



When He Kissed Me

Lexzi Gerald

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Love is an Open Road

An M/M Romance series

WHEN HE KISSED ME

By Lexzi Jerald

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 college-aged guys, visible from the shoulders up, facing each other with their eyes closed... kissing. Leaning in, the clean-shaven one on the left appears to be the instigator of the kiss. He is smaller, with almost “pretty” features and wears a gray T-shirt; his dark-brown hair curls up around a gray beanie. He cradles the back of the other guy’s head in his hand. With slightly longer reddish-brown hair, scruff along his jaw, and a gauge and hoop in his left ear, the guy on the right is wearing a navy-and-white striped T-shirt and he appears to be enjoying the kiss.

Story Letter

Dear Author,

I had a girlfriend in high school. She wanted to take it to the next level after we graduated, but I really wasn’t ready for that step, and so we split up. I spent the summer working and nothing much else. I started classes at the university a few weeks ago, and things started getting interesting. I was sitting in Freshman Orientation, and a guy walked in and sat down next to me. We started talking and kind of hit it off. We exchanged numbers before leaving that day, and made plans to meet up once classes started. Well, we’ve been hanging out a lot and having a good time the last few weeks, and now I find myself fantasizing about making out with him! What is that all about? I’m not gay, at least, I don’t think so, but I can’t deny I’m attracted to him. He’s said things that make me think he might be gay, and that’s really fueled my fantasies. They could be hints, or maybe I’m reading too much into it. We’ve had a few “moments” but today it happened; he kissed me! OMG, I kissed a boy and I liked it!

Please give these guys a story. I’d love a Contemporary setting with no paranormal, shifters or vampires please. It can be funny, sweet, have a little angst or better yet, of all of those things. Sexy times are a HUGE plus but a HFN/HEA is a must. Thank you!

Sincerely,

Justin

Story Info

Genre: contemporary

Tags: college, friends to lovers, slow burn, gay for you, homophobia, non-explicit OR sex off page, virgin

Word Count: 41,922

Acknowledgements

Where to start... Justin, your prompt photo and inspiring words grabbed my heart and screamed for me to *try*, and so I did! As a first-time fiction writer, this has been quite the roller-coaster ride, but I can truthfully say that I am glad I tried. I hope that I have managed, with the help of some outstanding friends, to create something that will be entertaining!

Now, to the wonderful support system I had throughout this process:

My beta readers, Armi and Amanda... you two kept me on track when my mind would veer off in twenty different directions, and you threw hard truths at me when I needed them the most. For these momentous accomplishments, I thank you both.

My heartfelt thanks go to Vicki, love her heart. As she edited my story, she put up with my many, many changes to the final draft... and still, we both somehow managed to live to tell about it!!!

And as we all know, this story, along with all of the wonderful stories we will be privileged to read this year, would not be possible without the DRitC Team. You guys are just amazing! And I thank you from the bottom of my heart for this opportunity to give writing a try. So, thank you, one and all for the long hours, the repeated thunks of heads hitting desks, and for your patience. I stand in awe of your patience.

And last, but by no means least... Ali! You are my rock. Through thick and thin, you were there for me. I cannot put into words what your friendship means to me. Just know that I couldn't have done this without you. Thank you for being my friend!

As I finish this VERY long thank you note, let me say that even with all of this fantastic help, I made mistakes! Some I chose to

make; others were just the product of my inexperience or lack of ability. But they were all mine, and if you find them, know that they were my doing, usually against the knowledgeable advice of others... because I can just be stubborn that way!!!

WHEN HE KISSED ME

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Chapter One

Dalton

Reality altered...

“Dalton! Would you c’mon. I don’t wanna be late.”

The jerk on Dalton’s arm told him that Makayla was, as always, in a hurry to get to where they were going. His gaze dropped down, and he bit his lip to keep from laughing out loud as he watched her bounce back and forth from one foot to the other. Unable to help himself, a small grin slipped out; that tolerant grin that was usually reserved for parents who were amused by their exuberant children. With a shake of his head, he let the grin grow wider as he wondered why in the world he let Makayla get away with half of the things that she did.

“I’m comin’, I’m comin’. No need to rip my dang arm off!” he proclaimed as he playfully pushed her hands away. “I’m pretty sure when we broke up this spring it ended your right to boss me around anymore.”

He watched as long, dark eyelashes were batted innocently up at him. “What, you think just because we aren’t dating anymore I lose all of my best friend privileges? Not hardly, you’re stuck with me for life.”

Dalton rolled his eyes dramatically at her “I’m so cute you can’t live without me” antics, trying not to give away the fact that his stomach was tied tightly up in knots. Freshman Orientation would be his first step towards the beginning of his dream of a college education, and man, was it exciting and terrifying all at the same time. It would’ve been hard to miss Makayla’s enthusiasm though, and he figured if she could do this then so could he. Dalton sucked in a long, calming breath, and the shaking of his hand was barely noticeable as he reached out to take Makayla’s hand in his and headed for the glass doors.

“Okay, okay. Let’s do this!”

A few moments later, both Dalton and Makayla paused as they stepped into the lobby of the Joan C. Edwards building of Marshall University. Small gasps escaped as they took in the ceiling soaring three stories above their heads.

“Dorothy...” Makayla leaned over and whispered into Dalton’s ear, “I don’t think we’re in Kansas anymore.”

Dalton did a slow three sixty of the room, trying to take in every single detail. The jumble of voices at a low roar, hundreds of people milling around, he found it all a little disconcerting. “Damn, where are we even supposed to start?”

“Maybe over there where the sign says ‘Register Here’?” Makayla suggested, her long, red-tipped fingernail pointing in the direction of the sign.

“Smart-ass. Now I wish that we’d let the parents come along. Mama and Daddy would’ve been able to keep you in line, ’cause lord knows you don’t listen to anyone else.”

“You’re just jealous that your parents love me like the daughter they never had,” she quickly shot back.

He immediately recognized her best “how could they not love me” smile as it spread across her face.

“Are you kidding me? When I finally came along they knew I was all they needed. So they didn’t waste their time trying to improve on my perfection by having another child.”

“You just keep telling yourself that, dumb-ass. In the meantime, let’s go get signed up,” Makayla said, her voice full of sass as she turned and flounced away.

Dalton’s eyes rolled again at her take-charge attitude. *Some things never change.* He chuckled quietly as he stuffed his hands into the front pockets of his jeans and ambled his way over towards the registry table. A bump to his shoulder had him glancing back just in time to see two cute girls giggle and wave. Dalton cocked his head to the side in appreciation of the nice view, the corners of his mouth turning up into a smile as he waved back. Yep, college definitely held many new possibilities, so maybe now was the time to make a few changes in his life. Dalton made a note to himself as he turned and continued after Makayla that now would be the perfect time to make some *new* friends. It would be nice to have a *guy* friend for a change. A *guy* to hang out with and just do *guy* things together. Anticipation brought a grin to his face as he made his way over to catch up with Makayla.

Name tags securely attached to their T-shirts, they strolled through the displays, checking out the various exhibits representing each department at the university. Locating his, Dalton gave Makayla a good-bye tap on the shoulder and headed over to the table. Pamphlets, course descriptions, and photographs were laid out. Dalton’s stomach flip-flopped. *Wow... this is really happening.*

A door at the top of the stairs opened with a swish, and a white-haired gentleman, wearing a gray suit and green tie, walked out. Holding his arms out wide, he began, “Welcome, incoming freshman and families.”

A cheer erupted around him and Dalton, sensing impending chaos, rose to his tiptoes, looking for the mop of black hair belonging to Makayla, while absently clapping his hands with the others. Spotting the curls, he weaved his way through the crowd, hoping he wasn’t being a complete nuisance, and sidled up next to her.

“Oh my god! This is so exciting!” she squeaked.

Dalton bit his lip. “Yes. Exciting.” *And terrifyingly nerve-wracking.* He squeezed his arms tightly around his stomach, hoping he wasn’t about to throw up in her hair.

“C’mon, c’mon let’s go!”

Without waiting for his response—or him—Makayla took off for the stairs. He caught up with her when the crowd bottlenecked, though the grunts and groans around him told him he’d stepped on a few toes to do it. When they finally made it to the top, the open doors revealed steps leading down into a theater-style room with hundreds of red seats. Makayla stopped, her mouth gaping, but there was no sound. She just stood there, silent and unmoving. Dalton stared at her in amazement. Makayla hadn’t been silent for more than ten seconds in the thirteen years he’d known her.

Finally, he just grabbed her arm and plopped her in the first row of seats that he found empty. Finding seats for the two of them, it would appear, was the easy part. Keeping a fidgety Makayla in hers? Now that’d be a different story. *Maybe I should’ve left her up at the door.*

“Freshman Orientation. The introduction into what your life is going to be like for the next two, four or six years...”

As the white-haired gentleman droned on and on Dalton’s thoughts began to wander, as they were prone to do when he was bored, and he found himself contemplating issues that had been worrying him for the last few days.

Where am I going to find a job that’ll work around my class schedule? Are Makayla’s parents going to find us an apartment where I can afford my share of the rent and living expenses? Will I be able to get the grade point average I need to keep my scholarship?

Nausea hit, and it hit hard and fast this time, like a sledgehammer to the gut. His arm flew to his stomach, and he leaned forward in hopes of holding back the volcano of bile that was threatening to erupt. He slid the palm of his hand across his clammy brow, wiping off the beads of sweat that had popped up, then continued on to push his damp bangs back out of his eyes. *Calm down, Dalton. Calm the fuck down.* One thing was for sure, there was no way in hell he was having the very first panic attack of his life during Freshman *freakin'* Orientation. Out of habit, his left hand automatically shot up to allow his finger and thumb to nervously work the gauge in his ear and the small silver hoop that he always wore just above it, in an attempt to calm the hard, fast pounding of his heart and the nerves still churning in his stomach.

He slowly sucked in deep breaths. One right after the other. In through the nose, out through the mouth. *Isn't that what they always say to do? Who were "they" anyways? Ugh.*

The *creak* of the door at the top of the stairs caught his attention. He shifted in his seat to get a better view, figuring a distraction was just what he needed to take his mind off his *almost* panic attack. He watched as the door slowly opened letting light filter in through the crack. A lone figure stepped through, allowing the door to close quietly.

A quiet puff of breath escaped Dalton's lips as the vision before him hit like a quick punch to the stomach. From beneath the glow of the wall-mounted exit light, he could make out silky-smooth brown hair with soft sun-bleached highlights and pouty please-kiss-me pink lips that glowed against pale white skin. Below the most perfectly arched brows he'd ever seen were bright emerald-green eyes that slowly grew wider, in what may have been shock, as they met and held Dalton's gaze for just a split second. Dalton watched as those eyes lowered and then widened even further as they stopped to ogle Dalton's chest. Never one to let an opportunity pass, Dalton glanced down. *Damn*, a skintight black T-shirt perfectly outlined an enticingly proportioned chest. Continuing down, he took in the pair of low-riding blue jeans clinging to every single inch of the guy's...

Wait!

What the fuck!

Dalton slammed his trembling hands down onto the wooden armrests of his seat as he rapidly swiveled to face the front of the room as the shock of what had occurred shot straight through him. His vision began to waver, and

everything around him appeared to grow silent. He watched as people shuffled around in their seats. Their mouths moving, but the only sound he could hear was the roaring in his ears. Nothing like this had ever happened to him before. Yeah, he had noticed all the girls that he'd thought was cute during high school, and he'd even spent time with them during classes and after-school activities. But this *punch to the gut* feeling of instant attraction was just more than he could take in.

He placed his left hand on Makayla's arm, seeking a point of stability. Only to find out that she'd actually settled into her seat and was listening to the speaker. Applying a bit more pressure to get her attention, Dalton watched Makayla as she turned towards him with a frown on her face, but the lift of one of her eyebrows quickly conveyed her questioning look. Unable to voice even the simplest of words, he resorted to gestures. Comprehension slowly registered as she watched his head slowly twitch with small jerks of his head towards the back of the auditorium.

Dalton forced his breathing to remain steady as he watched her head turn ever so slowly, taking what seemed like forever to him. When she finally had turned far enough to see behind them, her hands shot up to her chest with a look of astonishment on her face. Makayla's breath stuttered from her lips, and Dalton knew in that instant what was about to happen. He raised his hand in an attempt to get her attention, but it was like pushing his way through quicksand. He realized he wasn't fast enough to stop the impending train wreck ahead. There seemed to be no choice but to watch as Makayla pushed to her feet while finishing the turn towards the door. Dalton squeezed his eyes shut as the horror that was about to unfold right before him was more than he could bear to watch.

Obviously giving no thought whatsoever to her surroundings, Makayla's voice resounded throughout the room when she exclaimed, "Oh. My. God. He's freakin' gorgeous!"

The roaring in his ears blasted through his head as bile rose to the back of his throat. Dalton opened his eyes just in time to see every head turn simultaneously in their direction. Not giving her a chance to make an even bigger debacle of the situation, his hand frantically shot back up, searching for and finding Makayla's arm. With an abrupt tug, he jerked her back down so hard her whole body bounced as her ass hit the seat she'd just vacated.

A low mortified rumble came up from deep within his chest. His hands repeatedly combed through his hair as he wondered what the hell he should do now. *Oh fuck.* This could *not* be happening. His cheeks burned from the

overwhelming embarrassment of Makayla's actions, wishing that the floor would just open up and suck him right in, which he was pretty sure wasn't going to happen any time soon. After quickly weighing all of his options, Dalton then made the adult decision to go for the next best thing... *invisibility*. Covertly glancing first left then right, he allowed his ass to slowly slide to the edge of the seat, and he scrunched his shoulders down in what was probably a futile attempt to make himself disappear.

Dalton couldn't ever remember being this angry, embarrassed, or confused. His blood boiled with rage, and his insides quivered so hard he seriously thought he was going to puke. Hell, yes, he was pissed, and Makayla would be paying dearly for that later. But, right now, he had more important things to worry about. Like the fact that the *guy* at the top of the stairs was fuckin' hot. Perfect in every way that mattered. Fear tore at Dalton's gut as he acknowledged that coming face-to-face with sexual desire for the first time in his life at the age of eighteen, had just made things very complicated. Who would've guessed that his idea of perfection would come packaged in the most unbelievably breathtaking *male* body that he'd ever seen. His reality, as he'd known it, was completely shattered.

Colby

When you least expect it...

Colby breathed ever so softly as his hands lightly pushed against the smooth wood of the door. He eased it slowly open in an effort to enter the auditorium as quietly as possible. Looking down over the heads of the seated crowd, he noticed that the white-haired man speaking at the podium had paused when he looked up, raising his matching white eyebrows in an inquiring manner. Colby apologetically shrugged his shoulders and mouthed "sorry" to the older gentleman.

Colby's gaze bounced back and forth from section to section of seats in search of a place to sit but it appeared as though every single freshman, along with every member of their damn families, had shown up for what was obviously a well-attended orientation day. Yeah, like that was ever going to happen with his folks. He was still waiting for a reply from the voice mails and e-mails that he'd left for them several days ago. *Same shit, different day*. He wasn't even sure why he'd expected this day to be any different from all the other events that his parents had missed throughout his growing years. The

sharp pain of their neglect was something he should've gotten used to by now. But the *little boy* inside of him still craved the loving attention that his parents were never going to give him. Deciding then and there that he was so over needing them in his life, he refused to acknowledge the hurt as he ruefully shook his head and snorted in disgust. Even if they had managed to show up today, it wouldn't have mattered. The hollow space in his chest would've still felt empty. *Too little, too late.* He'd always told himself that his parents loved him in their own way, but he seriously had no idea why they'd even bothered to have him. They were always so caught up in their own lives that he'd pretty much just become a *thing* that they could take out every once in a while to show off and say, "Hey, look at what we did."

With his hand trembling slightly, he shoved his bangs out of his eyes and put his disappointment with his parents behind him once again. He thought, *fuck it* and resumed his search. "Ah hah, there we go," he muttered under his breath when he caught sight of what he thought might be an empty seat and went to take the first step down. The guy sitting next to the seat that Colby hoped was soon to be his slowly pivoted and glanced up just as Colby glanced down.

Their eyes met. Colby froze.

Mussed, reddish-brown hair flopped over the azure blue eyes looking up at him. *Jesus, those eyes are amazing!* Colby felt the heat of arousal zing through his body as his gaze followed those dazzling eyes as they blatantly traveled from the top of his head down towards his chest. Light scruff running along a strong jaw led up to plump, made-for-kissing lips that had Colby totally mesmerized.

