.

At my side, Drew stirred, but only to burrow deeper into my neck and curl around me. Letting my eyelids drop closed again, I found myself soaking in his warmth, the comfort Drew had no idea he was providing.

A buzzing sound startled me just as I landed halfway between asleep and awake. Without a glance to the side, I grabbed my phone to silence it then saw my sister's name flash across the screen. A hot streak of shame shot through me. Not answering the phone wasn't an option. My sister was the second most important person in my life, next to her son Blaine.

I swiped my thumb across the screen. "Jenna," I greeted in a hushed manner.

"Hey, Big Brother," her cheery alto sounded over the line.

"Hey back." I smiled. No matter my issues with the major, Jenna was the light of my childhood. My younger sister. My lifeline when things got bad.

"Why are you talking like that?"

"Like what?"

"Why are you whispering?"

"I'm not—"

"Is there someone with you?" She gasped. "There is. You have a girl with you. You sound like I woke you up. Did I wake you? It's three in the afternoon, Gav. Why in the world are you sleeping? You're getting old, you know?"

"I am not old." I chose to focus on the part of the conversation I could force past the lump in my throat.

“Who is she? And why are you in bed at this time of day?” she asked. Jenna could be the nosy sort. “I thought you were at a retreat or conference or something.”

I glanced down at Drew’s rumpled sable hair, my heart pounding as if my sister was going to walk through the door of our room any moment. Torn between pulling Drew closer and shoving him off me so I could lock myself in the bathroom for the rest of the week. “Or something,” I muttered. I was pathetic.

“The girl?” She was like a dog with a bone.

“There’s no girl.” At least that much was true. I felt my heart fall into my stomach. Jenna and I didn’t lie to each other. We’d had enough of that with the major. It was an unspoken code between us. All honesty, all of the time.

But this... this scared the hell out of me. I didn’t know how she’d feel about it. I didn’t even know how *I* felt about it.

“What’s wrong?” When she got soft and perceptive like this, I had to be careful. My personality could come off as abrasive at the best of times. I knew that. But hurting or upsetting Jenna was never an option. Not for me. Not after our mom passed. She’d had enough hurt in her life.

“It’s nothing,” I whispered, combing my fingers through Drew’s dark hair.

“You know you can talk to me, yeah?”

“I know. I’m just not sure I can talk about it right now. I have some things to work out on my own first.”

“But you’re okay?”

Drew snuffled then lifted his head. When those glassy green eyes met mine, something loosened in my chest. It still scared me, but it also brought a sense of safety and verity. I was lost, not sure if I wanted to be found. And that shook me most of all.

“I’m good,” I whispered both to answer my sister and the question in Drew’s expression. “Is there something you needed?”

She laughed. “Your nephew misses you. He wants to come for a visit.”

“Uncle Gavie, I gots a Groot and he wiggles his butt,” Blaine yelled from the background.

“Don’t say butt,” Jenna scolded, a smile in her voice.

“At least he didn’t say ass,” I said, and Jenna scoffed. “Or tail feather.” Drew lifted an eyebrow at me, an expression I’d seen a billion times over the years with him, but only now realized how completely adorable it was.

“You’re an idiot,” she snorted.

Drew nodded, apparently hearing Jenna’s end of the conversation as well. I stuck my tongue out at him.

“When will you be home?” Jenna asked.

“Sunday night,” I answered automatically. The smile fell from Drew’s face. Five more days of solace. Of this... whatever it was. As I held his gaze, I could almost see my own thoughts reflected in his eyes.

“So we’ll come up next weekend.” Jenna lived in Annapolis near our father. I’d gotten out as soon as possible. I had no desire to spend more than necessary time with the major, or the complications and insecurity that came with his presence. “Call me when you get home and we’ll make plans.”

“Sounds good,” I mumbled.

After a beat, Jenna said, “Gavin, I don’t know what’s going on, but there’s nothing you can tell me that will make me love you any less. You could have purple hair and warts on your nose and love two-headed aliens for all I care.”

“Uncle Gavie loves two-headed aliens?” Blaine screeched.

On the verge of tears, I choked out a huff at the three-year-old I loved so much. I could only imagine the visions floating through his head.

I hung up the phone to the sounds of my sister explaining the difference in reality and a figure of speech.

“Jenna?” Drew asked.

He’d met my sister a year or so after we’d become partners. Jenna and Blaine loved him. It wasn’t difficult. That thought froze in my head.

I nodded. “Blaine misses me. He has an ass-wiggling Groot.”

“What the hell is a Groot?”

It was my turn to arch a brow. “How does a grown man not know comics?”

The smile he gave me was crooked and charming. It melted something inside me. “How does a grown man *know* comics so well?”

“Variety. Have you not ever heard of being a kid at heart?” I grinned, poking him in the side. When he wiggled, it reminded me just how naked we both were.

Seeming to sense my mood shift, Drew leaned up and pressed a kiss to my lips, chaste and sweet. “I think we should talk.”

Every nice, warm, light feeling turned into cast iron in the pit of my stomach with those words. “Not now,” I whispered. “Can we not talk about it today?”

With his lips drawn down at the corners, Drew studied me in silence then nodded slowly. “Okay,” he murmured. “We’ll do it your way. I can only imagine the toll this is taking on you.”

I tilted my forehead against his. “Thank you,” I breathed before he brushed another kiss onto my mouth. I might have only bought another day, but it was one more day to pretend I wouldn’t be more of a disappointment to myself, to my family, or to Drew. Especially to Drew.

Squeezing my eyes closed, I held Drew and hoped I’d never have to let him go.

Chapter Six

Andrew

“Okay, kids,” Marty called from the edge of the clearing where our crowd was gathering. “Follow me. It’s not dark in there, but you will need to find your way out.” The sly grin on his face didn’t lend itself to confidence.

Noon sunlight broke up the gray-white clouds, providing bigger glimpses of blue sky. Even the temperature didn’t seem so cold. That was until we stepped through the tree line, the sun blocking the beauty and warmth of the sunshine.

“Need me to keep you warm?” Gavin breathed in my ear at the same moment I stepped over a downed, snow-covered log.

A shiver coursed down my spine that had little to do with the chill in the air and more to do with the visions running through my head, the promise his tone made. And then there was the fact Gavin had said such a thing outside the four walls of our room.

It had been two days since I woke up in his arms, and we’d yet to talk about what was going on between us. Not for lack of trying, but Gavin mastered evasion skills—they worked pretty damn well in the field and in the bedroom. My personal favorite—and weakness—was, “Can’t we just *be* without everything else getting in the way?” I fell for it every time. I was a fool. It wasn’t “everything” in our way. It was Gavin and his reluctance to own up to his feelings.