His breath stuttered as he watched the pink tip of a tongue appear. Its supple movement as it circled those luscious pink beauties pulled a whimper from between his lips. A shudder of excitement raced through him. Colby tried his best to shake off the desire coursing through his every vein so that he could get his ass down the steps and to his destination. The empty seat beside that great-looking guy.

What happened next was like watching an old black-and-white Jerry Lewis movie on late-night TV. The cute guy quickly twisted back around in his seat to face the front of the auditorium. Colby watched him shake the arm of the woman sitting beside him. She turned her head to face the cute guy. Colby chuckled under his breath at the hilarious way the guy's head was jerking

repeatedly in short nods towards the top of the stairs. Afraid to move a muscle and maybe miss something, Colby held perfectly still.

A split second later, Colby got a good look at the attractive young woman's face as she tried to *casually* glance back. His eyes met hers, and then chaos ensued. Without any warning, she abruptly surged to her feet, looked him squarely in the eyes, and loudly exclaimed, "Oh. My. God. He's freakin' gorgeous!"

What followed could be described as nothing less than a comedy of errors. Colby's foot hit air as he went to lower it to the next step. *Shit! Shit! Shit!* He stumbled, flailing both arms to keep his balance while standing on one leg. He frantically threw his hand out grabbing for the back of the seat nearest to him. To his horror, in an effort to try and counterweight his body to keep from falling headfirst down the rest of the steps, his hand came down making contact with the shoulder of an elderly gray-haired woman. *Damn.* Now wasn't the time to be making a fool of himself. He could feel the red-hot flush that raced across his cheeks as what seemed to be every person in the auditorium burst out in laughter.

The long dark curls surrounding the young woman's head went flying every which way as she was abruptly jerked back into her seat by the cute guy as he began to slowly slide down into his as if he thought he could somehow become invisible by doing so.

Having managed to not ass-plant on the stairs, Colby shrugged again as the speaker very politely suggested, "Can everyone please take a seat so that we can quickly finish up here. Then we will have refreshments and start the tours of the campus."

He'd never expected something like *this* to happen today. But, not one to let an opportunity pass him by, with a nod of his head to the speaker, Colby quickly, but quietly, took the last few steps to what he could now see *was* an empty seat. Cautiously squeezing past the people already seated, he did his best to miss toes and handbags. Trying ever so carefully not to bang any heads from the row below, he finally reached his destination. With a smile and a wink to the young woman, Colby shimmied his way past the totally amazing-looking guy and plopped down in the seat right beside of him. Even though the guy remained facing forward with his eyes looking straight ahead, Colby determined that his strong reaction to this stranger was just too important to simply ignore. Covertly catching quick peeks as the lecture droned on, Colby

mentally devised his plan to pursue and get to know the attractive man sitting beside him *much* better, because he was certain that he had just found the man of his dreams.

Dalton

Questions...

The remainder of the lecture passed in a blurry haze for Dalton. If there had been a quiz, Dalton was sure he would've received his first failing grade. Head facing forward, refusing to even consider glancing towards the man in the seat beside of him, Dalton did his best to ignore the annoyance of Makayla's shoe continually tapping his leg, because there was no way he was going to acknowledge her. He was still pissed as hell. She was going to have to work hard to gain his forgiveness for her latest stunt. He might forgive, but you could bet he wasn't going to forget this one. Not for a very long time. Maybe he should put a reminder in his phone, since she had a sneaky way of twisting him around her little finger. He knew why she was trying to get his attention. What was there to say? It wasn't like he hadn't noticed that the guy had sat down in the seat next to him. Or, that he hadn't noticed how damn cute the guy was. And, since Dalton was listing everything that he couldn't help noticing, he added how perfect the guy's features were. Delicate, almost to the point of being pretty, but still somehow they managed to appear masculine. Hell, even the arches of his dark-brown eyebrows were perfect.

With a slight shift, Dalton tried to find a position on the seat that'd give his slowly softening cock some much-needed relief. No matter how he tried, he couldn't get the damn thing completely under control. All the while, the same question just kept running through his mind.

What the fuck is happening to me?

Strangely enough, he'd pretty much just drifted through life without giving much thought to sex. He'd just never found the time to date. There had always been work, school, or other activities with his friends as a group. Then their senior year, he and Makayla decided that they should each have at least one boyfriend, or girlfriend in his case, before they graduated from high school. But they both quickly agreed that they couldn't find anyone worth the bother. So Makayla came up with the great idea that they should date each other.

It *was* great. He'd enjoyed dating Makayla. What wasn't to like? He had a girlfriend. She had a boyfriend. They still hung out all the time, just like they

always had. Their dating hadn't been much different from their friendship except for the kissing which Dalton had to admit had been kinda nice, but he really hadn't seen what all the big hoopla had been about. Then this past spring, she'd started pushing for more in their relationship. Something had changed and he wasn't sure what it was, but Makayla had wanted to take it to the next level. She had wanted to experiment with other things besides kissing. He'd soon found out he just couldn't go there for her. It wasn't like he was saving himself for marriage or anything. He just hadn't felt the need to explore like she had. That was when he'd known that he loved Makayla, and she'd always be his best friend. But he wasn't in love with her.

And today? Man, this had been a whole different ball game. He'd never considered himself gay. But here he was with all of these strange new feelings churning inside of him. Desires. Wants. Needs. He found himself left with the ultimate question.

What the fuck am I going to do now?

"...concludes this part of the orientation. The Welcoming Committee has set up tables downstairs and have refreshments ready for you. Please, help yourselves. The tours of the campus will begin in approximately thirty minutes."

Next to him, all he saw was a blur of red and white as Makayla excitedly jumped up, extended out her small hand, and immediately began to introduce herself.

"Hi. I'm Makayla Conrad, and this guy sitting next to me is Dalton Harris," she said, never taking her eyes off of the cute guy that, with one glance, had changed Dalton's life forever.

"Well, how do you do, Makayla Conrad? It's truly a pleasure to meet you. I'm Colby Stevens, and thank you for the *wonderful* compliment you gave me earlier."

Dalton shot to his feet, the pain radiating up his leg was caused by the point of Makayla's red, high-heeled sandal making contact with his shin. His eyes narrowed as he sent her a what-the-hell look and nodded a greeting to Colby. *What the fuck?* He would have stood up, eventually. What was the big hurry anyways? Not sure how this was going to play out, Dalton figured he'd go with what always came naturally to him. Say nothing and observe.

Turning to head down the row of now-empty seats, Colby said, "I don't know about you guys, but I'm starving. Free food is always the best food." His

bright-green eyes nailed Dalton as he glanced over his shoulder and asked, “Dalton, are you coming?”

Am I coming? Not yet, but stand a little closer and let’s see what happens.

Dalton could feel his face getting hot and even as he tried to control it, he knew it was turning red from embarrassment, again. *Damn.* What the hell was wrong with him? Seriously? An innocent comment like that, and his mind heads straight for the gutter.

Dalton stumbled back when Makayla suddenly shouldered past him and watched in disbelief as she drew her body in close to Colby, and then proceeded to wrap her hands around Colby’s very nicely muscled bicep. But she didn’t stop there. With a tilt of her head, she looked straight into his beautiful green eyes and batted her eyelashes oh so innocently. *What the hell?* She was putting the moves on Colby? *And why the hell am I so upset by that?*

“We’d better hurry, ’cause lord knows if Dalton beats us to the refreshments there won’t be a single bite left. Our boy is quite the eater, even though you can’t tell it by looking at him.” Makayla threw a slightly evil glare back at Dalton and with a pronounced tug on his arm began to maneuver Colby out of the auditorium. Dalton silently followed, trying not to notice that the view from behind of those low-riding jeans cupping Colby’s firmly muscled ass was nothing to complain about either.

Hell, does everything about him have to be so damn perfect?

Having finally made it back down the steps outside of the auditorium, the three of them began to work their way towards what turned out to be a veritable feast for Dalton’s supposed food addiction. His mouth watered in anticipation of all the good eats to be had. As he perused the tables that were lined up in the center of the lobby, filled with trays of meats, cheeses, fruits and vegetables, his gaze was instantly caught and shot straight to the last table with its incredible assortment of cookies and cupcakes. *Seriously? What is wrong with a healthy appetite?*

“Man, check out this spread,” Colby muttered under his breath as he added a chocolate cupcake to his already overflowing large paper plate of ham, fresh fruit, and veggies.

“Damn, this cupcake rocks,” he said with a wink and a grin towards Dalton as he licked the chocolate frosting off of his thumb with an apparently very agile tongue.

“You guys finish filling up here, and I’ll see if I can find us a place to sit while we eat,” Colby told them as he grabbed a Pepsi from one of the coolers sitting on the floor and headed over to claim a spot on the stairs.

Dalton stood motionless as he watched Colby walk away, once again appreciating the view of that perfect ass from behind. A hard slap on the back of his head quickly got his attention.

“What the hell was that for?” he growled at Makayla as he turned to grab a plate, while carefully selecting a variety of cookies.

“Well, first of all, there are people behind us waiting to get their food. Secondly, could you be any more obvious? I mean really. What’s up? You’re acting like you’ve never seen a cute guy before. I mean, sure, he’s gorgeous. But...” Makayla hesitated. Dalton could tell as her eyes grew larger and her full red lips formed an *O* that it had finally hit her what was happening.

Well, hell. Now the whole damn world will know.

Dalton was afraid to even begin to guess how Makayla’s newfound knowledge was going to affect them, but he didn’t have time to speculate as she grabbed hold of his arm with her empty hand and jerked him out of line. He juggled his plate, watching as the sweets bounced around, fearful he was about to lose his mother lode of cookies. As he was being dragged away from the refreshment tables, Dalton shot a quick look over to make sure that Colby hadn’t notice the scene that Makayla was making, and the whole time she was rapidly whispering in his ear, “Okay, now isn’t the time to panic. We need a plan.” She squinted her eyes and scrunched up her forehead in that I-am-thinking-hard look that was always so adorable. “Okay, this is what we’re going to do. Nothing. I’m sure this is just a fluke. Right? So, why go looking for trouble? Right? Now, grab us a couple of drinks, and we’ll go enjoy our food.” Her hair flew about her shoulders as she quickly turned to head towards Colby, who had managed to find them a place to sit on the stairs.

Typical Makayla, Dalton thought. Ignore the problem, and it’ll go away. *Oh, hell*, who was he kidding? That was typical Dalton, also. As usual, since he was unable to come up with a better plan, he decided to just go along with hers. Their method of dealing with problems had served them well for many years, so why bother to try and change it now. With a shrug, he grabbed two bottles of Pepsi from the icy depths of the cooler, and with a quick swipe of the back of his wet hand down the leg of his jeans, Dalton headed over to join the others.

Dalton tossed one of the Pepsi's straight at Makayla's lap and had a short-lived moment of revenge as the icy water dripped onto the bright-red cotton fabric of her dress. With a smirk he squeezed between her and the rail of the stairs in an attempt to stay as far away from Colby as possible without being obvious.

"Okay, so we have the campus tours next. Then I guess we are free to show ourselves around Huntington. You guys want to meet up after and see what we can get into?" Colby asked, then downed almost half of a bottle of Pepsi. Not that Dalton was paying any attention to the muscles of Colby's throat, or the bob of his Adam's apple as Colby gulped down the cold drink, but Dalton found that he had to swallow the lump in his own throat before he could reply.

"Makayla and I came in my car. If you need a ride, you are more than welcome to come with us." And so much for staying as far away from Colby as possible. His little Civic was just that... little. Talk about a tight squeeze. "Now that we have our class schedules, I need to get out there and start putting in job applications. I have grants and scholarships, but I will have to find a part-time job to help with the living expenses on the apartment that Makayla's parents are going to rent for us. I am going to try to stay away from student loans because they can be a bitch to pay back. I am pretty sure that between the money I saved working during high school and what my parents have managed to put back, we can pay my part of the rent, but I still have to work to cover all those little extras like food, that I just can't seem to break the habit of needing." *Diarrhea of the mouth, much?* Dalton thought as he stuffed a cookie in to shut himself up. *Do not stare at Colby as he eats that chocolate cupcake. Do not say another word,* Dalton told himself as he groaned at the sight of Colby's pink tongue taking still yet another swipe at the chocolate frosting on that damn cupcake. Foot to mouth disease was sure to follow the diarrhea of the mouth if he allowed himself to keep talking. Dalton was coming to the conclusion that this "ignoring the problem 'til it went away" was not being very effective when it came to Colby. But it didn't hurt to lay down some ground rules now and hope that his brain and his body paid attention.

"Dalton, you know Mama and Daddy said they had the food issue covered. And really, you need to devote your time to your classes. College has been your dream since I met you in kindergarten. You've worked hard to get here. Now let the rest of us help you make your dream come true." Dalton knew that Makayla had a heart of gold, but she didn't understand that this was something that he was determined to do on his own.

“Hey, nothing wrong with a little hard work as long as you remember to make time for the important things in life. Food, friends and fun, and not in any particular order,” Colby added with a waggle of his perfectly arched eyebrows.

“Well, I say let’s get this food finished so that we can get the tours over with and head out for a little friendly fun this afternoon,” Makayla suggested as she attempted to waggle her eyebrows. Dalton and Colby couldn’t contain the laughter that came bubbling up as they watched her attempt to imitate Colby’s “eyebrow waggle”.

“Okay, we are parked in the lot beside the library. I drive a red Honda Civic. So I guess we can all meet up there and then decide where we want to start our *fun*,” Dalton said as he stood to gather everyone’s plates.

“Sounds like a plan. And I always like to have a plan. It makes life a lot simpler, if you know what I mean,” Colby said as he stood and dusted off the seat of his jeans and started to walk away. With a quick wave and a wink he was eaten up by the milling crowd.

Dalton turned to Makayla, pointed straight at her, and said, “Don’t say a word. Not one single word. This is all your fault. You just had to jump up and introduce all of us. So you figure out what we are supposed to do with him.”

Makayla gracefully rose to her feet from her seat on the stairs to place her arms around Dalton’s waist. They just stood there staring at each other, neither one willing to be the first to break the stare as adversaries are prone to do. Dalton could tell the exact moment she figured out what she was going to say by the look of decisiveness in her eyes. He didn’t think the grin on her face could get any bigger as she stretched up on her tiptoes to whisper in his ear, “Oh, I know exactly what we are going to do with him.” Dalton just knew he wasn’t going to like what she was up to, not one little bit. She looked up at him with a ridiculously mischievous sparkle in her eyes and said, “We are going to keep him.”

The salty burn of sweat dripping into his eyes had Dalton wiping the back of his hand across his damp forehead again as he stood patiently leaning against his car in the hot afternoon sun. Having arrived first, he was waiting for Makayla and Colby to finish their tours of the campus. Anxious to get started on the job hunting, he was hoping that if all went well he would get a few applications filled out, and possibly even find a job.

He moved around, trying to find a more comfortable position against the hot, hard metal of the red '99 Honda Civic HX, noticing another scratch on his poor baby girl. He gave a soft chuckle which quickly turned into a snort as he recalled the first time he'd laid eyes on her. He'd worked his butt off doing odd jobs and working fast food for three years after school and during the summers to save up enough money to buy his own car. So, when his dad had finally declared that it was time to start looking, they had both agreed on only *one* thing. Dependability.

She wasn't anything like what he'd pictured in his mind for his first car. He'd been thinking sleek beauty, fast speed and *wow* factor. What he had ended up with was his baby girl. She might not have been much to look at with her slightly fading paint and dinged back bumper, and she sure wasn't the newest car on the block, but the price had been right, and she got great gas mileage. Most importantly though, she ran like a dream. He slid his hand lovingly down her fender while he contemplated his future. He knew that now it was his turn to get the job done. Work, grades, the whole nine yards, it was all on him. Damn, there was that queasy feeling in his stomach again.

The sound of laughter had him glancing up just in time to catch sight of Makayla and Colby heading his way down the sidewalk. Makayla was practically walking backwards with her hands fluttering in the air as she was talking a mile a minute, as usual, and Colby had his hands in the front pockets of his jeans as he strolled along behind her. Or was that in front of her? All the while, he was just smiling and nodding his head as Makayla rattled on. Dalton stood up straight, raised a hand in greeting, and prepared to meet his future head on.

Chapter Two

Dalton

Dream a little dream...

Exhaustion swamped every fiber of Dalton's body. His head leaned back against the cool tile of the shower as the warm water ran down the cramping muscles of his body. Afraid he was going to fall asleep standing there, he grabbed the bottle of his favorite lime bodywash and began the job of washing away the smell of his long shift at work. Not even two weeks into the first semester, and damn. The search for a job after orientation had been a huge success, and Dalton was glad that his boss at Bob Evans was willing to let his schedule work around his classes. But the *part-time* job had quickly grown into a full-time position. He'd come to Marshall prepared to work his butt off because college was that important to him, but man, his ass was already dragging. Between a full schedule of classes and working almost forty hours a week waiting tables, this semester was really cutting it close.

Thank god for Thursdays. They had quickly become his favorite day of the week. He lived for Thursday. It was the only day he got to sleep in, no morning classes and no early shift at work. Best of all, it was the day that he and Colby had Popular Literature together. Yeah, they had been spending more and more time hanging out, mostly to study, but occasionally they'd meet up for a quick meal and they even managed to squeeze a movie in a couple of times when he wasn't working that night. Dalton wasn't sure how he felt about the Colby issue. It was great having a guy friend, especially one that got along so well with Makayla. But, what really worked for him was the *guy time* they spent together. Just sitting around, munching on burgers and fries, slurping down Pepsi, and talking about their past and what they were hoping for in the future. What didn't work for him was that weird Harper Davis. Every Thursday like clockwork, Dalton would turn around and there Harper would be giving either him or Colby a shove in the back and saying things that made no sense at all. Dalton wondered where he got off calling them gay, and what even gave him the idea that they were gay? Sure, he and Colby were quickly becoming best friends, but gay? So far it had only been a few pushes and shoves, sneers and insults, but it might be a good idea to mention his concern about the Harper issue to Colby and Makayla the next time they were hanging out together.

Speaking of hanging out with Colby, Dalton's thoughts flashed back to last Thursday evening. They'd crashed out in the shade under a tree on the quad

after class waiting for Makayla to join them, and then they were all heading over to Pullman Square to treat themselves to some excellent food at Uno's, which was fast becoming one of his favorite restaurants. He'd kept swiping his overly long hair out of his eyes as gust after gust of hot September wind blew across his face. Colby had told him he really needed to get his hair trimmed, and Dalton remembered thinking, *when am I supposed to find the time to do that?* The heat of the day warmed his skin to an almost uncomfortable temperature. The sweat began to pool at the base of his spine as it rolled down his tall lanky frame. Colby, on the other hand, had been leaning up against the tree looking as cool as if it had been a spring day. Dalton never could figure out how Colby always managed that "always put together" look, and when he had said as much, Colby laughed and said to just think cool thoughts. *Yeah, like that really works.*

Dalton had plopped down to lie on his back in the cool shade, resting his head on his hands as he lay on the crisp green grass, his eyes closed, and he'd explained to Colby how his family was so very important to him. He'd told him that having been raised in a loving, supportive home, he'd realized at a very young age that someone needed to do something to help the kids of West Virginia, because they couldn't help themselves. Even though he'd just been a small kid at the time, he'd decided right then and there that he wanted to be that someone. Dalton had rolled his head to catch the look of understanding on Colby's face as he went on to say that he knew that his choice of careers may not be the best paying job, or the most glamorous, but he had his heart set on social work. It was great to know that Colby understood his need to help others, and he wasn't sure why Colby's opinion mattered so much, but the butterflies fluttering around in his stomach told him that it did.

Okay, enough daydreaming about Colby, he told himself as he grabbed the shampoo from the shelf in the shower wall and began to lather up his hair. Makayla had him using some kind of sweet-smelling conditioning shit, whatever, he just wanted to get clean. As he gave his hair a final rinse, a strange thought occurred to him. Hell, he was spending almost as much time with Colby as he did with Makayla, and he shared an apartment with her. *Hmm, does this make Colby my new best friend?*

The downside? It was getting harder and harder to act naturally around Colby. The casual touches, the innocent whispering in his ear so that no one else could hear. The heated intense looks he'd see on Colby's face when he'd glance over, only to have them disappear before he could figure out exactly what they meant. Yeah, those could've just been his imagination, or perhaps

wishful thinking on his part. *Who the fuck knows what is going on.* It might just be friendship for Colby and not mean anything else. But Dalton was beginning to think that there was more to their relationship than either one of them was ready to admit to. Would he be okay with something other than friendship from Colby? Did Colby want something other than friendship from him?

Hell, he was so wiped out that he really had no clue what the answers to either of those questions were. And he didn't have the time or energy to give it any more thought. Shutting off the, now, cool water, he pushed open the glass door of the shower and grabbed the large, soft white towel, quickly rubbing his hair dry, and swiping at the rivulets of water as they ran down his body. He groaned when he thought of how he'd love to just crawl into bed and call it a night, instead he had a couple of hours of studying to do before that could happen. With the towel neatly hung back over the towel rack, he pulled on his green and white plaid Marshall sleep pants, and headed to the bedroom to get started on his reading assignment for class the next day.

...the sweet taste of chocolate swirls over his tongue then slowly slides down the back of his throat. Hot sweaty skin against cool satin sheets. A featherlight caress. The touch of a single rough callused finger making its way leisurely from tight drawn-up balls to the leaking sensitive head of his cock. The heat of that simple touch is more than he can bear. Everything goes white. Pearlescent white, like the cum shooting ribbon after ribbon from his body as it spasms. The faint ticking of a clock slowly becomes silent.

The sun peeking through the gap of Dalton's curtains, lying in fuzzy stripes over his navy blue comforter, let him know him that it was time to get a move on. With a turn of his head he noticed the books lying beside him on the bed which led to a heartfelt groan. He had obviously fallen asleep in the middle of studying last night, so that meant he had to get that done before heading to class this afternoon. With a sigh, he rolled over trying to escape the intruding light, only to land in a cold goopy mess. Ugh. It'd happened again. Same dream. Short, sweet, and hot as hell. He always came. Every damn time. And he didn't even have to lay a hand on his cock. He never saw a face, just one freakin' finger. What the hell was up with that? Of course, if he was being honest with himself, he'd admit that he'd been obsessing about how hot it had been to watch Colby lick and suck chocolate frosting off his thumb that first day at orientation almost two months ago. The scene had been playing over and over in his mind ever since. Man, that was one hot fantasy. Just trying to imagine

what else Colby would be able to do with that tongue had his cock attempting to make the effort of showing its appreciation for the erotic thoughts that were running through his mind.

Downside? Now all he had to show for that heart-stopping orgasm was a cold, clammy wet spot. *Shit.*

Then there was the damn ticking of the clock. No need to wonder where that was coming from. He knew exactly what that was all about. There never seemed to be enough hours in the week to get all of his class assignments done and work his shifts at the restaurant. Exhaustion? Now *that* was his new permanent companion. On the other hand, free time, what the hell was *free time*?

He buried his head under the pillow to give himself the illusion of darkness, as he moved over to a *dry* spot, trying hard to delay getting up. He hated to let even a few minutes of sleep be wasted, if it was humanly possible to grab them. The light tapping on his door brought a frustrated groan to his lips and banged overly loud in his head, putting an end to his one chance at sleeping in this week.

“Go. Away. Makayla. I don’t have to be in class for a couple more hours. So... just go away.” Dalton growled into his pillow.

“Ummm, well, actually it’s not Makayla. She was heading out the door when I went to knock. She told me to come on in and get you up. Sorry, my bad. I can come back later if you’re still trying to catch some sleep.” Colby’s voice came through the door.

The pillow went flying as Dalton shot straight up in bed. It crashed into the lamp on the nightstand which had Dalton lunging to catch it as it wobbled, teetering on the edge, threatening to fall and join the pillow that had finally come to rest on the floor. Oh. My. God. What in the hell was Colby doing at his apartment? Standing on the other side of his bedroom door? More importantly, what had Makayla been thinking, letting him in and just heading out like it was nothing? She was so dead when he got his hands on her.

“No. I mean... wait. Just give me a minute, and I’ll be right out.”

Hanging off the side of the bed, he threw the pillow out of his way, his hands hit the floor as he frantically began digging his way through the pile of clothes there. He flung his bangs out of his eyes as he grabbed the first pair of blue jeans he got his hands on. Rolling off the bed, he hopped from one foot to the other, trying to shove first one leg then the other into the jeans, all without

falling flat on his face. Catching a glance of himself in the mirror hanging over the dresser had him stopping in his tracks. Okay, he decided, enough is enough. He plopped his ass down on the bed. What the hell was he doing hopping around the room like a fuckin' idiot?

Breathe, Dalton. Just... breathe.

He collapsed back onto the bed, the waist of his jeans riding midthigh. A rumble of laughter began low in his chest and worked its way out. Lying there staring at the ceiling, he wondered how Colby came to be at the apartment. He'd last seen him at the library a couple of days ago. Frankly, it had been hell trying to concentrate on his research, what with Colby sitting right there next to him. Quietly driving him insane with those brief touches on his arm... each one a freakin' electric current shooting straight to his chest. Or, when he'd casually lay his warm hand on Dalton's knee, causing Dalton's cock to twitch in his pants. He'd sat there, watching Colby's pink tongue dart out to lick his luscious lips, then Colby would continue on with whatever little tidbits of gossip that he'd picked up on campus as if he wasn't aware of the chaos that he was generating throughout Dalton's body.

With a shake of his head, Dalton got back to the problem at hand; getting his damn jeans on. Arching his back to lift his hips off the bed, and rocking them side to side he managed to wiggle his jeans the rest of the way up. Exhaling a large gush of air, Dalton rolled forward to sit at the foot of the bed. He swiped his damp palms on the legs of his jeans and shook his head in disgust because he couldn't actually remember much of their conversation from that day. *Did Colby say something about coming over today?* Looking back, he was a little shocked that he'd managed to get any work done at all. Considering that Harper dude had shown up at the library while they were there. Generously sharing his dumb shit with them every time he saw them coming or going. Making it even harder to get any serious schoolwork done. What a pain in the fuckin' ass.

Worried that Colby might try to come looking for him again, Dalton yelled through the door, "I'm coming. Be right there. Go grab a drink out of the fridge, and I'll be out in a few." He pushed up from the bed and turned to head to the bathroom. He couldn't believe... "Shit!" Falling backwards onto the bed, again, he grabbed his left foot, trying to ease the sharp shooting pain racing through his big toe from stubbing it on the frame of the bed.

"Seriously? Can this day get any worse?" Dalton mumbled under his breath.

He was about to push back up off the bed, still yet again, when he looked down and saw that there *was* an even bigger problem. *Well, fuck...* There was no way his jeans were going to zip up while he was sporting that kind of wood. He was as hard as a freakin' rock. Scrubbing his hands over his face, he took a couple of deep calming breaths. Okay, bathroom first to take care of a little business. Then, maybe he'd be ready to face Colby.

Colby

The chase is on...

Colby pulled open the door of the fridge. *Hmmm, orange juice or Pepsi?* It was obvious that Dalton had forgotten that they had agreed to meet up and head over to the campus cafeteria for lunch. Their afternoon class was the only one that they had together this semester, and Colby had been trying to use that to his advantage with his "getting closer to Dalton" plan. Which at this point was moving very slowly along. What the hell was it going to take to get the guy to notice him? At times, he thought he would catch Dalton looking at him with something other than friendship, but he couldn't seem to get him to talk about what he was feeling, much less get him to act on those feelings. Maybe it was time for plan B, whatever the fuck plan B was. The sound of a toilet flushing let Colby know that Dalton was finally on the move.

He quickly grabbed two bottles of Pepsi out of the fridge and pushed the door shut. Twisting the top off of his bottle, he took a long, cold swig and turned to lean against the counter. He couldn't stop the corners of his mouth from turning up as he took in the sight of Dalton stumbling barefoot into the kitchen: low-riding jeans barely covering the interesting bits, just-out-of-bed tousled hair, sexy morning stubble running along his jawline, and the faint pink blush of his cheeks. Colby couldn't think of a time that he'd seen Dalton look any sexier than he did right then. *Yum, his man looks good enough to eat!*

Now the question was, what could've possibly put that blush on Dalton's cheeks this early in the morning? Handing one of the bottles of soda over, Colby thought he caught Dalton's mumbled "thanks" as he immediately twisted the cap off and tilted his head back to take a long drink. Colby tried to drag his gaze away from the sight of the muscles of Dalton's throat working as the liquid flowed down. The bobbing of Dalton's Adam's apple had Colby's cock going zero to sixty in a matter of seconds and, damn, how did he miss it before? Dalton's nipples were small dark brown pebbles, and his left one was pierced through with a silver hoop to match the one in his left ear. *Fuck, that's hot.*

Colby now found himself in actual pain from his leaking cock that was confined, uncomfortably, in his jeans.

“Ahhhh, the nectar of the gods.” Dalton moaned as he took another swig of Pepsi.

“Yep, I have no clue why anyone would bother with coffee if there was a perfectly good ice-cold Pepsi sitting in the fridge,” Colby said as he cleared his throat and tried to hide the fact that he was pressing his palm over the length of his cock through his jeans, trying to get back a bit of his self-control. “I guess you forgot that we were meeting up before class today, didn’t you? But, hey, no problem. We still have plenty of time to head over and grab a bite to eat before we have to be there.”

“Damn, was that today?” Dalton’s palm flew to his forehead. “Hell, of course it was today. We have class together this afternoon. Why else would you suggest that we grab a bite before class? Yeah, we have time to eat.” Dalton turned and headed for the front hall of the apartment. Colby froze. There on Dalton’s right shoulder was the most exquisitely detailed tattoo of a young mother cradling her child. It sent a feeling of warmth to Colby’s heart and a zing of heat to his cock.

Lord, give me strength. My man is pierced and inked.

“Where do you want to eat? It might be best if we just grab something from the drive-thru, if we’re going to make class in time. Man, I’m sorry about running us late.” As Dalton placed his hand on the doorknob, Colby moved over to stand behind him and covered Dalton’s hand with his own.

“Calm down. No rush. The drive-thru at McDonald’s will be fine for today.” Colby crowded into Dalton’s personal space just a little more, wanting to wallow in the need he felt at seeing Dalton half-naked. “But... you might want to grab a T-shirt and some shoes before we head out.”

The sound of Dalton’s head as it thumped the door had Colby holding back a laugh.

The heat coming off Dalton as Colby pressed closer, made it tempting to just lean in and place kisses along those strong, masculine shoulders. Colby had to dig down deep once again for his self-control, because even though his brain was saying *take it slow*, his body was yelling... *Now!*

Colby found holding back his smile became impossible as Dalton turned away from the door, because the deep-red blush that had quickly spread across his cheeks was just too cute for words.

“Wipe that freakin’ grin off of your face and move out of the way so that I can go grab a damn shirt. Hell, I should’ve just stayed in bed...” Dalton’s mumbling continued as he headed down the hall. Colby’s gaze followed the sway of that hot ass every step of the way until Dalton turned into his room and was out of sight.

In spite of Dalton’s grumbling, they somehow managed to make it to class on time. Colby was stealthfully watching as Dalton made his way back from the front of the classroom after dropping off their assignments to the professor. His man sure wasn’t making it easy for him. Dalton had insisted on paying for his own lunch and then proceeded to order off of the dollar menu at McDonald’s. His determination to pay his own way was cute, but it was putting a cramp in Colby’s dating attempts. Would Dalton even be open to dating another guy? Colby had dated both guys and girls in the past and had never felt the need to hide it from anyone besides his parents. Who paid absolutely no attention to who he was dating unless they made him attend an event that required him to be accompanied by a date. Those times he always made sure to take a girl. Better safe than sorry, and the events were few and far between, so it was no sweat to keep the peace.

“Well, fancy seeing you here,” Colby said with a smirk just as Dalton bent over to sit his backpack on the floor, causing him to spin around so quickly that he almost lost his balance.

“Yeah, this *is* becoming a habit,” Dalton shot back with a smile that lit up his whole face, completing the running joke they had going. “Of course, we do have this class together every week. So, I’m guessing that we’ll get tired of going through this same routine every time we get to class, eventually.”

Dalton’s quick comeback and relaxed manner gave Colby hope that he was finally making some progress in getting Dalton to loosen up and be more comfortable with spending time with him. Just being able to put a smile on Dalton’s face filled a place in Colby’s heart that had been empty for far too long.

Damn, this was getting out of hand.

“Nah, being a creature of habit, I could go on like this for months. Hell, I may even use that line until the end of the semester. It seems to be working for me so far,” Colby said as he tapped the seat beside him. “Set it down, and let’s compare notes before the professor gets started. Makayla told me that you fell

asleep again while you were studying last night. Another late shift at the restaurant?”