“Should I take that as a no?” Gavin grasped my elbow when I stumbled over a bush I failed to see while I was buried in my rumination.

“What?” I asked, moving close enough to brush against him. “No! I mean yes! I mean”—I dropped my voice low—“of course I want you to keep me warm. Are you crazy?”

He chuckled. “Good to know.”

“You’re a tad confusing, you know?” I bumped his shoulder. I didn’t think he felt the playful tap through his bulky parka.

Gavin’s grin fell and he sniffed. “Sorry about that.” Then he cocked his head. “Did you say ‘tad’?”

I ducked my face inside my high collar, my cheeks blazing. “What’s wrong with ‘tad’?”

“Who says that?”

“I do, ass.” I glared over the edge of my bushy coat.

The smirk he leveled at me lit me from the inside out. “You do,” he said, in that matter-of-fact tone that drove me crazy.

“I hate you,” I told him.

He laughed. “You love me more.”

I did, and every time I thought it, my breath hitched and my heart did a silly flip because the endearment held an entirely new meaning now. Four years of secrets and repressed feelings on my part stood between us. Now I was the secret.

That knowledge burned in me as we continued on in silence, weaving through the grove of centuries-old trees. Finally the group reached another, smaller clearing where Mickie and Marty stopped.

“Today’s exercise is one of trust, team building, and honor,” Mickie spoke up from her perch on a large rock near the center of the otherwise snow-filled area.

“We call this game Blind Maze,” Marty took over. “Partner One will lead a blind-folded Partner Two back through the forest by words alone.”

Mickie continued as Marty stepped away and began handing out black elastic nightshade-type eye coverings. “Partner One, at no time are you to touch or in any other way guide Partner Two other than with the words of your direction.”

Marty reached us and held out the black eyepiece. I took it. I would follow Gavin anywhere. He had to know that.

“I’ll be Two,” Gavin said, taking the blindfold from me.

“What?” I turned to him. Gavin wasn’t the easiest man to work with. Our partnership was not without its hiccups, especially in the beginning, but he had reason to hate me, to never trust me again. The fact that he wanted to make himself vulnerable for me, because of me—it was humbling and worrisome at the same time.

“I trust you,” he stated, reading my thoughts.

What felt like a vise squeezed around my chest. I shut my eyes and shook my head. “You don’t have to.”

“But I do.” I felt his hands on my shoulders, and my eyes snapped open. “I trust you. I’ve always trusted you. I need you to trust yourself now.”

There—in the open wilderness—two things happened. First, I was fairly certain all of the air in the clearing had disappeared when I met his crystal blue gaze. Second, he stepped closer and wrapped his arms around me. For the briefest moment of time, I thought he might kiss me. I wanted it, hoped desperately for it. Then he tugged my head down onto his shoulder and held me close. Air rushed from my lungs with the nearness, the trust and sacrifice that came with that gesture.

I nodded against him and pushed my hands against his chest. I needed to put some distance between us. “Okay,” I said. “You can wear the blindfold.”

When Gavin trained his smile on me though, it reached his eyes, like he knew what I was thinking. As much as I wanted this with him, as much as a fairy-tale dream come true it was, I needed to protect myself. I wanted him, wanted to love all of him, but I needed the same in return. He wasn’t that guy—never had been. I don’t know why I’d been fooling myself thinking he was. Then he slipped the black material over his head, covering his knowing gaze.

To our left, Brooklyn and Whitney argued. I heard her say that she wanted to lead him through the woods. “How will you ever trust me if you never give a fucking inch?” I heard her hiss. From my periphery, I saw that the other three couples were doing their best to ignore them as well. Having them bicker so much at this point in the week bordered on awkward.

“Here we go, ladies and gents,” Marty called out, silencing the ten of us. “If you have any problems, just yell my name or Mickie’s. We’ll come running.”

“Good luck and we’ll see you on the other side.”

Blind Maze was one name for the trust-building exercise, *Follow the Leader* was another. The agency used the same principle in training when pairing new partners. Gavin and I had played this game before. Though four years ago, I had been the one wearing the blindfold and he had purposely run me into a brick wall. I never said he wasn’t a dick.

I chuckled at the memory. “Too bad there are no brick walls around.”

“You deserved it. A wakeup call was exactly what your green ass needed,” he snorted.

“I was not green. I’d been partnered with Evan an entire year before you came on.”

We were halfway through the trail back to the cabin. Back when we’d perfected this exercise, we’d realized it was easier to have the vulnerable partner follow the sound of the leader’s voice. So I stood in front of him and verbally guided him with the sound of my voice and directions to step over this foot-high log with this left foot, and he came with me without hesitation.

“You were still green,” he told me. I could only imagine the gleam in his eyes behind that black cloth. “You were an innocent compared to the things I’d seen and done.”

“You would think so.” I shook my head.

“Don’t shake your head at me.”

“You’re not supposed to be peeking. A low swinging limb to your right, six inches below the shoulder.”

Without even a pause in his step, Gavin swung to his right and sidestepped the branch until I gave him the okay.

“You were green,” he repeated.

“Okay whatever,” I agreed, because whatever I was back then, I wasn’t any longer. He was right about one thing. Looking back, I could see where I was far more innocent compared to now. Naples had only been the last in a long string of ops to jade me.

“Quit.” Gavin said it with a smile on his face but steel in his voice. “You’re blaming yourself, mourning who you used to be, who we used to be. Stop.”

He reached up to lift his blindfold, and I leaped forward to hold it in place. His grin spread across his face.

“Don’t ruin the activity because I’m an idiot,” I said.

“You are an idiot,” he whispered, his long fingers grasping my hips and pulling me closer. I glanced around to make sure nobody was watching. I couldn’t be sure Gavin wouldn’t freak out when he realized we stood in the open still. Maybe he was only this comfortable because he couldn’t see anything. It didn’t matter. Even though I knew I should pull away, I couldn’t make myself.

He leaned closer, his minty-warm breath ghosting over my face. I licked my lips and leaned forward at the same time a high-pitched scream pierced the quiet of the mountain afternoon.

Gavin jerked away from me and ripped his blindfold off, this time for a reason other than teasing me. Someone was in trouble. We were at the edge of the clearing, in the scheme of the game, about to win, so we were farthest from the cry for help.

By the time we reached, the edge of the ice cliff, everyone else was there. Everyone but Brooklyn's husband, Whitney. I'd noticed him walking in the other direction muttering to himself. Marty lay prone and held his arms out to something I couldn't see, while Mickie held his feet. Everyone else made a half circle, keeping their distance from the couple.