“Yeah. But the tips were great and the money will come in handy, so it’s worth it. And you always have my back for this class. So it’s all good.” Dalton looked up after digging his folder out of his bag and reached over to grab Colby’s notes.

“Ahh, too late, here comes the professor already. You just keep those, and I’ll stop by and get them later tonight when you fix me dinner.” Colby wagged his eyebrows at Dalton and continued, “Makayla also told me that you have homemade spaghetti sauce going in the Crock-Pot. So I figured I’d invite myself over and bring along a bottle of red wine that I swiped from the parents when I was packing my shit to head here. That is if you don’t mind me coming over?”

Colby put on his best *poor me* puppy-dog face and watched as Dalton’s eyebrows drew together, and his lips quirked.

“Sure. Come on over around seven. Food should be hitting the table right about then. Hell, Makayla and I would never say *no* to a bottle of good wine.”

Yes, progress at last!

Chapter Three

Dalton

Impressions...

“Damn. Hell. Fu...” Dalton grabbed his throbbing left hand. He silently swore while thrusting it under the spigot as he turned the water on with his right. Pain shot up from his hand into his arm as the lukewarm water made the burning even more intense than before. Gritting his teeth against the discomfort, he let the water continue to flow over the wound, until the pounding pain in his hand began to ease. He knew from past experiences this was the best way to take the heat out of a steam burn. Just ask his mama. She could give you a ten-minute lecture on how it worked. Then follow it up with the lecture on how the burn would never have happened in the first place if some *idiot* had been paying attention to what he was doing.

“Dalton, what in the world is going on in here?” Makayla asked with a look of shock, horror, and maybe even a touch of humor crossing her face.

Dalton knew how it looked. He was always meticulous about keeping the kitchen neat when he was cooking. But, now, the kitchen looked like a tornado had blasted through it. You couldn’t see a single flat surface that wasn’t covered with a pot, pan, bowl, or strangely enough, flour.

When the hell did this happen?

“Flour? Dalton. Baby?” She faltered, just standing there, obviously stunned into silence. Frankly, it was one of the rare moments that Dalton had ever seen Makayla practically speechless.

With one more look around the kitchen, Dalton’s self-doubt took over, and his mouth just started spewing.

“Oh hell. Colby’s going to be here in just a few minutes and everything is such a fuckin’ mess. Why did making a cake from scratch seem like such a good idea at the time? I’m such an idiot. ‘You’re making spaghetti,’ he said. ‘I’ll bring a bottle of wine,’ he said. It’s just freakin’ dinner. What was I thinking? Why the hell am I so damn nervous?” Clamping his mouth firmly shut, he threw his hands up in the air, flour going everywhere from the towel clasped in his hand. *Fuck it!* He headed out of the kitchen, disgusted with himself, deciding that hiding in his room was the smart thing to do. Dinner could take care of itself.

“Dalton Harris. You get your cute butt back in here and help me get this mess cleaned up. Everything smells delicious. I’ve never known you to put anything short of stellar on the table.” Makayla yelled so loud he stopped in his tracks and turned to give her hell.

Simultaneously, the buzzer on the stove went off, and the doorbell rang. Shared looks of horror crossed their faces as they stood there staring at each other. “Oh” escaped from Dalton as he watched Makayla’s eyes grow wide. Hands flying to their mouths, first a snort escaped, then a giggle, and then she broke out in uncontrollable bursts of laughter at the exact same time as he did. Makayla was the first to get herself under control. She wiped the corners of her eyes with tips of her fingers and started handing out orders as she always did when things needed to get done.

“You get this food on the table, and I’ll let Colby in and keep him busy in the living room until you give us a yell. We can get all of *this...*”—indicating the mess on every surface in the kitchen—“cleaned up, *later.*”

“And Dalton?” she continued as Dalton watched her try to keep a straight face. “Could you *please* wipe that flour off your nose?” By now, the laughter that she’d so obviously been holding back squeaked out as a giggle. Rushing for the kitchen door, she hit it with the palms of both hands and threw back over her shoulder, “Okay, let’s get it done. I’ll go let our boy in before he starts thinking we don’t want him here.” And then she was gone.

Dalton’s breath caught in his throat as he slowly took in the mess he’d made in some insane attempt to impress Colby.

Okay, I can do this.

Looking down at the flour-encrusted towel in his hand with disgust, Dalton grabbed another that appeared to be somewhat cleaner than the others and swiped at his nose, hoping he was getting all of the flour off. With swift precise movements, he drained the spaghetti noodles, the culprit that caused him to burn himself in the first place, added a touch of extra virgin olive oil, and dumped all of it onto the large white serving platter he’d set out earlier. He was focused, but his hands still had a slight shake to them as he very carefully ladled the aromatic red sauce over the noodles. Some freshly grated Parmesan cheese, a sprinkle of fresh chopped parsley, and the dish was complete.

He opened the door of the fridge, grabbed the bowl of salad that he had prepared earlier, banged the door shut with his hip, and then carefully lifted the platter from the counter. He blew his bangs out of his eyes and headed for the

dining room, only to have his gaze land immediately on Colby's ass as he was stretched over the table to grab a wine glass. *Damn.*

"Great, you're here. Perfect timing. Let me get the pasta and salad on the table, and then I will bring out the garlic bread. I hope you brought your appetite along with the wine." *Good job, Dalton. Friendly and upbeat. You can do this. Just quit looking at his damn ass. No matter how perfect it is.* "You two grab a chair, and we can get started just as soon as I get back with the garlic bread," Dalton threw over his shoulder on the way to the kitchen.

The door closed behind him just in time for his head to thump against it. Dinner. With friends. Nothing unusual about that. *Yeah, and how many times am I going to have to tell myself that before my brain will actually begin to believe it? Other people do this all the time, so I can damn well do it this once. Somehow. Okay, this is going to happen, and I am going to enjoy the evening, one way or another.* He grabbed a couple of towels and removed the carrot cake from the oven. Setting it to cool on a rack, he reached back in and pulled out the garlic bread, carefully dumped it into a basket, and headed back to the dining room.

"Here we go. I have carrot cake for dessert, so be sure and save room for a slice or two." This was relayed as Dalton set the bread on the table and took a seat for himself.

"This looks fantastic, and thanks for having me over. I can't think of a better way to spend the evening," Colby said as he eyed the large platter of spaghetti.

"Dig in, Colby. It's always a good idea, as I am sure you recall me telling you, to make your plate before Dalton does. I know I am," Makayla teased as she grabbed the tongs to attack the pasta.

"Oh, I am sure that there is plenty, and I plan on saving room for some cake," Colby replied, then turned to face Dalton. "How did you know that carrot cake is my favorite? I don't remember ever telling you that."

"Oh, I didn't know. I just found this new recipe a while back and had been looking for a chance to give it a try."

"Yeah, I guess there are still a lot of things that we don't know about each other. But, we have plenty of time to share 'how I embarrassed the hell out of myself' stories. I know I have a few that I could tell on myself," Colby said as he reached for the garlic bread.

“Ha. Seriously, you expect us to volunteer our embarrassing moments? You are truly some kind of crazy, aren’t you,” Makayla said in between bites.

“Damn, this is delicious. Beats the heck out of a TV dinner any day. Really, guys, thanks for having me over. As for your question, Kayla. Yeah, the way I look at it, once you’ve heard the worst about someone, then there’s never anything you can’t tell each other after that,” Colby said as he finished the last bite on his plate.

“Well, I don’t know about any of *my* embarrassing moments, but I sure could tell you one on Kayla. The day we met, to be exact.” Dalton shot a mischievous look Makayla’s way.

As Dalton began to tell the story of his first day of kindergarten and the day they’d met, he did so with a shake of his head and chuckling under his breath.

...there I was, a five-year-old kid dressed in my new, freshly pressed blue jeans and the Thundering Herd T-shirt I’d spent days agonizing over. I stood there, waiting at the end of my street for the bus to come and take me to that wonderful place called school that Mama had been telling me about all summer. I had placed the ends of my tennis shoes against the edge of the blacktop, being careful not to step on the road, because Mama had said I couldn’t step on the “big” road until the bus had come to a complete stop. I stretched as far out as I could go. The view was the same as it had been a few minutes before, just a long stretch of empty road leading up to the corner where I was standing. When out of nowhere a loud screeching noise from behind had me spinning around so fast I thought I was going to land on my butt. And boy, wouldn’t that have gotten my mama mad, if I’d dirtied my brand-new school clothes before I’d even made it on the bus?

Jeez.

As I caught my balance, I quickly looked over at Mama watching me through the front window of our house across the street. I shrugged my shoulders, threw my hands up in the air, and sent her my best ‘I’m innocent’ smile and then looked around to finally see what all the fuss was about. I couldn’t believe what I was seein’. Being gently but firmly led down the street towards me was a small but obviously very determined girl. Her black curls, sticking out every which way from the ponytail at the top of her head, were bouncing to and fro as she planted her feet and pulled back against the hand of the woman who was attempting to move her forward. With skin the color of my favorite drink back then, chocolate milk, and her tiny little feet encased in pink,

sparkly high-top tennis shoes, I decided then and there that I was glad I wasn't a girl. Pink from head to toe? Yuck!

The two had moved close enough that I could make out the wide stream of what my mama would've called "crocodile tears" falling from almond-shaped eyes and rolling down the girl's face. I watched, mouth gaping open, as she stomped the ground with those ridiculously girly high-tops and screamed at the top of her lungs.

"No, you can't make me! I don't want to go! No! You can't make me!"

Even at the age of five—a very mature five, if what my mama said was anything to go by—I knew trouble when I saw it, and that small bundle of noise had trouble written all over it. As the big yellow bus finally made the turn around the corner and began to slow down for our stop, I made a decision that would change my life forever, although I didn't know it at the time. With her head shaking back and forth and her hands planted firmly on her hips, I knew from experience that there would be no moving the silly girl unless you made a bargain with her, just like I did every time my mama had that look about her. Running the short distance to where the girl had refused to budge from, I gave a quick nod in greeting to her mama before reaching my hand up to swipe away the tears that were leaving streaks of dirt across the girl's chubby cheeks. I leaned over and very quietly whispered in her ear, "Come on. Quit being such a big crybaby. This will be fun. The beginning of a great adventure!"

Softly snuffling, the little girl peered up at me through the dark curls that had fallen down over her forehead and into her large dark-brown eyes. She gave me a look of total disbelief and then asked in a don't-lie-to-me voice, "Do you promise we'll have many wonderful adventures together?"

As the brakes hissed, and the bus doors swung open, I reached out to take the tiny tear-soaked hand in mine and headed for the bus with her in tow.

Never guessing that my next words would be sealing my fate, I replied, "Yep, we'll have all kinds of wonderful adventures together, if you'll just quit being so dang loud."

"...and the rest as they say is history." Dalton finished the tale by throwing Makayla a kiss across the table.

"Well," Colby said as he cleared his throat to stop the laugh that was threatening to break free. "That was certainly... surprising? So, it would only be fair to share one of my 'embarrassing moments' next."

Dalton, finally beginning to relax, sat back and prepared to enjoy Colby's tales and the rest of the evening.

Colby

A friend in need...

The silence in the room would've been awkward under most circumstances. But this was the silence of blissful contentment. Total satisfaction. Makayla was curled up on the brown leather love seat, reading what appeared to be a romance novel, giving Colby the perfect opportunity to watch Dalton unobserved. His man had outdone himself with dinner. Dalton's spaghetti sauce was first class and that carrot cake had been pure heaven. He was surprised by how content he was to just sit and watch Dalton's eyelids twitch. Or to see the steady rhythm of his chest going up and down with every breath that he took. He had certainly been surprised by the wonderful meal that Dalton had prepared, and Colby was still trying to figure out how he was going to talk Dalton out of the last delicious piece of carrot cake. Man, that had been the best he'd ever tasted. And he'd sampled his fair share of carrot cake over the years, whenever his parent's had managed to drag him to this or that must-be-seen at restaurant or event.

The usual flutter of emotion that he was used to feeling whenever he saw Dalton, was nothing compared to what was going on in his chest right at this moment. He caught himself breathing in rhythm with Dalton as he slept. Without even knowing it, Dalton had shattered every single layer of protection that Colby had managed to build around his heart over the years. There was just no turning back now. Dalton was the one for him, and Colby was by no means ready to give up on them yet. The urge to run his fingers through Dalton's wavy hair that had fallen over his forehead was almost overpowering. He always seemed to be on the move. To see him lying there quietly, making those cute little snuffling noises was just too adorable.

"You want to help me with the cleanup while he gets some rest?" The whispered question in his ear jerked his attention away from Dalton and over his shoulder to Makayla who had somehow managed to get up and walk over behind him without making a sound.

"Sure, he certainly deserves a nap after that wonderful meal he put on the table," he whispered and pointed towards the dining room. "Wow, that was one fabulous dinner. And man, that carrot cake was out of this world," Colby praised as he started gathering the plates off the table.

“Yes, he is a wonderful cook. He never ceases to amaze me with all the new things he whips up for us to try. The thing is, though, he never gives himself a break. He’s always on the go. Heading to classes, to work or, to the library. I help when I can. But our boy won’t touch a thing I cook. So I order in or bring food home on the nights that I know he’s had a full day. Of course, he growls at me that it’s cheaper to cook than to get take out. I just grin and tell him, ‘Fine, I’ll go cook.’ That stops him dead in his tracks, and he digs in with gusto.”

“Our boy? I’m not sure that’s something you should go around saying,” Colby said as he piled the silverware on top of the dishes and pushed open the door to the kitchen.

“What the hell happened in here?” Colby stopped just inside of the kitchen to take in the chaos before him.

“This was Dalton in a panic. You invited yourself over, and he wanted to make a good impression.” With a shrug of her shoulders, Makayla shoved him on through the doorway and placed her pile of plates in the one side of the sink that was miraculously empty. Then she grabbed a damp sponge and started wiping down the counters and appliances.

“He doesn’t need to impress me or anyone else. He’s awesome just the way he is. Every day I watch him push himself to be better, to do better. A lot of the kids here are just using college as an excuse to party. But, Dalton, man. He’s motivated in ways that sometimes even I have trouble understanding. Not that I’d say no to another one of these outrageously great meals every once in a while,” Colby said with a wink while rinsing the plates and placing them in the dishwasher. He glanced up and caught the grin on Makayla’s impish face.

“You know, don’t you?” He ruefully shook his head. “Of course you know. How could you not?”

“It was kinda hard to miss. I mean, you all but drool when he’s around.”

“I’m trying to give him time. You know? Let him figure it out on his own. I mean, sometimes I’m sure that he has feelings for me. And I don’t mean *best friend* feelings. But then for some reason he’ll back off and there we are again. Best buds. Which is great. But...”

“You want more?”

“Yeah. I want... No, I *need* more. I’m going crazy here. He’s *it* for me. I can’t even begin to explain. But I just know.” Loading the last item into the dishwasher and softly closing it instead of giving it the slam he really would’ve

liked to, Colby shoulders drooped in dejection. With a deep sigh, he turned to face Makayla.

“Hey, give it time. He’s overwhelmed with all of these unexpected emotions, trying to come to terms with how they’re going to make a huge change in his life. Have faith.” She pulled him in for a hug. “I can see how he looks at you when he thinks no one will notice. Don’t give up just yet.”

“Am I asking for too much? I mean, if it came down to picking between having him for my friend or losing him. I’d pick friends every time. I just need him in my life. I mean, how did this happen so quickly? I walked into that auditorium, and there he was. My life felt complete for the first time in that moment.” Fighting back the tears prickling behind his eyes and threatening to break loose, Colby rested his chin on the top of Makayla’s head and returned her hug.

“Why didn’t you guys... Well—Hell—” Dalton gasped as he stood staring at the two of them with their arms wrapped around each other. “Sorry. I-I... d-didn’t mean to interrupt.”

All Colby had time to notice was how adorable Dalton looked with his bed-head hair sticking up on one side of his head and the deep red crease embedded on his cheek from the cushion of the sofa on the other side, before Dalton spun around and ran back out of the kitchen.

As their eyes meet in shock, Colby’s shoulders started to quake with laughter as he squeezed Makayla even tighter. “Yeah, well—Hell.”

“Yep, there you go. That boy is hooked. Now all you have to do is figure out how to reel him in. He’s gonna fight you with everything he’s got. You know that, right?”

“Yeah, I know. But, I promise, I’ll be gentle. I don’t want to break him. I just want to love him.” The feeling of elation from being able to finally admit how he felt, was so strong that Colby wasn’t sure how to hold it in. So, he didn’t. With a loud whoop, he grabbed the nearest pot and told Makayla, “Come on, girlfriend, let’s get this kitchen cleaned up. Then I have me some planning to do—and the love of my life to declare war on.”

Chapter Four

Dalton

Reality bites...

The resounding thud of the bedroom door as it slammed behind him had Dalton considering slamming it again. Just because he could. *Childish* was the word that popped into his mind. *Who the fuck cares.* The unbelievable amount of anger that was racing through him made him feel like he was going to explode and disintegrate into tiny, little pieces. He pressed a hand over his chest trying to ease the excruciating pain that had lodged there. His breath rushed out in stops and starts, making him wonder if he was about to pass out. The quaking inside of him would probably hit a six or seven on the Richter scale. But who the fuck cared. Slinging himself onto the bed, he felt the rage and hurt begin to build. He pulled a pillow up to cover his face just in time to catch the guttural roar that made its way up and out of his mouth. His rage left no room for logic, only the sense of betrayal. At any other time, he'd have acknowledged that he was being unreasonable. But for now, it all just came pouring out. The disbelief. The hurt. The doubts. Leaving him in one big pile of broken desolation.

That's when he noticed the tears. Why the hell were there tears streaming down the sides of his face? What. The. Fuck. How could they do this to him? When? His brain just couldn't wrap around what he'd just seen in his own kitchen. In. His. Own. Home. His two best friends in the world. Together. As in Colby and Makayla. A couple. No. Fuck, no. They had no right to do this to him.

As one shuddered breath followed the next, he felt a calm come over him as he lay perfectly still on the navy comforter covering his bed, his sense of reasoning slowly returned. What the hell? Of course they could do this to him. *He* was the one that had told Makayla last spring that he couldn't be what she wanted, and any red-blooded man would love to have her for his own. So, why not Colby? She was fucking gorgeous. Insanely intelligent. A wonderful person inside and out. What was there not to love about her?

And, Colby? He was just the nicest guy that Dalton had ever freakin' met. Who in their right mind wouldn't want him? He was fuckin' hot. Okay, he was the only guy that Dalton had ever considered hot. But it was obvious by the way all the girls hung on him that the whole package was perfect. Starting with

that slim build with just enough muscle tone to make every single thing he put on look great. And that dark, silky fine hair that made a guy just want to spend hours running his fingers through it. And don't freakin' get him started on that face. It was incredible. Delicate, bordering on feminine but somehow, it totally worked with the overall package of manly perfection. And Dalton could admit, if only to himself, that he had fantasized about that perfect body during more than one jerk off session in the last few weeks.

Shit. Where the hell had all of these fucking emotions come from? They were his best friends. And if being together would make them happy, then who was he to stand in their way? He threw the pillow aside, jumped off the bed, and started pacing. Back, then forth, trying to get all the chaotic thoughts bashing around in his head to make sense.

A soft tap on his door had him stopping dead in his tracks.

"Can I come in?" came softly through the door.

Shit. It's Colby.

"Ye—" He cleared his throat and tried again. "Yeah, come on in." Dalton quickly reached up to rub his hands over his face, trying to remove all evidence of his tears and rage.

As the door cracked open, Colby's head peeked around the edge.

"Hey," Colby said with a troubled look in his beautiful green eyes.

"Hey."

Yeah, not awkward here at all.

"Would you believe me if I told you that it wasn't what it looked like?" Colby spoke so softly that he could barely hear him. There was a note of insecurity in his voice that Dalton had never heard before.

Dalton's ass plopped back down on the bed, and he thumped the spot next to him. "Have a seat." He knew that he had some fast talking to do, the question was where to start. "Hey, listen, I'm sorry if I scared the shit out of you guys. I don't know what the fuck came over me. But, now I've got it all straightened out in my head. Lost it there for a minute. Damn, that was freakin' intense. So..."

Colby, in a very soft voice, continued for him. "So, what you saw in the kitchen? Well, that was... I mean... hell." Colby gently gripped Dalton's chin and turned his face to look into his eyes. "How in the world do I explain this to you?"

Colby pushed up off the bed, clenching and unclenching his hands. Now it was his turn to pace. Moving back and forth, before finally coming to a stop in front of Dalton. Colby let out a long sigh. “Okay, it’s like this. It wasn’t anything sexual. I’m pretty sure I can promise you there will never be a reason for you to worry about something like that between me and Makayla.”

“Well, I wasn’t worried,” Dalton lied through his teeth.

“I just had a moment, and you know Makayla. That girl is like some warm and fuzzy barracuda. She sees someone she thinks needs a hug and wham! She’s all over them. Just one friend giving another friend a hug and a little sympathy, multiplied by like a hundred. You know what I mean?” His eyebrows rose in a questioning manner.

“It isn’t any of my business anyways. But, well...” Dalton hesitated, not even sure how to begin. “What the fuck is happening to me, Colby? Half the time I don’t even recognize myself anymore. I mean, my head is so mixed up. I don’t know what to do or if I even should be doing something. I’ve always had this plan for my life, and the shit I’m feeling right now sure the hell wasn’t part of that plan. But, well the plan...” Overcome with frustration, he faltered. He knew Colby could see the confusion in his eyes, but how could he get him to understand how life altering this whole mess was without actually telling him what the whole mess *really* was.

“Fuck!” With a growl, he threw himself back onto the bed.

Colby tilted his head to the side, narrowed his eyes, and then gave a nod.

Dalton could tell by the decisive nod of Colby’s head that he’d found whatever answer he’d been searching for, and he wasn’t sure that he was ready for what Colby was about to say.

He felt the bed dip as Colby dropped down next to him and fell back. Colby lay there quietly. He didn’t say a word. The only sound in the room was the calming rhythm of his breaths as he slowly inhaled and exhaled, soothing a restlessness in Dalton.

“You know.” Colby finally broke the silence. “This might be something that you’re just going to have to work out on your own. But as you’re trying to get it figured out, remember to be true to yourself. Don’t worry about what anyone else thinks or tells you to do. Just listen to your heart. It’ll never let you down.”

Dalton rolled to face Colby, pillowing his head on his arm. He swallowed his fear and whispered, “Yeah, but, I can’t hear my heart over all the fuckin’ noise in my head.”

Suddenly it dawned on Dalton what, or rather, who was lying next to him. *Oh. My. God. Colby is on my bed. Beside me. On. My. Fuckin'. Bed. Great, now my cock is adding to the noise too.*

Colby turned his head, looked Dalton straight in the eyes, and his mouth turned up with the tiniest of smiles. “Yeah, it can get loud in there sometimes, I know. And that’s when you have to listen really hard. Trust me, your heart’s talkin’. You just have to let yourself hear it.”

A warm feeling spread through Dalton’s chest when he saw the understanding in Colby’s bright-green eyes. “Damn. Okay, I might not get this all worked out today, but you’re right. I just have to freakin’ listen. And I will, I promise. So, thanks.”

Colby opened his mouth—*Crash! Thump!*

“What the hell?”

Dalton quickly pushed up off the bed and rushed to the door. He opened it slowly, and there sitting in the middle of the hallway was Makayla batting her dark eyelashes, trying to appear innocent.

“Hey, Makayla,” Colby said as he came up from behind, leaning against the doorframe and squeezing in close to look over Dalton’s shoulder. Dalton could feel the man’s body heat radiating off him as he looked down at his best friend and glared.

“Hey, guys.” Makayla innocently waved from her position on the floor. “I was just coming to check and see if one of you wanted the last piece of cake before I ate it.” Again with the innocent look as she held up the dessert plate for them to see.

Oh, my god! Was that her hair dragging through the freakin’ frosting?

Colby chuckled, Dalton groaned.

“Nah, you go ahead and have it. And Makayla? Good luck with getting that frosting out of your hair,” Colby said with a smirk.

Chapter Five

Dalton

Running scared...

Autumn was finally making an appearance and Halloween was just a week away. The days were still warm but quickly getting shorter, and the evenings were starting to cool down. *Thank god for Thursday*, Dalton thought as he rolled over to his stomach on the blue plaid blanket that Colby had laid out under the shade of a large oak tree at Ritter Park. He used the act as an excuse to covertly catch yet another quick look at Colby, who at the moment was watching a girl play Frisbee with her dog.

He watched the small streams of sweat as they rolled down Colby's forehead and tried not to notice that the baggy khaki cargo shorts and skintight navy T-shirt he was wearing did nothing to hide the near-perfect condition of Colby's body. Which made the fact that Dalton was lying on his stomach a good idea as it was *hiding the evidence, so to speak?* Jesus, Makayla had nailed it that first day. Colby was just freakin' gorgeous.

Colby quickly turned his head to face Dalton with an inquiring look on his face, causing his silky-smooth brown hair to slide down over his eyes. *Oh, fuck. Did I just groan out loud?* Dalton swallowed hard, and the electrical current buzzing just under his skin had him questioning the wisdom of meeting Colby here today. Meeting at the park had sounded like a great idea when Colby called and suggested it. Get in some serious study time, catch a few rays, and take a break from the hectic schedules that had both of them racing to keep up. So far, the plan had at least one major flaw, *currently evidenced in Dalton's pants.*

"I'd like to have a dog someday," Colby stated as he broke the silence, turning back around to watch the golden retriever catch the Frisbee, yet again.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. We have two dogs back home. They'll drive you crazy, but you can't help but love them. The little Pom is nothing but an attention whore, but one thing's for sure, you'll never be lonely while they're around."

"I guess with our busy schedules, getting a dog is something that we'll have to think about for the future."

Dalton's heart stuttered and then took off racing at Colby's almost matter-of-fact tone of voice.

We will?

Trying to decide exactly where Colby was going with that statement, Dalton couldn't figure out why he was making such a big deal out of the whole *dog* thing or the *we* thing. It was probably just Colby making a random comment about how they would both have to wait to get a dog 'til sometime in the future.

But what if it is... more?

Sitting up and grabbing his English lit book, he flipped it open and hoped it was somewhere near the chapter he was supposed to be reading.

"Hey, I thought we came out here to study, not watch dogs catch Frisbees. Or is it the girl throwing the Frisbee that keeps catching your attention?"

Wow, Dalton. Jealous much?

With the flash of a naughty grin, Colby pounced on Dalton, knocked him onto his back, and grabbed his arms to pin them to the ground above his head. "I hadn't even noticed that it was a girl throwing the Frisbee, but it would appear that you did." Colby's bright-green eyes sparkled with a look that said he was holding back a laugh.

Kneeling with his legs on either side of Dalton's waist, Colby's slightly smaller body slowly lowered until he was sitting on top of Dalton's thighs. His heart was racing a mile a minute as Colby's fingers lightly brushed across the insides of his wrists. Ever so slowly, Dalton felt Colby's fingers entwining with his own, followed by a gentle squeeze that sent a shiver of pleasure curling down through Dalton's stomach and heading straight for his balls. The reality of Colby sitting there made it almost impossible for him to keep from groaning out loud.

"So, tell me, since you were so observant. What color is her hair? What's she wearing?" Colby asked with a whisper as he held Dalton in place.

The caress of Colby's warm breath across his ear and the weight of Colby's incredibly enticing body as he leaned over him, had a feeling of rightness about it that Dalton had never felt before. Not to mention the havoc that it was wracking on his state of mind. Seriously? How in the world was he supposed to answer those questions? He had no clue what the girl looked like. He had been too busy looking at Colby to notice anything about the girl. He took a deep breath and tried to calm down his now raging hard-on. Dalton rolled his head

towards the girl with the dog, but Colby leaned in even closer and effectively blocked his view.

“Ummmm, she has long blonde hair pulled back in a ponytail and is wearing cut-off blue jean shorts?” Dalton hoped that a generic answer would do the trick and save his ass.

Oh my god, I'm so fucked. This is going from bad to worse in ten seconds flat.

With a grin of victory, Colby bent his head down, touched his lips lightly to the rapidly beating pulse in Dalton's neck, and whispered in his ear, “Well, at least now I know that I won't have to worry about you girl watching while you're with me.” He let out a soft chuckle and rolled back over onto the blanket.

Dalton remained frozen, not daring to move even a single muscle. He was amazed that no one else noticed the sound of his labored breathing because he could sure hear it roaring loudly through his chest. He concentrated on getting himself back under control, which regrettably wasn't that simple. He sucked in another deep breath, and the scent of Colby engulfed him. Obviously, having Colby lying next to him was doing nothing to help with stopping the rush of blood to his groin.

Well, hell. Who knew that another guy could smell so...

Suddenly, it was just way too much. He abruptly stood and hastily started grabbing his books and stuffing them precariously into his backpack. Dalton knew this was something he was going to have to deal with, eventually. Just not the fuck right now.

“Hey, man. Listen, I have to go. Can we, maybe, meet up later? To study?”

When Dalton finally found the courage to glance down, the frown on Colby's face and the way those perfectly arched eyebrows knit together said it all.

Telling himself that he wasn't running away, just taking a few steps back to figure out exactly what the hell was going on. Dalton pulled his backpack over his shoulder and quickly headed towards the gates of the park.

As reason slowly ebbed its way back into his brain, Dalton came to a complete stop. Not wanting to be a total dick, because lord knows he certainly had fucked this up big time already, he turned and yelled back to Colby, “I'll call you after work tonight, okay? We can catch some study time between classes tomorrow.”

His pace was fast as he made his way back to his car, sweating from more than just the heat. Pain like he'd never experienced before exploded from his chest, or was it his heart? Ripping the car door open, he slid into the seat, and rested his forehead on the steering wheel. With his eyes closed, and feeling the air slowly begin to move normally in and out of his lungs once again. Leaning back against the seat, he wondered if maybe he could hear his heart talking after all.

Colby

Plan C...

Sprawled across his comfortable king-sized bed, Colby stared unblinkingly at the white ceiling above him, slowly running through every second of what had happened while he and Dalton had been at the park that afternoon.

It had started out great...

Blanket on the ground. ✓

Wear favorite baggy khaki shorts that hug my ass. ✓

Get Dalton to actually make conversation. ✓

Find out if Dalton is actually attracted to me. ✓

Move in for the kiss...

And that's when it all fell apart. What had gone wrong? There had been no mistaking that hard-on or the way that Dalton's breath had stuttered out of him. But Dalton had run. That hadn't been part of the plan. Time for a new plan. Time for Plan C. The question was... What the hell was Plan C?

Rolling over to his stomach, Colby laid his head on his crossed arms. Inhaling deeply, he could still smell the scent of Dalton. Ah, that phenomenal scent that was only Dalton. Lime, sweat, man. Ummm. It did things to his insides that he'd never felt before. His gut twisted. His heart pounded. But still he felt like a weight had been lifted off of him. Yes, he'd been attracted to other guys in the past, but he had always considered himself bi. His strong attraction to Dalton and his desire to be with him and only him, pretty much put an end to the "Am I gay?" question.

He laughed out loud at his own thoughts.

Why, yes, Colby. It's official.

You. Are. Gay.

But the bigger question, the more important question: was Dalton gay?

He needed that answer, one way or the other. He'd told Dalton to listen to his heart, and Dalton had said he would. Maybe he'd tried to make his move too soon. He knew that Dalton was aware of the attraction between them. But, he also knew that Dalton was still confused, fighting his feelings. He growled as his frustration surged through him.

Colby let his thoughts drift back to earlier that afternoon. Dalton spread out beneath him, arms pressed firmly to the ground. A thrill of power thundered through his body as he thought about having total control over the larger man. It made his head spin, and his dick hard.

He flipped over onto his back and carefully unzipped his shorts. One hand wrapped firmly around the base of his cock, and the other cupping his balls. He stroked up his shaft to swipe his thumb over the tip, smearing the already pearling drops of precum over it. Breathing fast and shallow, Colby allowed his mind to picture Dalton's gorgeous blue eyes as they hazed over with desire as their erections pressed close together.

More. Harder. Don't stop. Dalton's pleading voice sounded through his head. Just the thought of having his man *want*. Hearing the *need* in his voice had Colby close to coming. He grasped the base of his cock in a tight grip, trying to control his own raging need, wanting to prolong his fantasy. Slowly, but steadily, he once again began to work his cock. His lean muscles flexing with every stroke of his hand as it made its way down to the base and back up to the leaking, bulbous head.

Let me. I want to see you... touch you.

He dropped his head back to the bed. "Dalton," he whispered, the name more of a moan than a word.