Then I heard it. "He was trying to get cell service, and I was playing along with the game. I thought it would be fun." That voice was Brooklyn's, her ramblings stilted and panicked.

I glanced up at Gavin and the look he gave me was one of apology as he unhooked a rope from beneath his parka. I wasn't surprised he brought backup outdoor gear. He was probably prepared for the apocalypse back at the cabin.

He tossed one end to me while he made a harness out of the other end. "That tree," he directed me, and I took off. He was already on the move toward the hole Brooklyn had disappeared down when I finished stabilizing the rope.

My heart pounded in my chest as I watched him drop over the lip of the snow canyon. They were so unstable, crumbling at the drop of a hat, which was likely how the pampered housewife had ended up at the bottom.

After what seemed like hours but was certain to be only minutes, two tugs vibrated the rope. Finding traction, I heaved, taking advantage of the tree and using it as leverage to help lift my partner and his load out of danger. A couple of the other guys joined in, easing my strain. When Gavin's head appeared out of the hole, I could breathe again. As he climbed out and to his feet, Brooklyn clung to him, and I couldn't blame her, both for being scared and wanting to be near Gavin's calming presence. I should have felt bad for the slight jealousy coursing through me, but I didn't. She wrapped her arms around Gavin's neck as he hauled her prissy ass back to the cabin. The whole way she whimpered. I knew I was being petty. She'd been through a traumatic experience, but she wasn't hurt. Not really. Mostly scared and in shock.

And I was an asshole.

Back in the common room, Brooklyn refused to let go of Gavin, and while I was trying to be the bigger man, I wasn't. I couldn't help but think I was convenient for Gavin. Women were what he was used to—women like Brooklyn.

Quietly, I made my way back to my room to the sounds of Brooklyn praising her hero. If that's what he wanted, I wouldn't stand in his way. Even if it killed me.

Chapter Seven

Gavin

I started awake, unsure what was the cause. For a moment I lay still, breathing, listening. That's when I heard a rustling. I turned my head to watch Drew slip into the bathroom.

Blinding rays beamed through the windows, slicing into my retinas, and I wondered why Drew hadn't pulled the curtains. Pulling Drew's pillow over my head, I sighed at the blessed darkness. I hadn't gotten back to the room until late the night before. After the EMTs cleared Brooklyn, she refused to let me out of her sight. Her asshole of a husband didn't so much as come out of his room to check on her.

She deserved better, and part of it wished it could be me. That I could be the better. Having a woman like Brooklyn in my life would be so much easier than the wreck of emotions storming over me the past few days. She was beautiful—soft, sweet... easy. But when I looked at her, my heart didn't stutter. She did nothing for me on a level outside of “willing body,” and I'd had enough of those in my life.

I remembered the look in Drew's eyes before he walked away the day before, while Brooklyn hung on me like a monkey. He seemed resigned—hurt but walking away from everything, from us. I couldn't let that happen.

Maybe if I could find myself comfortable with Drew, the rest of the world would fall into place. Asking for time had been a delaying tactic. Both he and I knew I wasn't good at admitting weakness or fear or defeat—the list goes on and on. I wondered, not for the first time, how long it would take for him to give up on me. Suddenly, I didn't know how I would handle that sort of rejection.

Somewhere in the span of a few days, I'd fallen for my best friend. I couldn't explain it, and I wanted to hide from it as much as possible, but seeing the hurt I caused Drew brought it all home. My fears aside, I wanted to at least explore what we had, because it was obvious—at least to me—that there was something special between us. I just had to prove it to him. And to myself.

The moment the shower turned on, an idea popped into my head. I threw back the covers and walked to the bathroom. As quietly as possible, I crept

inside. Tones from a song I knew to be one of Drew's favorites filled the hollowness of the room in my partner's special brand of wobbly tenor. It was an accustomed taste I found endearing.

The glass of the oversized walk-in was foggy but not so much that I couldn't see the outline of Drew's golden skin and his dark hair, wet and plastered to his head. My cock perked up with anticipation.

When I opened the shower door, Drew didn't jump, he didn't turn around at all.

"You could have told me you wanted to shower first," he said, his back remaining to me, his shoulders tense.

"How would you expect that since you left me in bed asleep and alone?" I crossed my arms and leaned against the cold tile of the stall. I dropped the tone of my voice. "Besides, maybe I like the idea of showering with you."

The tension in his shoulders didn't ease. Apprehension weighed down my shoulders, slowed my steps as I pushed off the wall and moved to stand behind him.

I wrapped an arm around his waist, pulling his back against me. With a sigh, he relaxed a little and dropped his head back to my shoulder. I skimmed my lips down his jaw, reveling in the roughness of his stubble—a contrast to the smoothness of a woman's skin.

"Or maybe you don't want me here," I whispered, running the fingers of my other hand up the column of his neck. "I could go back to bed and wait."

Drew whimpered, a sound of warring need and denial. I wanted to know what was going through his mind. More than that, I wanted him to know what he meant to me—even when I had trouble voicing it.

I slipped my hand over his slick abdomen, lower to the wiry curls surrounding his cock. "You were asleep when I came in last night."

Tension stiffened Drew's neck and arms. I nipped his jaw in warning, smiling against his skin when Drew relaxed once again.

"You were out there late," he said in a soft tone.

"You could have come to get me."

He scoffed and turned his face away from me.

"Hey," I said, grinding my cock into the crease of his ass. "I'm here."

“But is this where you want to be?”

“Of course it is. Why would you think I wouldn’t?” Like I didn’t know.

Drew lifted his head off my shoulders and untangled himself from my arms, turning to face me. “You’ve never been with a man. How do you know this isn’t some crazy cabin fever thing? You’re stuck here with me in the middle of nowhere, surrounded by married couples.”

Taking a step backward, I crossed my arms over my chest and squinted down at him. “So now I don’t know my mind?”

“I’ll believe that when I see it. You won’t even talk about it, Gav.” He threw his hands up in a huff. “With me. Of all people. I’m not asking you to out yourself to the people outside that door or to the world. But we’re in this together. You don’t even do relationships. How does this thing work? You have fun for a few days in the mountains but drop me when we leave? What are you going to do if your dad finds out? Jesus, you live your life for the man.”

“That’s not fair, Drew,” I snapped, feeling the color drain from my face. “You know that’s not true. I left home for a reason. There’s no pleasing him.”

“Yet you keep trying,” Drew threw back, folding his arms in front of him. Instead of looking angry, the gesture seemed to add a layer of protection between us. “How would I know anything? I have no idea how you feel, and that’s the problem. You only let me in to the point that it suits you.”