The mental image of Dalton tentatively reaching out to softly run a single finger along the bulging vein running down the length of his shaft only stopping to tickle at his balls, took him to the edge.

Beautiful. So hard, but silky soft. I need to taste it.

His breath hitched from the vision of Dalton's warm, luscious lips sliding over the head of his cock. Fuck, his mouth would feel so damn good. It was too intense. His body was on fire. He couldn't hold back any longer. His balls drew up. His back arched so high his ass left the bed as his climax hit. *Fuuuuck!* His

eyes slammed shut, hand pumping through the orgasm as his cum shot out in long arcs of pearly cream, one right after the other.

Colby's body dropped to the bed in exhaustion as his cum-slicked hand stroked his cock one final time. His spent cock fell to lay outside his open shorts in the sticky residue of his release.

As his racing heart slowed, his eyes popped open, and it suddenly came to him as epiphanies usually do.

Screw it! Seduce his sexy ass! Now that's a plan!

The sound of Dalton's ringtone coming from his cell phone had Colby reaching over to grab it, only to grimace at the mess on his hand. Not sure what his man would have to say, but knowing that whatever it was, they could work it out. Using his clean hand to pick up the phone, his thumb swiped the screen to take the call.

"Hey."

"Hey."

Colby heard what he thought was a snort come through the phone.

"Man, did you just fuckin' snort on your phone?"

"Yeah, seriously, how fucked up is that?" Dalton's laughter could be heard in his voice, and that quickly the tension from earlier in the day was broken.

"Hey, I mean, listen. I just wanted to call and tell you that, man, I really am trying to get all this shit figured out in my head. And, I don't know how it's going to work out, but I do know that you're my best friend and I don't want to lose that. You know what I mean?"

The self-doubt and hope were both apparent in Dalton's voice, and Colby wasn't about to send his man running for the hills by pushing too hard.

"Yeah, man. I get it. We're good. Want to hang out after work tomorrow and see if we can get in an hour or two of studying?"

"Yes! I mean, yeah. That'd be good. I'll give you a call when I'm leaving. Can you meet me at the apartment?"

"That sounds like a plan. See you then."

Colby chuckled and tossed his phone onto the nightstand. So, Plan C was in motion.

This plan was going to require quite a bit of work but the way he looked at it, Dalton was more than worth the effort. He pushed himself up off the bed and headed for the bathroom because he had a wet, sticky cum mess to clean up first.

Chapter Six

Dalton

One bad apple...

Dalton was beginning to get suspicious. Every time he turned around, there was Colby. Walking down the sidewalk heading to the library and there was Colby offering him a cup of his favorite coffee from Starbucks. Sitting in lit class and there was Colby... *duh, they sit together every week.* Going to turn in a food order at work and there sat Colby nursing a soda at the bar, waiting for him to finish his shift.

What the hell? Do I have a stalker? He mentally joked to himself.

He still found it kinda surprising that Colby wanted to be friends after the debacle at the park. He would have bet money on not seeing much of him after that. But it would appear that he'd have lost that bet. Colby had met up with him the next day just like he had said he would. They had hung out at the apartment talking and watching a movie. To their surprise, they found out that they liked a lot of the same things; food, clothes, sports. They both agreed that *The Herd* was the best. Even when they weren't winning. And they even got in some serious study time before they called it a night. Now, back to the stalker issue. He'd noticed that he was spending more and more time with Colby. Which, of course, was great.

So, maybe having a stalker wasn't so bad... unless the stalker was Harper.

Man, he and Colby just couldn't figure out what that guy's problem was. The Harper situation had been escalating over the past week or so. Every time they ran into him now, he'd spout awful words at them. Like *cocksuckers*, or hit them with *faggots*. If the ass was feeling really creative, he'd throw something out like *fudge packer* or *ass bandit*. Most of the time Colby was with him when Harper popped up. Other times, though, the bigoted prick would catch one of them alone and that's what really had him worried. Dalton knew that he could take care of himself, if push came to shove. But his biggest fear was that Harper would go after Colby if he caught him out by himself.

Right now all he could do was try to avoid a confrontation. So, if Dalton happened to see Harper heading his way, he tried to rush out of the room ahead of him or he would hang back with the crowd waiting for Harper to leave first, just to avoid another round of unjustified insults. He was getting sick and tired of having shit like that whispered in his ear when he least expected it.

Last night when he had gotten off work, Colby was there to hitch a ride back to the apartment with him. He'd tried to voice his concerns then, but Colby wasn't one much for getting riled up. He just shrugged it off and explained that in his opinion, Harper and others like him were just bigoted rednecks. They wouldn't ever change. All talk and no action.

That was a good point. But Harper's shit was getting old, real fast. It seemed that he wasn't quite as easygoing about the whole situation as Colby was. That much was quickly becoming obvious.

When he told Makayla about it earlier in the week, she has said that she could sympathize but was pragmatic about the whole issue. She had told him, "Dalton, some of us have had to deal with racial issues our whole lives. Imagine how bad it was for my mama and her parents, being Japanese. Or, for my daddy's parents. Back in their day, blacks and whites were just starting to work out their differences, so trust me when I say a marriage between the two races was not looked upon as a good thing. Times are better now. But, there are still racist, bigoted assholes out there that will never change. Is it wrong? Hell, YES! Can we do anything about it? Maybe. But one thing is for sure, educating people is the only way that we'll ever be able to end the hate crimes and discrimination that's still running rampant across not just our state but the whole fuckin' country."

Boy had she gotten riled up, but she really hadn't seemed too concerned about Harper. So, it had pretty much become a game of cat and mouse between him and Harper. Hide and seek. Marco... Polo... *Okay, enough of that.* He may be a little paranoid, but it wouldn't hurt to be cautious for both of them. He wasn't sure when keeping Colby safe had become such a priority in his life but it was, and he was determined to do just that. So imagine his surprise when he became the victim and not Colby.

Chapter Seven

Dalton

Rescued...

The excruciating pain exploding through his skull, from having the back of his head banged against the rough brick wall of the library, was something that Dalton could've lived without.

“What the fuck! What the hell is wrong with you?” Dalton growled, reaching back to determine the damage as he sent an accusing glare towards Harper. “First the name calling every time you see me in the halls or around campus. And now this? What are you, crazy?” Dalton’s breath came in short gasps, and the bump on the back of his head hurt like hell.

“I mean, what the hell have I ever done to you? Damn, this fucking hurts.” Dalton looked down at his hand to see two fingers smeared with blood.

“What can I say, *faggot*. Just your existence offends me,” Harper responded, along with still yet another hard push against the rough wall.

Dalton tried to wrap his mind around what was happening to him, but it was just plain confusing.

“Faggot? Who the hell are you calling a faggot? Why the hell do you keep saying that to me? I’m not gay, you big dumb-ass. I date girls, for fuck’s sake. What the hell are you talking about?”

“Yeah, sure. I’ve seen you and Stevens. Always hanging out together. All of those disgusting looks that you guys are constantly giving each other. Fuck, I know gay when I see it. And where I come from, we know how to take care of guys like you.” Harper’s comments sent a quake clean through Dalton. Fear. Confusion. They both were followed by the painful tightening of his chest. The nausea that was rolling through his stomach caused Dalton to raise his fists, prepared to fight back this time if Harper struck again.

“What in the fuckin’ hell is going on here?” It would seem that Makayla was now joining the freakin’ party. “Who the hell do you think you are? Getting in my boy’s face and saying shit to him that you have no clue about.”

Stepping between the two of them and pushing with both hands against Harper’s chest with so much force that she knocked him back a step or two, she let go with another round.

“Who the hell put you in charge of the ‘Bigots Are Us’ club? Huh? I don’t know how to tell you this, but we live in the twenty-first century, and shit like this don’t fly no more. Now, take your sorry bigoted ass and get the hell away from us before I call the law. You poor excuse for a human being.”

It was a thing of beauty, Makayla in a full rage. And boy, was she letting Harper have it with both barrels.

“Your boy? Are you saying that you two are together? Like, seeing each other? Boyfriend and girlfriend?”

Makayla and Dalton both just stood there with their mouths gaping open at Harper’s questions.

“Are you serious? It isn’t any of your fucking business who I’m seeing or not seeing. Did I not make myself clear when I told you the first time to take your sorry ass and get the hell out of here?” She was poking him so hard in the chest with her long, bright-pink fingernail that you could see him wince as he tried to suck his breath in.

“Well, actually, the reason I was asking was because I was wonderin’ if you’d like to go out with me sometime.”

What the fuck?

“That’s if you’re free. I mean, if you and Harris here ain’t seeing each other.” By this point Harper had started to babble.

They both just looked on in shock.

Dalton could tell she wasn’t finished with Harper yet when she planted her hands on her hips and with a roll of her eyes, she laid into him, again. “Let me get this straight. You want to know if I’d like to go out with your undereducated small-minded ass? Are you fuckin’ crazy? In case you’ve so quickly forgotten, just a few minutes ago you were attempting to beat the shit out of my best friend because you thought he was gay. And now *you* want to go out with *me*.” She was really on a roll now, and in a way, you kinda had to almost feel sorry for Harper. *Almost*.

“Well...” Harper began as he jerked his ball cap off of his head. “You’re the most fascinatin’ girl I’ve ever seen. And you sure don’t take no shit from anyone. That’s fuckin’ hot. What more could a guy ask for in his woman?”

Her eyes grew wide. Her mouth gaped open. Makayla was speechless. In all of their years together, Dalton couldn’t ever remember seeing that before.

“I-I. Your w-woman. Let’s get one thing straight, asshole. *Us?* There is no us. That so isn’t going to happen.”

She reached into the back pocket of her jeans and pulled out her phone. Looking straight into Harper’s eyes, she threatened, “Now would be a good time to leave, or I’m calling the cops.”

Harper threw up his hands, plopped his cap back on his head, then turned and walked away. Dalton and Makayla watched until he was out of sight.

Cocky bastard, would serve him right if she did make the call.

Like throwing a light switch, Makayla turned towards Dalton and gently ran her fingers through his hair. Brows drawn together, her concern was apparent as she asked, “Aww, my poor boy, are you okay? Do you need to go to the emergency room?”

The whisper-soft touch of her lips as she placed a kiss on his forehead went far in making it better. But his head still hurt like hell.

“No. No. I’ll be fine. I just wish I knew what the hell he was talking about. Me and Colby, we’re just good friends. I mean, where does he get off sayin’ that I’m gay? Just because the two of us hang out together sometimes? I don’t get it, Makayla. We’re just friends.”

“Well, if you’re sure,” she said reaching out to try to assess the damage that had been done to the back of his head. “You need to tell Colby about this, though. He needs to know to watch his back. I’m so sorry, we should’ve listened to you when you tried to tell us about Harper. Damn, that boy is on my shit list, and I will make sure that everyone hears about what he did to you.” Makayla ended with a growl.

“NO! I mean, no need to do that. I wasn’t hurt that bad, and there’s no reason to cause a problem. But, you’re right. I will tell Colby what happened. We need to keep an eye out and make sure he stays safe.” Dalton allowed himself to relax for the first time since the attack had begun. He took a few deep breaths and tried to get his insides to settle down. Still feeling confused by the whole incident, he wasn’t sure what to think about all the shit that had come out of Harper’s mouth. Talk about not seeing something coming. That sure came out of nowhere. Yeah, he knew that he had feelings for Colby that needed to be dealt with, but he had never acted on those feelings. And he and Colby sure the hell had never even been anything more than good friends. So what did Harper mean when he said that he could see that they were gay? And what the fuck was that attack about? To say that it had scared him shitless would’ve been

an understatement. How the hell was he going to explain this to Colby when he didn't even understand it himself?

Yes, he'd been having some strange feelings when it came to Colby. He could admit that. But did that make him gay? He'd never had any feelings for any other guy before this. Was this one of those things like he'd read about in that book of Makayla's? The one that she had left just lying there, on the sofa, for anyone to see. The one with the two shirtless men on the front? The one he'd been planning on teasing her about. But instead had ended up reading the damn thing from cover to cover... twice. Makayla's book was where he had first come across the expression "gay for you". Was that why he was having all of these feelings for Colby? Had the instant appreciation of Colby's body, followed by the wet dreams and mind-blowing jerk-off sessions all been leading up to this overwhelming feelings of attraction?

Gay. For. You. Could that be what this was? He knew that there had to be *some* explanation for all of these feelings that were quickly growing for Colby. Because he'd *never* had feelings like this for another single person... ever.

He pushed himself away from the wall, knowing one thing for sure. He wasn't ready to deal with any of this shit right now. And trying to see Colby any time soon just wasn't going to happen. *Later*. He'd talk to Colby later and let him know what had happened. Taking Makayla by the hand, they heading for the car. Realizing that this could have really turned out a lot worse than it had brought a lump to his throat and then it occurred to him that he had forgotten to do one very important thing. Drawing Makayla in close to his side, he softly planted a kiss on top of her head and whispered, "Thank you for being there for me today. But most of all, thank you for being my friend."

Blinking back tears as he felt the soft squeeze she gave him, he heard her soft reply. "Any time, babe. Any time." And for that one moment, all was right with his world.

Halloween had come and gone, and everyone at Marshall was slowly adjusting to the cooler weather and shorter days that always seemed to hit about that time of year. Knowing that winter was right around the corner, Dalton was trying to take advantage of every minute of outdoor time that he could get. Some days were just meant to be spent outdoors. And today was one of those days. At least according to Makayla it was, and of course, as always, she was right.

The leaves had changed to the beautiful colors of fall last month, the reds and golds had intermingled with the still-vibrant greens. But now the lawn of the quad was covered in a blanket of those colorful, fallen leaves which made a perfect backdrop for a picnic. Her parents had sent a picnic basket full of what Dalton knew would be good eats, and there was no way that he was missing out on that. The thought of spending more time with Colby had nothing to do with it, and maybe he'd begin to believe it if he kept telling himself that over and over again.

“Dalton. Boy, I’ve been talkin’ to you for like forever. Would you please put the blanket right here? This will be the perfect spot for our little picnic. Don’t you think?” Makayla had thoughtfully turned her command into a question.

Trying to hide his grin, Dalton carefully arranged the blanket so that it would catch the last of the warm rays of sunlight. Soon the days would grow so short that there wouldn’t be any daylight to speak of after they got out of their afternoon classes.

“Am I too late to join the party? When Makayla told me that her parents had sent a basket of food, I was psyched to be going to my first picnic. Another first for me. I’m so loving this college gig.” No one could miss the joy that was lighting up Colby’s face as he dropped down beside Dalton on the blanket.

Reaching over to give Colby a hug, Makayla said, “You know what we always say around here. ‘The more the merrier’ to quote what I’ve heard Dalton’s mama say a million times over the years. I never really got it though until we moved into the apartment. Then I came to see just how quiet a room could be when I was sitting in it all alone.” Makayla in a melancholy mood didn’t bode well for the day.

But one can always live in hope, Dalton thought as he turned to greet Colby.

“Actually you have perfect timing. A few minutes later and you would’ve been looking at the sorry remains of a meal that had been inhaled. Makayla may not have any cooking skills, but her parents can rock a kitchen. I make a point to *never* miss out on anything they’ve prepared if I can help it.”

“Here, grab a plate. As you know, Dalton wasn’t joking when he said he inhales his food. Calling first dibs when he’s around is always a good idea. I’d go as far as to say that eating is one of his favorite things to do. It’s frustrating as hell for me. He never gains a damn pound.” Makayla threw a disgusted look at Dalton and grabbed a plate for herself.

“I’m sure that you guys have heard it said many times before, but let me say it again. You both present a fine package regardless of the amount of food you eat. Very nice. Both of you. *Very nice*,” Colby said as he waggled his perfectly shaped eyebrows up and down.

“Well, allow me to return the favor. That’s one nice package that you present, yourself. I know that it doesn’t go unnoticed around here. Why is it that I never see you hanging out with any of those girls that are always drooling over that great bod of yours?” Makayla asked as she placed, what appeared to be, a baked burrito of some sort onto her plate.

Subtle isn’t Makayla’s middle name, Dalton thought as he dug around in the basket to make sure that he hadn’t missed anything; Mexican was one of his many favorite foods. Of course, Makayla would tell anyone who would listen that any food was his favorite food, and he hated to admit it but she’d be right. He bit into what he discovered was a spicy chicken burrito, only to find out that even excellent food couldn’t keep his attention from straying to Colby and the way his jeans were hugging his firm ass. Or the way the gentle breeze was blowing his bangs into his eyes. Dalton’s fingers twitched with the need to sweep them back. Those emerald-green eyes never failed to mesmerize him.