Frustration licked at my periphery. I threw my arms open. “What more do you want from me, *Junior*? You know me better than I know myself. What is there to talk about?”

“You sound like a douche. Out there”—he pointed at the door—“in the field, at HQ, in fucking Naples—I know you. Here, where it matters, I have no idea who you are or what I’m getting myself into. Maybe that’s it. Maybe that’s the point. This isn’t real. I was fucked to think this could go beyond Sunday. You’re not ready.” He turned off the cooling water then opened the door to let himself out of the shower.

I clasped his bicep before he could escape. “This is not just a one-off for me.”

“How do you know?” He glared back.

“Because I know.”

“Then maybe you should think about why you refuse to talk to me. Why you don’t want anyone to know.” He jerked his arm from my hold. “I get that you’re scared.”

“I’m not scared.”

“Tell yourself whatever you want, but I get it. I’ve been there.” Drew shook out a towel and began drying himself. “There’s a reason you don’t want to talk about it. If you do it will get to be too real, and you’ll have to face falling in love with a man and disappointing your father again, or yourself. Probably both.”

“I just need some time to wrap my head around this. When did you become an asshole?”

“When you started holding me at arm’s length. I’ll give you all the time in the world, but you need to give something in return.” With that, Drew turned and stalked out of the bathroom, leaving me standing dumbfounded in the shower.

Chapter Eight

Andrew

“You’re missing your counseling session.” Sally Ann dropped down on the sofa beside me, placing a warm mug in my hands. “It’s hot chocolate. My grandson says it heals everything. Even broken hearts. Though I have a feeling yours is simply bruised.”

The corner of my mouth lifted on its own accord, I think. I wasn’t feeling it. “Simple?”

“Oh, dear”—she patted my leg—“matters of the heart are rarely simple.”

I grunted, took a drink of the smooth, molten chocolate in my glass, and continued to stare out of the glass wall into the massive range of mountains. I’d been there for several hours hoping to find peace or solace or some kind of answer, but all I’d found was a numb ass and a growling belly.

“Have I told you yet what brought my Beau and me to Reparations all those years ago?” Sally Ann broke the silence again.

Tearing my gaze from the stillness of the outdoors, I drew my knees to my chest and rested my head down facing her. “No,” I rasped.

She took my mug from me and sat it on the coffee table. “Well, his mother—God rest her soul—did not like me. From the moment he introduced me to her at a dinner, she’d done her best to break us up. And Beau, among his long list of faults, is a mama’s boy at heart, so he did his best to please her, but our love began the moment we met. You’ve heard of love at first sight? Well, ours was all of that with fireworks and bells and rainbows.

“That didn’t matter to Rosalie Masterson. Her boy was too good for the likes of a child raised in the Bronx.” Sally Ann winked, and the corners of my lips twitched. “I had a few tricks up my sleeve—and up my skirt—though. I refused to be played by some uptown hoity-toity snob. I knew how to keep my man happy, and I did. Multiple times in one night sometimes.”

“Oh Sally Ann, you minx. Please tell me this is relevant to your story.”

“Honey bun, sex and how you use it is always relevant.” She snorted. “We’d been married for twenty years and his hag of a mother still meddled, hoping to get rid of me—to the point that she set my Beau up, hoping I’d catch

him in a sticky situation with another woman. It hadn't started out that way. She gradually got worse—talking down to me, ignoring me when we were in the same room. I know Beau too well to think he'd cheat on me—he's my other half after all.

“Even after all that, it was easy for me to forgive him for any mistakes he made regarding her. The last several years of her life I think she'd resigned herself to the fact that I wasn't going anywhere. Then six years ago, she passed away, and I started noticing the little ways Beau was trying to turn me into her.” She snorted. “Fuck that.”

“Sally Ann!” I gasped.

“What? The woman was a bitch, but I wouldn't begrudge Beau his love for her. But he had another thing coming if he thought I'd wipe his ass and cater to him the way she did. He came home from work one day to find me packing my bags. The next weekend we spent here. And you see how well that turned out.” She gave me a sweet smile.

It was a sweet story. “I'm glad you guys worked it out. You're good together.”

“We are, and so are you and your man.”

“We're not—”

“No need denying it. The whole cabin hears you arguing... and doing other things.”

My cheeks heated and I tucked my face behind my arm. “It's... complicated.” I wondered what Gavin would think if he knew everyone had heard us. More than once. The thought scared me as much as it thrilled me. I almost needed to see the shock of reality hit him.

“The best things usually are.” Sally Ann watched me for a moment then said, “The reason I told you the story was to say I fought for my marriage for twenty-six years total, and when I let my guard down, I almost walked away from the best thing in my life.”

“I'm lucky my Beau is a fighter too. Maybe you should give your man time to show you how he fights.”

“I know how he fights.” When Gavin was passionate about something, he wouldn't let it go. “He let me walk away.”

She patted my arm then scooped up the hot chocolate again and handed it to me. “Give him time to realize what he’s lost. He’ll come back to you.” The way she looked at me said she knew something I didn’t. I wasn’t sure whether to find hope in that look or fear it. “I’ve seen the way Gavin looks at you, honey. He’s not going anywhere, but maybe you should think about not sitting around and waiting on him to come to you. It’s time to make yourself known, don’t you think?”

Standing, Sally Ann grinned down at me and said, “One thing I’ve learned in all my years is when things get hard, when we feel trapped, we run. It’s easier. Give him a reason to stay.”

With a pat to my cheek, Sally Ann walked away.

Had I pushed Gavin too hard? He knew me well, better than anybody, but there were parts of my life that were still a surprise to him. I closed my eyes and leaned my head against the back of the sofa. I might have been a little unfair to him, even though his mixed signals were giving me whiplash, but he deserved time at least. If I knew Gavin—and he’d even admitted as much earlier—he would open up when he was ready. He just needed to figure out what he was doing—what we were doing.

With that thought, I set my mug down. I’d seen Gavin dressed for the gym earlier. The time to eat crow had come upon me. I got up and headed that way.

Chapter Nine

Gavin

Adrenaline raced through my bloodstream as my feet pounded the treadmill, the argument with Drew replaying itself in my mind.

How could he not understand? Was it so difficult to give me time to adjust? Was there a learning curve to falling in love with a man? Because I was sure that was what was happening, but for the life of me, I didn't get why Drew couldn't be patient. On the other hand, I knew it wasn't fair to him for me to ask that he wait while I tried to figure my shit out. I just didn't think I could do any of it without him.

Women had been my go-to my entire life. They were easy—most of them. It's not like I strung them along. They knew the game when we hooked up. I didn't do long-term. Didn't have time. But with Drew, things were different. There was no such thing as slow or one night or hookup. He was all in, and so was my heart. My head was the problem.

My phone rang, and I glimpsed the caller ID. *Jenna*. I punched the buttons on the machine to slow it down and picked up my phone.

"Two times in a week," I greeted. "You doing okay?"

"I'm fine," she said. "It's you I'm worried about."

"Me?" I panted, walking my cooldown half mile.

"I know you said nothing was wrong when we talked last, but I can't help but think there's something you're not saying."

She was always a perceptive wench.

I sighed. "I... I'm not sure how to say it."

"Then just say it. You'll feel better."

"Don't know about that."

"I do."

"And you know everything?"

"More than you," she shot back. "Now quit avoiding the question and say it."

The small gym was empty at this time of night, for which I was thankful. I stopped walking and rode the belt to the end of the tread then hopped off. In silence, I made my way to the nearest bench.

After another wordless stretch, my voice cracked when I said, “I think I’ve done something I can’t take back.”

“Okay,” Jenna replied. “Do you want to?” She paused. “Take it back, I mean?”

“No.” I swallowed past the fear in my throat. “But I’m afraid of fucking it up.”

“We all fuck things up, Gav. It’s how we fix them after we’ve broken them that matters.”

“I don’t want to break him,” I whispered. But I wasn’t sure I could keep from doing just that.

“Him?” Her voice was just as soft.

My pulse thudded in my ears, and it had nothing to do with the four miles I’d just sprinted. I took a deep breath and let out everything I’d been holding in. “Drew,” I confirmed. “I don’t want to hurt Drew.”

Jenna was quiet this time. And after a while she broke the silence with “You’re in love with him.” It came out as a statement, not the question I would have expected. Still, I heard no animosity or anger in her voice.

“Maybe.” I wasn’t sure I wanted to have this conversation with her. “It might be too soon.”

“Oh, Big Brother, you’ve been together for years. Of course you love him.”

The rightness of her words hit me, but still... “I don’t know if I can do this.”

“Why the hell not?” Now she sounded angry, or at least she was getting there.

“I’ve fucked up enough in my life—my eye, the Marines. Dad doesn’t even look me in the eye anymore. How would he take me bringing Drew home for Christmas?”

“Who cares what he thinks? Gav, you can’t mold your life around the major’s happiness.” She sighed. “I don’t think he’d be as upset as you think he would.”

This time I scoffed. “Apparently you’ve forgotten how much he looks down on everything I’ve ever done.” Even back when I tried to please him at every turn.

“Don’t do this,” Jenna said, her exasperation clear. “You and Dad need to work out your own crap on your own time, but I think you’ll find you’ve both made mistakes. Right now we’re talking about you and Drew. You know you’re a good brother, right?”

I grunted, clearly she would say whatever she wanted. So I strapped in for the ride.

“And the best uncle. But your problem is you work so hard at pleasing everyone else, making everyone else happy, that you don’t count yourself in that equation. You deserve happiness, Gav. Hell, you deserve it more than anyone I know. Yet you run from it every time it comes near you.”

“What are you talking about?” I asked.

“Art school.”

“That was never a possibility. The major would have never gone for it.” It had been a kid’s pipedream. I’d been accepted into Rhode Island School of Design when I was a junior. Jenna had been the culprit back then, starting the process by sending in my application and portfolio. It never went farther than that. But I thought the Marines were my future, so I declined.

“You’ll never know,” she growled. “You never fought for it. You ran because it was easier to make Dad happy than go for what you really wanted.”

“That’s not fair. It’s all he ever wanted for me.”

“And what do you want for yourself, Gavin? Jesus, do you hear yourself?” I could picture her throwing her hands in the air, and it made me smile. “Wipe that stupid grin off your face. It’s not funny. You’re being ridiculous. You’re a grown-ass man who is still living his life to make his daddy happy. Do you know what will make Dad happy? Living your own goddamned life. For the love of God. Fight for what you want. Get hurt. Cry. Scream. Screw up. Fall in fucking love. But do it because you’re doing what you wanted to, not because someone else told you it’s what you’re supposed to do.”

She stopped talking, and I was the one who was out of breath. She was right, but I had no idea where to start. “I…” I swallowed my fear. “I don’t know how.”

Jenna gave a very unladylike snort. “First, go get your man and tell him how you really feel.”

“You’re right.”

“Of course I am.”

“Bitch.”

“Asshole.”

“I love you.”

“Love you most,” she replied. “Go get him.” Then she hung up.

Still sweaty and smelly, I raced through the gym doors and down the hallway. Drew was inside the massive A-frame somewhere, and nothing would stop me from finding him.

I barely saw the sparkly pink and blonde blur before it slammed into me, causing me to stumble backward. My back slammed into the wall, and I wrapped my arms around the body hugged to me. Sobbing reached my ears.

“Brooklyn?” I croaked.

“He’s leaving me,” Brooklyn wailed into my sweat-soaked T-shirt.

Confused, I tried to pry her loose, but the hold she had on me rivaled that of a professional wrestler. “Brooklyn, what are you doing? What are you talking about?”

“Whitney!” she screeched, looking up at me, but not pulling away. “He served me with divorce papers when all I’m trying to do is save our marriage, he’s been planning to leave me—with *nothing!*”

Damn. That sucked, but I didn’t have time for this. “Look, Brooklyn. I’m sorry for... whatever’s going on with you guys, but I really have some stuff I need to take care of.”

I reached behind me and tried again to peel her off me, but she wouldn’t give an inch.

“You need to let go,” I said.

She blinked up at me. “He’s crazy jealous of you. He’d go insane if he saw you and me together.”

I jerked back. “There is no you and me. And we’re not together.”

“We could be.” The calculating glint in her eye screamed of wrongness. An itch started at the back of my neck. In any other situation, I would’ve reached for my gun. Good thing for Brooklyn my gun was in the safe in my room.

“No we co—”

My protest was cut off by her lips on mine. Too soft, too insistent, too... wrong.

With her mouth still attacking mine, I opened my eyes to find Drew at the other end of the hallway. The stricken look on his face broke something inside me. Drew stormed away at the exact moment I pushed away the woman attached to my face. Brooklyn staggered backward then took a step toward me again, a cocky, unbecoming smirk on her face.

“Stop,” I demanded, holding a hand out to keep her away physically if I needed to.

“But—”

“No. This isn’t happening. I’m sorry your marriage is ending, but I’m not your backup. As it is, I can only hope to fix what you’ve done.”