“And speaking of great bods, let me tell you, Harper is certainly making mine wake up and take notice.”

Talk about a not so great segue.

Dalton could practically feel his blood pressure shooting up. “Are you fucking serious? Harper? As in bigoted asshole Harper?”

“Now, Dalton. I didn’t say he was without his faults. Just that his body rocks.”

Dalton felt the need to protect Makayla from herself. Harper was trouble with a capital T. No matter if he’d started sniffing around her, after she’d read him the riot act the other day, there was no way that Dalton was going to stand by and watch one of his best buds get hurt.

“Don’t you ‘now Dalton’ me, young lady. This is serious, and there is no way that I’m letting him hurt you. You just take your *whatever* and tell it to move on to a more appropriate body to be getting all turned on about. I mean it. You and Harper? That’s *not* going to happen on my watch.”

And there was the look that could put the fear of god into any poor sap that got caught in its path.

“Dalton Harris, you did *not* just tell me what I could or could not do. I thought you learned that lesson way back in elementary school when you told me that girls weren’t allowed in your tree house. I don’t know who put the smackdown on you faster, me or your mama. Is that a lesson that needs repeatin’? Because I’m just the one to deliver it. I want him. I will have him. You’ll see. He really is a great person underneath all of that bullshit that he’s been programmed to believe from his daddy. And you can bet that there has been a large amount of groveling being done on his part, and I have been giving him a much needed education on the realities of discrimination. So you see, I have been setting him straight on all of that before we even try to figure out what’s going on between us.” Makayla finished with a quiver of her bottom lip and a swipe of her hand to catch a tear that was trying to work its way down her face.

Well, hell.

Dalton dropped his plate onto the ground and quickly wrapped her in a big bear hug. Shushing her as he held her tight. It wasn’t very often that they got to see the softer side of Makayla. He knew right then that she’d have *her* Harper. Of course, not before he, maybe with Colby along for backup, put the fear of god into him. Because no one, and he meant *no one*, messed with his Makayla and lived to tell about it.

Okay, that may have been a little over the top, but...

“Shush. It’s okay. If it’s Harper you want, then it’s Harper you’ll have. Just remember, I’m here if you need me for anything. And I mean anything. You got that?” Gently raising her head, Dalton placed a tender kiss on her forehead.

“Damn. I hate when I cry. What if he doesn’t really like me? Dalton, I’m not sure that I’ll be able to handle that. I just know in my heart that we’re meant to be together. You’ll see what I mean someday, when you find that one person that’s meant just for you.” A sharp gasp from Colby reminded Dalton that he wasn’t alone in this situation. He glanced over, only to become aware of a very strange look on Colby’s face. He couldn’t quite put his finger on it, but *shock* would’ve been the best word to describe what he was seeing.

“Hey, we’ll get this all worked out, somehow. But in the meantime, this food has our names written all over it. So, let’s eat, and then we can tackle the Harper issue. What do you say? Feel like eating a bite or two? That is if there’s any left over when I get finished with it.” The small smiles he received from both Makayla and Colby let him know that everything was going to be all right.

Now, all he had to figure out was how to tell Colby about the incident with Harper. He'd been putting it off. But, it looked like that wasn't an option anymore. Colby had to know what was going on, so that he could help come up with a plan to bring Harper into the twenty-first century.

And, what the fuck is up with those looks I keep seeing on Colby's face?

Okay, here's the plan... Let Colby come up with the plan...

Dalton scurried around the apartment, doing busywork, as his mama referred to it, because he sure the hell didn't know why this had seemed like such a great idea last night. But after seeing how serious Makayla was about Harper during the picnic yesterday, he had no choice but to come clean with Colby. And the sooner-the-better. To say that this was something that he really didn't want to address would have been an understatement. But he had promised Makayla to help with the Harper issue, and he needed Colby with him to take care of that. He knew that the next few hours were going to be some of the most difficult of his life. He really should've told Colby about what Harper had done before now, but he'd been so sure that it would never be important. But, this was Makayla, and Dalton had found over the years that he had a protective streak a mile wide when it came to her. Also, let's face it, keeping her happy went a long way to having peace and harmony in their lives. The fact that he was willing to do just about anything for his best friend to see that she was happy, that was for her. But doing what was necessary to keep her safe? That was for him.

So, that's what tonight was all about. Movie night with Colby to lead into the "Harper" incident. The movie choice had been hard. At first, something like *Brokeback Mountain*, *Boogie Nights*, or maybe even *Dallas Buyers Club* seemed like the best way to go. But then the thought of sitting through any of those movies, trying to control the rage, and yes, the gut-wrenching fear from the attack that still bothered him from that day, was just more than Dalton could handle right now. *Sweet Home Alabama* was a much better choice. Get Colby laughing. Play on his emotions, and let him see that not all redneck, good ole' boys were racist, bigoted dumb-asses. Although, that might be a hard sell after Colby learned about the attack.

Dalton's stomach began rolling, and the bile started rising into his throat just from thinking about that day. How in the hell was he going to work up the nerve to tell Colby about it? *Okay, I'll worry about that later*, he decided as he

headed for the kitchen. Now, for the snacks. *Damn.* Carrot cake, he should've made one for tonight. *Why can't I be a better planner? Why do I always leave everything 'til later?* Dalton couldn't believe how flustered he was getting. For fuck's sake it was only Colby. Yeah, right, that was the whole damn problem.

The sound of the doorbell rang through the apartment. *Thank fuck.* He was finally here.

Dalton took a quick check in the mirror by the door. Shook his head at how ridiculous that was and pulled the door open.

"Hey, man. Glad you could make it tonight," Dalton said as he stepped aside to let Colby into the apartment.

"Are you kidding? Turn down movie night with my best bud, not gonna happen. I brought snacks. Have you picked out a movie yet?" Colby asked as he showed Dalton the two grocery bags full of chips and sodas.

"Here, put your things over with mine." Dalton pointed at the coffee table in front of the sofa. "I made popcorn. Seemed like the thing to have for movie night."

Really, Dalton? Open mouth and let stupid just pour out.

Shit, this wasn't working, Colby in the apartment, with no Makayla to chaperone. Why the fuck did he feel the need for a freakin' chaperone? And why did being here alone with Colby get his heart racing, making it hard for him to catch his breath?

Now wasn't the time for all of the shit that was running through his head and driving him crazy. He had to calm the fuck down and get this done for Makayla. Because making sure she gets her man and that he treats her right was the goal for tonight.

And when had catching his breath or slowing his heart rate needed a conscientious effort? Oh man, he was so fucked. Was Colby even aware of the feelings that he was causing to race through Dalton's body? And where were these feelings coming from? He wasn't gay. Yeah, right. So why was having Colby stand so close to him turning him on like nobody's business? Maybe it was time to quit asking himself these stupid questions and listen to the answers that his heart had been trying to tell him.

Shit, maybe later.

Making a beeline straight for the kitchen, he yelled back to a very concerned looking Colby that he was getting some glasses of ice for the soda.

He had to get himself out of the same room that Colby was in. This wasn't going well at all.

“Hey, *Sweet Home Alabama*, I can't believe you actually found a movie that I haven't seen,” Colby said as Dalton made his way back into the living room.

“Yeah, I thought we could use a few laughs. Things have just gotten way too serious around here lately.” Dalton handed over one of the glasses and made himself comfortable on the sofa. He indicated the other end of the sofa and told Colby, “Plop down and let's get the movie started.”

Colby grabbed the bowl of popcorn and proceeded to get comfortable also. He sat down on the sofa with his back into the corner with his legs sprawled towards Dalton, taking up over half of the space. Dalton mentally banged his head on the metaphorical desk, picked up the remote and hit the *play* button. It was going to be a very long trying evening.

Callused fingers softly running through his hair. A warm, but firm pillow under his head. The feeling of weightlessness, floating gently in the dark. Callused fingers softly running down his chest. Plucking ever so lightly at his nipple. Tugging ever so lightly on the small silver hoop. Tingling chills swept down his spine. Icy, cold wind blowing across his face. A rock hard bed at his back. PAIN shooting through his head. Anger! Fear! Sobs!

“Hey, it's okay. I'm here.” Colby's soft, deep voice slowly pulled Dalton awake. The nightmare slowly became nothing more than a vague memory. *Fuck*. The same damn dream he'd been having off and on since the day of the attack. When the hell had he fallen asleep?

“Dalton? Are you okay? Do you want to talk about it?”

The feel of Colby gently pushing his sweaty bangs off of his forehead let Dalton know that he had to tell Colby everything, like right now. Raising his head from where it had been using Colby's leg as a pillow—*when the hell did that happen?* Dalton pushed himself up off the sofa, making sure not to touch Colby's leg and started to pace.

“Well, see... Damn. I was hoping I wouldn't have to tell you about this.” Dalton muttered, trying to find the right words. Then the flood gates opened and there was no stopping it. “Harper attacked me a couple of weeks ago, outside the library. He pushed me hard against the wall. Busted the back of my head and was saying shit about us being gay. I mean, really? Where did he get

off saying shit like that to me? He pushed me again and it scared me that time. I wasn't thinking clearly. Everything was all messed up in my head. I was ready to fight back. But then Makayla showed up. I don't know what would've happened if she hadn't shown up early to meet me there. She laid into him. Man, it was wild watching her give him hell. Telling him the way it was and threatening to call the law."

Wow! Talk about easing into things.

Dalton watched as Colby slowly went from caring and concerned, to stiff and questioning.

"And I'm just now hearing about this, why?" Colby asked, the anger apparent in his voice. "Because, I'd think this is something you'd tell your best friend. Wouldn't you?"

It broke Dalton's heart to see what he knew was hurt in Colby's eyes. "I'm so sorry. I've been so worried about my own embarrassment it never occurred to me you'd look at it like that. As a lack of trust. I just wanted to put it behind me, and forget that it had ever happened. Now you're pissed, and I understand why. This is all on me. I should've told you that first day like Makayla told me to. Instead, I just pretended that it'd never happened which didn't really work because of the damn nightmares. Hell, I've fucked this up so badly I don't know how to make it right with you. I never meant to... can you...?" Dalton might not understand his attraction to Colby, but the one thing he was sure of; he didn't want to lose their friendship.

Dalton watched as the anger slowly left Colby's face, but there was no missing the fine sheen of tears as he rapidly blinked to keep them from falling.

"I just need to know that you're safe. Don't ever be too embarrassed to tell me anything. You're my best friend. I've never allowed myself to get this close to anyone before, and I thought that what we had was special. But if you can't trust me to be there for you, when you need me. Then..."

Dalton's heart broke all over again.

"I do. I mean, I will. From now on. I promise. I really didn't mean to tell you quite like that." Dalton wiped at his own damp eyes. "I sorta had a plan. But, well, that didn't work out too great, what with me falling asleep and all. So, now you know why I was so upset when Makayla told me that she'd been talking to Harper, and that he was important to her. I need to know she's going to be safe. Honestly, when he'd say shit to us before the attack, my first thought

was to make sure that you were safe. Then, damn, he came at me. I didn't see that one coming. Not at all."

Colby snorted, and Dalton watched as the now familiar snarky smile lit up his face.

"So, I'm not even going to get into the whole 'I can take care of myself' argument with you. Just know that I can, and that I will help to protect the people I care about. That being you and Kayla. Now back to what you were saying. We need a plan, right?" Colby asked with his infamous waggling of those perfect eyebrows. "Well, plans just happen to be my specialty. Let's see what we can do to make it safer for all three of us and figure out a way for Makayla to still get her man."

"Yeah, that sounds like a plan." Dalton sighed in relief. That had actually gone better than he'd thought it would.

Colby

Problem fixed...

Colby sat looking out the car window, his anger silently boiling over as he thought about what the asshole had done to Dalton. And then on top of that, the fact that Dalton hadn't had enough faith in their friendship to tell him about it when it happened. If Makayla hadn't set her sights on the asshole, he doubted that Dalton would've ever talked about the attack and the nightmares would probably have continued to plague him. But, now they were on their way to set things straight with Harper, and he damn well had better get it the first time, because Colby couldn't promise that he would play nice if they had to confront him a second time.

"Hey, are you doing okay over there? You're awfully quiet. This is a good plan. Like you said, he'll back down and listen if we do this together. It's going to work, and Makayla is going to get her man." Dalton's voice came through as a mix of hope and a bit of fear.

"Truthfully, I don't give a flying fuck about Makayla getting her man. My main concern is your freakin' safety. Which I wouldn't have even known you were in danger if it hadn't been for Makayla." Colby snarled and then felt bad about it. "Damn. Just look over me. My temper is riled, and I should be taking it out on Harper, not you. Sorry, man. Are we almost there?" As soon as the words left his mouth he turned to watch Dalton burst out laughing and couldn't help laughing himself.

“I’m sorry, man... Seriously? Are we there yet? Totally classic moment!” Dalton could barely get the words out in between the bursts of laughter.

“Shut the hell up. It wasn’t that fuckin’ funny. Well, maybe it was, but... hell.” Colby’s head thumped on the side glass and set Dalton’s laughter off all over again.

Pulling the Civic into the parking lot beside the library, Dalton parked, and Colby heard him suck in a deep breath. He knew that this was going to be hard for Dalton. Confronting his attacker, and putting on a brave face while doing it, just showed how brave his man really was. They had decided that the best place for this to play out was at the scene of the crime, as it were. Colby had done some checking around, and they knew that Harper would be at the library with a tutor ’til five o’clock. So he figured they would just wait for him to come out and have a little conversation with him. Them doing the talking, and him doing the listening. Damn, this had to work, because he wasn’t taking any chances with Dalton’s life. He planned on them spending many happy years together, and that asshole Harper or any other bigoted freak wasn’t going to stop his happy ever after from happening. He would get his man, just like they were going to make sure that Makayla got her man.

“Okay, let’s do this.” Colby flicked Dalton on the shoulder and turned to get out of the car.

“Ouch, attack victim here, show a little respect for the wounded please.” It was good to hear Dalton finally comfortable enough to joke about the whole thing.

“Yeah, yeah. Whatever. If being a sissy girl is what you were going for... let me tell you... you nailed it.” Colby jumped to the side just in time to keep Dalton from landing a solid hit to the back of his head.

“Hey, there he is. And, he’s by himself. Let’s make our move, now.” Dalton took off in a quick sprint, and Colby barely caught up with him in time to stand side by side as they confronted Harper.

“Listen up, asshole.” Dalton started, just as they had planned.

“Now, Dalton, don’t be like that. Give the guy a chance. He might surprise you.” Colby added his line with just the right touch of understanding and concern.

“What? You guys got a problem, or something?” Harper asked, his head swinging back and forth, obviously not wanting to take his eyes off of either one of them if he could help it.

“Well, actually, we were hoping that we could all three have a little talk about your bigoted-ass attitude, And how you are getting ready to miss out on the best thing that could ever happen to you in your sorry ass life.” Okay, maybe Colby wasn’t as over his anger as he’d thought he was.

“I don’t understand. What are you talking about? Is this about the other day when I roughed up your little sweetie pie over there?”

And, that was all it took. Colby grabbed Harper tightly by the front of his shirt and jerked him quickly to the left, causing him to lose his balance just long enough for Dalton to push him from the right and then maneuver him to the side of the building.

“Now, listen up asshole. We don’t care where you came from, or what your *daddy* taught you, that ain’t no excuse for the filth that keeps spouting out of your mouth. You are an adult now, and you need to start thinking for yourself. Your bigoted attitude is going to lose you any chance that you might have with Makayla. Although, I seriously can’t understand what the fuck she sees in you to begin with. But, if you have feelings for her, and I think you do...” Harper tried to interrupt, but Colby wasn’t having any of that shit. “Shhhh... not done yet. I will talk, and you will listen and maybe, maybe, you will get a chance to have Makayla in your life. Now, you came to college to learn, at least I hope so. So listen and hear what I am saying. Use the brain that god gave you for something other than spouting out the filth that your dad or whoever has been telling you. Think for yourself. Look around you at the real world. The one that you are going to have to spend the rest of your life in. Look at Makayla and what a wonderful woman she is, regardless of her race or what you think of her friends. Does her being of mixed-race make her any less attractive to you? Don’t you think if she is smart enough to know that us being gay doesn’t change how she feels about us, then maybe you need to take a look at what you really think about it yourself, not what you have been taught to think.” Colby watched as Harper slowly started nodding his head up and down. Hope began to spread through him. Maybe he’d found the right words to make Harper see that what he’d been taught was so very wrong.