“What are you talking about?” she sneered.

“Drew,” I told her. “I’m going to crawl on my hands and knees, if need be, and hope that he’ll listen to me. Because I don’t want you. I never have. As much as I wished I had at one time.”

Her sneer turned uglier. “You’re choosing that fag over me?”

I narrowed my eyes and opened my mouth to tell her just how superior Drew was to her when Whitney strolled into the hall.

“I hear you’re causing a scene, Brooklyn. No need to act like a child simply because you’re not getting your way.” He nodded at me. “Sorry for any disturbance she’s caused. I’ll take care of it.”

Using the distraction the soon-to-be ex-husband handed me, I slipped around the unhappy couple and ran to the room I shared with Drew. By the time I got there, the rest of the cabin was silent, with the exception of Whitney and Brooklyn arguing.

As soon as I opened the door, I knew something was wrong. My skin crawled with it. I scanned the room for exactly what was missing.

“Drew?” I called.

No answer.

I checked the bathroom. He wasn't there either.

"Drew?" I raised my voice, panic threatening to choke me.

I spun around. A framed painting of the Raymondskill Waterfall swung on the hidden hinges, exposing the safe. Rushing over, I entered the passcode and pulled the heavy door open. Drew's wallet and gun were missing, as were his keys.

Without thinking, I grabbed my belongings and scooped up my phone on the way out of my room. I dialed him as I sped down the walkway.

"It's perfect," he said by way of greeting. "Consider this your out. You never wanted this in the first place, and now you don't have to have it. We can go back to the way things were."

The tears in his voice crushed me. "What are you talking about?"

"You and Brooklyn. I heard Whitney was filing for divorce. You can have your perfect woman."

"She's not perfect and I hardly want her. *She* kissed *me*, Junior. Don't do this."

"It's okay. I shouldn't have pushed you into this in the first place."

"You didn't push me."

"Whatever. You would have never—"

"You're right," I yelled, opening the door just in time to watch the taillights of Drew's Jeep disappear around the bend of the half-mile drive. *Fuck*. "I never would have known how you felt. I never would have touched you. I never would have held you. I never would have fallen in love with you. Drew, you need to come back here and talk to me, okay?"

"Not a good idea," he sobbed. "I'm sorry about all of this, but I think it's best that we forget it ever happened. You can find a nice woman and be happy."

"I don't want a nice woman. I want you."

"I don't think you know what you're talking about."

"Fuck you, Moyer." My heart clenched, and I dropped to the top step of the veranda. "Don't tell me what I do and don't know. I know I love you. I know I want to be with you, to see where this goes. Do not run away from me."

“Maybe we need some time apart. Then you’ll realize how wrong you are.”

“Dammit, Drew, get your ass back here and talk to me.”

“I can’t. I—” A loud screech sounded then a crunch. Was that glass?

“Drew?”

“Oh God,” he gasped. For the longest second in history my heart stopped. The last thing I heard before the line went dead was Drew telling me he loved me.

Chapter Ten

Gavin

“...a relatively large hemorrhage internally and his brain is swelling.”

I blinked at the man in the blue scrubs standing in front of me. He looked like he was a teenager. When I swallowed and opened my mouth to speak, nothing came out. Teen Doctor’s expression softened.

“We’re doing everything we can to help him, but I’m not going to lie to you—your friend—”

“Partner,” I choked out then squeezed my eyes shut to hold back the tears. Why was it still so hard to say what I meant? “My lover and my partner.”

It was the least I could do for Drew right now. And for myself.

“Your partner,” the doctor repeated, giving me a soft smile. “He’s in bad shape, but he’s in good hands.” He waited for a moment then nodded at me. “I need to get back in there.”

I didn’t say anything more. I couldn’t because what I wanted to do was yell—order these people to save the best thing in my life. The best man. I had no control over the situation, no control over whether the man who had taught me to discover love in a new way would live or die.

Teen Doctor walked away and all I could do was watch. All around me families and friends waited for their loved ones. I stood there. Still. Frozen. Alone.

I hadn’t called Mickie or Marty before I left. They weren’t my concern. Though I figured at some point they’d wonder where Drew and I had gone and why we left our things behind. I would need to call.

Later.

The one call I did make was to Eric. He would take care of calling Linda and Frank, Drew’s mom and dad. I didn’t think I could handle telling them. I barely fumbled out something coherent enough for Eric to decipher.

Four hours later, the nervous wreck I’d become hadn’t changed. The longer I had to wait, the more scenarios ran through my mind.

“Don’t do this to me, Junior,” I whispered, mostly to myself. Though I was pretty sure the grandma sitting a few chairs over was eyeing me like I’d escaped the mental ward.

I didn’t care.

My heart had stopped the minute Drew’s call dropped. His words—“I love you, Gav”—continued to run through my head on a never-ending loop. I was lost without an anchor. Lost without Drew.

“Gavin!” Linda burst through the waiting room doors and made a beeline for me. I stood in just enough time to catch her in my arms. “Gavin, honey,” she sobbed. “Are you okay?”

I shook my head, barely keeping it together. Tears blurred my vision. “I wasn’t there, Linda. I’m so sorry. You’ll never know—”

“It’s not your fault, baby. They said it was a drunk driver.”

There had been a drunk driver, who miraculously walked away from the scene with hardly a scratch. But it was still my fault. I just couldn’t bring myself to explain to her why. Shame weighed down the words of confession threatening to bubble over.

“How is he?” Frank asked, clapping me on the back with a soft hand, like I’d break.

I shook my head. “I don’t know. They haven’t been out in an hour or so. Last thing they said was the swelling in his brain was worrisome but they were confident they had things under control.” This time I was unable to hold back the sob. Tears streamed down my face. “I’m sorry,” I whispered, dropping back to my chair.

“I’ll go check on things.” It was then that I noticed Eric standing near us, but far enough away to give a modicum of privacy. Thankful for his grounding presence, I breathed a little easier knowing he was there.

“Tell me what happened.” Linda sat close and grasped my hand.

My tears strangled my reply until Frank’s hand squeezed my shoulder. I didn’t deserve their kindness. They should’ve been angry with me. They would be as soon as I came clean.

“We...” I cleared my throat and tried again. “We had an argument, and he left. I hurt him by accident, but that doesn’t matter. I hurt him and he left and a drunk asshole who couldn’t think of anybody but himself rammed him into a tree in the middle of the fucking day, and it’s my fault.”

Linda gasped and I prepared myself for whatever she had to say to me, whatever blame she laid on my shoulders because I deserved it all. But when I met her eyes, all I found there was understanding and, of course, sadness.

“He told you,” she whispered.

I couldn’t look at her because Drew had done more than tell me. He had shown me exactly how he felt, and I’d taken it all for granted. Staring straight ahead, I nodded.

“Oh, honey, are you okay?”

Frustration, self-loathing, and anger—at myself, at Drew, at Brooklyn, and even at Linda—roiled inside me. “It doesn’t matter how I am. Drew is in there because of me and I need him—” A garbled cry rolled out of my mouth. “I need him to come back to me. I need him to be okay, so I can make him see...” *That I love him, that I want him too, that I can’t live without him.*

All of those things. I needed them all. All of him.

I clutched my head in my hands. The tears flowing down my face made no signs of letting up any time soon, and hiccups vibrated my frame. I ugly cried like I was a teenager bawling over a pop sensation who’d gone and found a boyfriend who wasn’t me. I was destroyed in the worst way, and the only person who could make it better was lying on an operating table fighting for his life.

This wasn’t me. I didn’t lose it. I was the rock. People came to me to hold them up when things went wrong, and here I was leaning on Drew’s mom and dad. The people I should have been consoling were consoling me.

“Don’t you have faith in my boy?” Frank asked in the calm manner I’m come to realize a long time ago was his signature. Although this time it sounded fragile, as if it might break with one wrong word.

Bleary-eyed, I snapped my gaze to him. “Yes. Always,” I rasped, feeling as if gravel coated my throat.

“Then you need to trust he’ll come back to you, even if it’s to rip you a new one and send you on your way.” the elder Moyer said.

When he looked at me like that, I could see Drew through the light in his dark green eyes, the square angles of his jaw, and the smirk tilting his lips. So much so, I had to turn away from the likeness.

I deserved what Drew chose to give me, and I'd take it like the man I was. Also, I needed to quit being so morose. Drew just might come out of this kicking my ass for wallowing in my own guilt and not seeing to the two most important people in his life.

The moment I straightened up to do just that, my sister rushed into the waiting room, looking like a manic mess—hair sticking up, eyes wild, no makeup.

I shot to my feet. "Jenna?"

"Gavin!" She rushed to me and flung herself in my arms.

"What are you doing here?" I held on tight. I didn't really care how she'd gotten here, only that she was actually here, with me.

I took a moment to mentally slap the back of my own head at not thinking to call her. But to be honest, I was doing good calling Eric.

Echoing my thoughts, she confirmed the next best thing. "Eric called." She stood back and cupped my face. "Said you might need a shoulder."

I didn't bother questioning the fact that Eric seemed to know more than he'd been told. The number of sources he had in his pocket scared me. Instead, I took it as the gift it was. My sister was here.

A throat clearing stole my attention. Behind her stood the major in all his bulky, intimidating glory. The permanent scowl etching his face marked him as the hard man I'd always known, the man with no heart. The one man I'd never please. No matter what. Except at that very moment, I couldn't bring myself to care about his disappointment. Even if he found out the true relationship between Drew and me. Or what I hoped would be a relationship.

"Sir." I nodded to him when Jenna stepped back and out of the way.

"Gavin." He tilted his head toward me. His tone was clipped but there was a watery quality to it.

Then he did something so out of character it stunned me to silence. In two long strides, he ate up the space between us and wrapped his arms around me in a bear hug. "Son," he rasped, "how are you? How is your... partner?"

Shocked and speechless, I turned my head in search of my sister. She stood by, a hand covering her mouth and tears in her eyes. Had I entered the *Twilight Zone* and not realized it?

When I found my voice, I directed the same thought at Jenna. “What the hell, Jenna?”

Her watery gaze shot wide, then just as quick she narrowed those previously sympathetic eyes at me. “I couldn’t not tell him. He’s our father and he deserves to know when you’re hurting. I was worried and I needed someone to drive me to the airport. Dad wasn’t going to let me come without him.”

Letting me go, the major gripped my arms and held me at a distance. “Don’t blame your sister. If anything, you should blame me. I’ve done a hell of a job at screwing you up. I just didn’t realize it until now.”

“What are you—”

“This man—Andrew—Jenna told me what he means to you.” He shrugged. “We had time on the flight. I also found out you’ve had your issues, and some of them stem from me.”

Clearly they had spoken. I could see my sister scolding him, telling him how things were going to be. She had always been the strongest of us.

“Sir, no. It’s not like that.”

“It is, and I take full responsibility for it.” The corners of his lips pulled up in a sad smile. “After your mother died, I lost myself in work because it was all I knew. You are my only son. I only wanted you to be happy. I thought the Marines would do that for you. It took me a while to realize you had to find it for yourself.”

“If it makes you feel better, I thought it was what I wanted too.”

My father shook his head. “It doesn’t matter now. I’m not going to ask about your preferences changing. I know what it is to love so strongly the rest of the world doesn’t matter. I only wish I would’ve told you that before now, shown you. Whoever you love is okay with me. You’re happy now?”

I didn’t even have to think about it. “Yeah,” I said, resolute in my answer. “I’m happy.” Joy encompassed my life—my job, my friends, but most of all Drew, even before we were... whatever we were.

“I’m proud of you.”

It was all he said, but it held a world of meaning. The healing would come. Probably it would take time, but this step was epic, and I was willing to take it at face value.

“Dad,” I choked out. It wasn’t something I called him on a regular basis. In fact, it had been so long ago, I’m certain I was only a child back then. I turned to bring the other couple waiting on news into my line of sight. “This is Linda and Frank—Drew’s mom and dad. Guys”—I guided my father to them—“this is Major Raymond Davies—my father.”

Before Eric returned with a stone-faced man in a white coat, I’d smiled for the first time in hours. It felt plastic and brittle, but I’d done it. Then it fell away. I wasn’t sure if I wanted to find out the truth or not. Whether I could handle something difficult without Drew by my side. But for his sake, I stood straight and waited for whatever news Dr. Foreman had for me.

Chapter Eleven

Andrew

A whirring buzz echoed in my ears, followed by a beeping sound. “Gav, turn off the alarm,” I yawned. The words hurt my throat. “Thirsty.”

“Andrew?” a woman’s voice asked. I knew that voice, but I couldn’t figure out why my mother was in the bedroom with me and Gavin.

“Mom?” The word scratched my increasingly dry and sore throat. I tried to raise my lids, but they felt weighted and sluggish. It hurt to try for very long.

“Oh, Andrew,” I heard my mom say again. “Baby, can you open your eyes?”

I shook my head. “Hurts,” I whispered because it ached less. “Where?”

“Pocono Medical Center,” she replied, and I was grateful she knew what I was asking. “You were in an accident—a drunk driver hit you on your way off the mountain.”

The mountain? It took me a minute to remember the retreat and Gavin. Then the memory of Gavin and Brooklyn flashed through my mind. I’d left. My plans were to catch the first flight home, get laid, and pretend what happened with Gavin was a dream. Except then I remembered the crunch of glass, metal, and what I thought was the hard thud of a tree. The sound of Gavin yelling in my ear, and telling him I loved him.

Outside of my pounding headache, my chest tightened, and it had nothing to do with a physical injury. I needed Gavin but didn’t know if I could have him.

A sob echoed in the room. It took the feel of Mom’s weathered hands wiping away tears for me to realize the sound had come from me.

“It’s okay, baby boy. You’re not alone here. Dad and I have been with you, and your partner hasn’t left your side.”

At that, I pried my eyes open to find the room empty of all but me and my mother, thankful at the same time that the lights had been dimmed. I turned my gaze on her, confused.

My mom gave me a wobbly smile. “I made him go shower. He’s been here four days.” Her eyes gleamed with laughter. “He was beginning to stink.”

“I don’t stink.” Gavin’s deep voice vibrated through me.

Unwilling to move my head in fear of exacerbating my throbbing headache, I turned my gaze to the door and found the most beautiful of dreams. Wet hair, scruffy jaw, and slumped shoulders aside, Gavin Davies was a sight for my increasingly sore eyes.

“Gav,” I whispered.

It seemed that was all he waited for. In the blink of my eyes—which could have been a tad longer than most—he was at my side.

“You’re awake,” he sobbed, burying his head in the crook of my arm—the one free of tubes and needles.

“Hey,” I whispered. “Why are you so sad?”

He lifted his head, and I was surprised to see the glare there. “Why?” he rasped. “You left me, Junior. You left and damn near got yourself killed. Twice in one day I lost you, and I almost lost myself.”

I had to rewind his words in my head and slow them down to make sense of them. I swallowed hard. “I... I thought I was giving you a chance at what you wanted.”

Gavin leaned closer. “You are what I want. Nothing and no one else matters.”

“But—”

“What you saw was a housewife desperate for attention and affection—none of which I am willing to give her. From what I understand, Brooklyn and Whitney are spending an extra week at Reparations. We’ll see how they fare.”

I blinked. Trying to take in his words. “But you’re not gay.”

Gavin’s smirk warmed me. “Neither are you,” he tossed back at me the words from what seemed like ages ago. “But I need you—here with me. I think I’ve always needed you. You’re the only thing that’s right in my life. And even if you never forgive me—”

“There’s nothing to forgive,” I rushed out.

The smile that landed on me was sweet and perfect and the one I knew was meant only for me. “Maybe not, but I’ll spend every day proving to you how much I love you and you alone.”

Tears rushed to my eyes, and I let him swipe them away. Not that I had a choice, glued to the bed and all. “I love you,” I said. “So much it hurts sometimes.”

“Well, I intend on kissing it better.” Gavin slid forward and brushed a soft, sweet kiss over my lips. Then he whispered, “I’ll do other things to make you feel better too.”

Sitting in a chair by the window, my mother giggled. “I think I’ll leave you two alone now,” she singsonged. “No need in damaging this old lady’s perception of her innocently virginal son.”

I snorted. I’d believe her act if she hadn’t been the one to walk in on me and my high school girlfriend going at it.

“Innocent, she says.” Gavin chuckled.

“I’ll show you innocent.” My laugh turned into a groan when the stitches in my abdomen pulled.

Gavin combed his fingers through my hair, smiling down at me. As a sense of rightness moved me, I thought for the first time that maybe I’d found my slice of happiness in the world—and he’d been by my side for the past four years.

Epilogue

Gavin

“No more,” Drew growled. “I can’t do this anymore.”

He flung himself over the arm of the sofa we’d just positioned in front of our new coffee table.

“I’m finished. If you can’t give me a break, I swear to God, you’ll only have your hand to keep you company for the next year.”

I snorted, and he glared at me, but his position, laying on the couch, took the steam from it. “Like you could go a year without.”

Drew crossed his arms over his chest and huffed, closing his eyes.

In the eight months since the wreck, Drew had been through two additional surgeries. He was now relegated to desk duty—possibly on a permanent basis, but he was still hopeful. On Eric’s orders, I’d received a new partner, but most of our assignments remained stateside and fairly easy. The new rookie hated it. Like I gave a fuck.

After months of not touching Drew, afraid I’d hurt him, I’d finally pulled my head out of my ass and changed both of our lives. This moment, this day, moving in together—it was our next step.

Somewhere between the wreck and the first surgery to repair a hairline fracture in Drew’s tibia, I’d found my breath again. In fact, I came to realize the only time I felt suffocated or trapped happened when I was away from Drew. He was my air, my freedom.

It’s funny, the day I’d brought up moving in together had been the day he was released from Pocono Medical. It had taken me that long to break him down. I hated the doubt I sometimes saw in his eyes, but I was determined to prove him wrong there, determined to show Drew he was all that mattered to me.

The day he’d come to me ready to look for a place—*our* place—was one of the happiest of my life. He was mine. He knew it, and so did I. Next on my list was the black velvet box stashed in the back of my wardrobe. I figured I’d give him some time to relax before I sprang that on him.

“Fine,” he whined. “Have it your way. But I’m resting no matter what you say. You’re gonna have to have one hell of an incentive to get me off this sofa.”

“Really?” I smiled down at him. He knew how much I loved a challenge.

“Yep.” He looked up at me and nodded. “Really.”

I quirked an eyebrow at him and pulled my T-shirt over my head, strolling to the bedroom. It had been the first room we’d set up.

A sharp gasp sounded behind me, then the soft thuds of his socked feet as he ran to catch up. Breezing by me, Drew raced into our room and jumped on the bed.

Wiggling out of his clothes, grin spread across his face. “I found my incentive.”

The End

Author Bio

Kenzie Cade was born and raised in the South where she spends her days in the sometimes stressful field of private medicine observing interesting people and committing them to memory for later use. When she isn't reading, experimenting with recipes, or being distracted by social media, Kenzie spends time with her family, friends, and the Pomeranian/Long-haired Chihuahua mix who likes to keep her company while she writes. As a young girl, Kenzie dreamed of princesses and their white knights. As an adult (or sort of adult), she dreams of princes and their proverbial white knights, which she attributes the fellow Arkansan S.E. Hinton and her novel The Outsiders. Writing to keep the fictional voices at bay, Kenzie enjoys the journeys her characters travel to find their happy endings, and she loves the challenge of writing a great love story.

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