“Yeah, okay. I mean, Makayla means a lot to me. And I have been worried about what my family would say if they found out about her. But they would be wrong. She is wonderful. She has been really decent to me. Even after the shit I pulled on Dalton, and man, I’m really sorry about that. I just need to pull my head out of my ass. And you’re right. I do have a brain, and I need to start using it. I really think that this thing between me and Makayla is the real thing. You

know what I mean? And I don't want to fuck that up. Maybe my family will come to see her for the beautiful person she is inside and out and maybe they won't... but I can't let them ruin this for me. I was wrong to treat you guys the way I did. And I know it will be hard for you to forgive me, but I hope that you can. I don't want Makayla to ever feel like she has to choose between us."

"Damn, do you need to stop and take a breath or something?" Dalton asked Harper as a grin spread across his face.

"Man, I really am sorry that I hurt you that day. It never should have happened. And I hate to think how far it could've went if it hadn't been for Makayla. I think you three may have saved my life. Because there is no telling how it would've gone down if she hadn't showed up. My bigoted ass, as you called it, could've ended up in a shitload of trouble, because I *was* letting their words come out of my mouth instead of using the brain that I have to find my own words. But, I promise that will change. Even if this thing with Makayla and me doesn't work out, I will never let someone else's prejudices rule my life."

"Damn, I believe him. And, I *really* wanted to have an excuse to kick his ass," Dalton said as he punched Harper in the shoulder with just a bit more force than a friendly punch should've had.

"Yeah, well, don't give up hope yet. He may just need a *friendly* reminder every now and then, and we will be right there to give it to him if he does." Colby put his hand on Harper's shoulder and gave it a squeeze. "How 'bout we all go grab a Pepsi and call this a done deal?"

It was the Sunday before Thanksgiving, and Dalton was planning to enjoy a rare day off from work. It looked to be a good day. He had started it off right by sleeping in late. And now he was meeting Colby to try out a new restaurant. Some friends had taken Colby there when he'd first come up to Marshall to give the campus a look over, and he claimed the food was some of the best he'd ever eaten. Dalton parked the Civic at the only available meter in front of Black Sheep, where Colby told him they would meet up. Colby had asked if he and Makayla had wanted to try out this really great restaurant on Sunday for brunch. He couldn't remember actually going to brunch before, but Colby swore that they had the best French toast in the world, and Dalton's sweet tooth wasn't passing up a chance to give it a try.

So here he was, minus Makayla who had to go visit her grandparents. Wasn't this going to be interesting. Dalton took a deep breath trying to center

himself. What in the world were they going to talk about? The weather? Politics? Dalton's strange attraction to Colby? Well, maybe they should skip that last one. Just to be on the safe side, for now.

"Dalton, I see you lucked out with parking," Colby said as he approached from the sidewalk. "I wasn't so lucky. But I'm just down the street. So I didn't have far to walk."

"Hey."

Yeah, like that's really going to get the conversation started, Dalton thought as he turned and saw that Colby had stopped just a couple of feet from him. He stood there, watching in silent awe as the bright rays of sunlight danced off the highlights threading through Colby's hair.

Fuck, is there anything that's not perfect about this guy?

"I didn't think or I'd have suggested we just ride over together, or we could've walked. After sitting in class all week, the exercise would've been great."

Dalton let his gaze quickly take in the view before him and couldn't see anywhere on Colby's body that was in need of a workout. He was one of those guys that was just lean enough to be healthy but had muscle in all the right places.

"Well, if the food here is as good as you say it is, then we both will need to get in a little exercise afterwards." *Oh shit. Now didn't that just come out wrong.* "I mean, we could go r-running or s-something," Dalton stammered as he felt the heat rise in his cheeks.

With a wink and a grin, Colby replied, "Yeah, that sounds like a plan."

As they walked through the door, the volume of voices was surprisingly loud. For such a small restaurant, it sure was packed. Dalton found himself admiring the antique bar that ran down the right side of the room, along with the local artwork displayed on the walls. The tables were placed closely together, and he could hear most of the conversations that were going on. Not only at each table, but in some instances between three or four tables at the same time. Everyone seemed to know everyone else. For just a moment he felt a little out of place.

"Hey guys! Table for two?" A very young and apparently, if going by the way Colby was giving him the once over, very good-looking waiter came over and inquired.

“Yeah, that’d be great. Or we could just sit at the bar if you need us to,” Colby quickly replied before Dalton could even speak.

“Perfect. We have a great mimosa if you guys would like me to bring you a carafe to get you started?” He turned and laid a couple of menus down on the bar. “On the other hand, how about a couple of large ice-cold glasses of orange juice? Unless you two have some ID that you’d like to share with me.” With a wink, he slowly ran his eyes from the top of Colby’s head down to what Dalton was now coming to understand was a very fine package.

“Yeah, you could start us with the orange juice. Then we’ll check out what you’ve got,” Colby said as he slid onto the bar stool and opened one of the menus. “Sound like a plan to you, babe?” His devilish grin and casual endearment caused Dalton’s palms to sweat and set his heart to pounding just a little faster.

“Why yes, that sounds just perfect to me, *sweet pea*.” Trying not to laugh, both of them nodded to the waiter as he turned to walk away, and Dalton slid onto the stool beside of Colby’s.

“What in the world was that all about? *Babe*? Seriously? I didn’t know whether to punch you or play along. Good thing for you I’m starved. Food is my top priority.”

They each began to look over their menus. Just as the bartender brought their juice over, Dalton decided to break the silence and give conversation a try.

“So, it would appear that *brunch* is alive and well right here in Huntington, West Virginia. Who would’ve thought?”

Being seated at the bar gave them a small amount of privacy, so Dalton gave himself permission to take a quick glance at Colby’s profile. For someone who had never really noticed guys before, Dalton was certainly noticing Colby. That dark hair, those bright-green eyes, and then there were his freakin’ perfect eyebrows. Gah! Add those to the perfectly sloped jawline... *Oh, man...*

Colby grinned as he caught Dalton looking. The cheeky bastard obviously couldn’t resist saying, “See anything you like?”

Dalton was sure that Colby could see the red-hot flush of embarrassment as it rushed to cover his cheeks, so he quickly dropped his gaze back to the menu in his hand. “Everything looks great, but we could pick out two and share.”

Yeah, concentrate on the obvious meaning of the question and ignore the innuendo. That, along with thinking calm thoughts should get the blush back

under control. Dalton peeked at Colby through his bangs and asked, “Does that sound good to you?”

“Oh yeah, two for one. Can’t go wrong with that idea. So which one are you going to get? I was pretty sure that I was getting the French toast with blueberries from the get-go, but the biscuit and gravy with breaded chicken and fried potatoes sure does sound good too.”

“Well, I can get the biscuit and gravy, and you can try some of it. I can guarantee that I plan on trying some of that French toast you’re getting.”

Dalton hadn’t even realized that they were sitting there, silent, staring into each other’s eyes until the waiter came over and leaned against the bar. “If you two can pull your eyes off of each other long enough to order, I’ll leave you guys alone.” Placing the back of his hand onto his forehead, the waiter teased them both. “Ahh, young love. Ain’t it grand?”

Shaking their heads at the waiter’s foolishness, they placed their order, and it went without saying that they both watched him sashay away.

“Have you? I mean, have you ever been in love before?” Dalton asked Colby. Not sure what possessed him to ask, but desperately wanting to hear the answer.

“Well, I thought I was once but found out it was just the discovery of lust. Don’t get me wrong, there not a thing wrong with lust. It happens to everyone, eventually. As a matter of fact, I’ve been in lust a few times since I met my seventh grade gym teacher. She was hot and I was hooked, until I meet the new kid later that year. Boy, did he show me new ways to pass the time during lunch break. But love? Not really. Although, I’m finding out that you usually find it where and when you least expect it. How about you? Any lost loves in your jaded past?” Colby asked with a smirk as he placed his elbow on the bar and resting his head on the palm of his hand, he gazed intensely into Dalton’s eyes.

“Seriously? Me? I’ve been way too busy for love, or lust for that matter. The only *real* relationship—I can’t believe I just said that—I’ve ever had was the few months during senior year that Makayla and I tried our hand at dating each other. Yeah, that so didn’t work. I do love Makayla, but, I was never in love with her. I sorta wished that I had been. That maybe it would’ve worked, in a way. I think I was just looking for something that was missing in my life but us being a couple wasn’t it. You know what I mean? I knew that I’d never be able to love her like she deserved. So, nah. It was best that we decided to end it and went back to just being best friends.” Dalton slowly wound down, all the

while unconsciously mimicking Colby's elbow-on-the-bar position, and giving him a clear view of Colby's face.

"Yeah, I know what you mean. Can you imagine how boring things would be around here without her?" Colby leaned in even closer to Dalton. "So? There hasn't been anyone who has tried to lay claim to your heart in the past? Well, I just hope when love does come along that you're open to the possibility of it actually being love."

Dalton just sat there. Speechless. Refusing to even acknowledge what Colby had said. The clank from the waiter setting their plates on the bar gave him no choice but to look up.

"Okay, you two love birds. Hope you enjoy. Give me a holler if you need anything. Anything at all."

Placing his mouth near Dalton's ear, he continued, "The name is Brady, by the way, and I'd be up for anything if it involved you two lovelies."

"Oh. Well. Ummm. Thanks, but, no offense..." Dalton's mouth felt like it was stuffed with cotton. He took a large gulp of orange juice trying to cover up his inability to speak.

"Sorry, but my babe is a one-man kinda guy," Colby explained. "One of the many things I love about him."

The acute burning sensation of orange juice flooding his nostrils before spewing across the bar made Dalton's eyes water and his whole body heat, just not in a good way.

"Aww. Now isn't that just so sweet." Patting Dalton on the back, the waiter gave them both a wink and headed over to take another order.

"W-wow, this certainly looks delicious," Dalton blurted out when he finally got the wheezing under control and his voice to work. It was that or run out of the restaurant screaming.

"Yes, it does. Here, let me give you a piece of this French toast and that'll make room for me to try some of yours." The laughter shining from Colby's eyes wasn't teasing. Thank god. Dalton felt his face flush again, though this time for a whole different reason.

"I'm sure glad *one* of us is having a good time. Really? How do I let you get me into these situations? Well, no more. I mean it. And what's up with his over-the-top flirting anyways?"

“It just so happens that Brady was our waiter when I was here before. There may have been a slight mutual attraction. That progressed to a slightly higher level...”

“What the fuck? Are you telling me that you slept with him?” Dalton’s voice came out a little louder than he’d planned. Several nearby heads turned in curiosity to catch the answer to the question.

“Now, babe, it was way before I met you. He’s a nice enough guy. But he could never be you.”

The son of a bitch. He did it to me again.

“Would you just shut the fuck up. Let’s eat our food before it gets cold.” Dalton figured stupid would quit pouring out of his mouth if it was full. He just hadn’t taken into consideration how it would affect him as he watched Colby’s lips wrapping sensuously around a fork.

Chapter Eight

Country roads take me home...

Christmas break was finally here. All the hassles of finals were finished and done with. Dalton's gaze drifted over to Colby who was skimming through his Facebook page, sending what appeared to be Christmas greetings to those who were on their way home to visit their families also. Earlier in the week, when Dalton had overheard Colby's conversation with his parents about their plans for the Christmas holidays, his first thought had been... *Who in their right mind takes a cruise at Christmas and doesn't invite their kids along?* They might've only known each other for a few months, but Dalton knew that taking Colby home with him for the holidays was the right thing to do. Not to mention that when he asked Makayla for her thoughts she was all over him to get it done. Now! That girl really needed to take up yoga or something before she crashed and burned on all of her excess energy.

Of course, when he phoned his parents, he was told that they didn't understand why he'd even bothered to call and ask. The more the merrier had *always* been their motto. Then there was the fact that Colby was quickly working his way into their hearts. The huge turkey he'd had delivered to them for Thanksgiving had been a big hit. But the pictures that he sent to them religiously of Dalton, of Dalton and Makayla, or the ones of all three of them together seemed to be the thoughtful act that they really appreciated the most.

"So, Makayla just messaged me. She said to tell you that she might need us to head over to her folks' house later this evening. I'm thinking that she doesn't want to do the 'meet the parents' thing all by herself when she introduces them to Harper." As he chewed on his lower lip, Colby's concern was obvious. "Will her parents have a problem with Harper? I mean, with the race issue. I guess I should've asked before this." Dalton could tell that this was something that was very upsetting for Colby when he continued, "But it never really came up before, because Makayla's just Makayla. A sassy, intelligent, sometimes mule-headed, but always captivating young woman that anyone would love to be with. I mean, is it going to matter to them that he's white? I'd hate that for Makayla. I think she's really into him."

Dalton figured he had "lack of oxygen" more than anything else to thank for Colby finally winding down. His ramblings brought a smile to Dalton's face though. How sweet that Colby was worried about Makayla. Although she usually came off as having it together, even she had her insecurities.

“No worries. Her mama is Asian, and her daddy’s parents are Caucasian and African American, which explains what a beauty our Makayla is.”

“Great. Then why the need for us to be there when they meet Harper?”

“Well, let’s just say that Makayla tells her parents just about everything. About her. About me. About you. So, all they’ve heard about Harper is what a bigoted ass he is. Makayla’s words, not mine.”

“Ahhh, so they know about the shit he pulled on us. Wow, he really is going to be a tough sell.”

“Yeah, you could say that. But as we know—What Makayla wants—Makayla gets. So I’d say the Harper issue is a done deal.”

As he watched Colby’s head nod in comprehension, Dalton reflected on all the things that he’d been slowly learning about Colby in just the short time that they had known each other. Like how much he loved good food, or the fact that his parents were total asses, but still managed to have a great kid. Then there was Colby’s fascination with his piercings and tattoo. He had been surprised the day that Colby had asked him if there was a special meaning behind the tattoo that he had on his shoulder. No one had ever asked what it meant to him before, but it felt right to explain its significance to Colby. How he wanted to remember that every child deserved the love of a mother, whether it was their birth mother, or a mother in another form, or even a loving father that fulfilled a child’s need for love, caring and understanding. It was the symbol that he had chosen to remind him that his life’s work had a purpose, especially during the bad times, and he was afraid that there would be many of those in his future career. It was to remind him every day that there is always hope.

Colby had quickly turned his head away, and Dalton had been afraid that he’d somehow hurt his feelings. Maybe Colby thought he’d been referring to his parents. But then Colby had turned back around, the look of joy on his face said it all. And that was when he told Dalton he was going to become a pediatrician for the same reason. To help make sure that the children were cared for. In that moment, Dalton knew for certain he’d heard his heart talking and it was going to get harder and harder to ignore it now.

Dalton enjoyed spending time with Colby during the road trip home. Like when they were fighting over what music they were going to listen to, he’d quickly found out that there was no way they would ever agree on the music issue. Colby was all about the *meaning* of a song, and he liked the more laid-back classics. On the other hand, they both could talk about Herd football and

basketball and never have a moment of disagreement. They'd spent the past few hours ribbing each other and having a great time, but a sense of heartfelt relief passed through Dalton when he pulled into the driveway of his parents' small two-story home. As they climbed out of the car, Dalton watched, not the least bit surprised, as Colby's eyes grew wide. It was like a scene out of *National Lampoon's Christmas Vacation*. Christmas decorations lit up every available inch of the house and yard. Colby just stood there in... astonishment? Horror? Fascination? Dalton couldn't be sure which one, and maybe that was for the best.

"Yeah, I know. My daddy loves three things. My mama, his guns, and Christmas decorations," Dalton said as he shook his head in wonder. "I can't believe it, but he's managed somehow to put up even more of them this year than he had last year."

"Wait, you said he loved three things. Where are you in those three? Because, I know your dad couldn't be prouder of you if he tried."

"Well, when I asked him about that he said, 'Dalton, I picked your mother and that's the best decision I've ever made in my life. My guns, they are there to protect what your mother and I have worked so hard to own. But, you? You were a gift to me. God gave you to me. You're a part of me.' He kinda scares me sometimes, when he comes up with shit like that."

"But it sure made you feel good inside though, didn't it?"

How did Colby figure that out so quickly?

"Yeah, he's great. But, remember, I warned you about his gun collection. He treats them like his babies. Wants to show them off to anyone who's interested."

The bang of the front door was the only warning they had before they were attacked. If you could consider the little ball of fur that was wrapping itself around Dalton's ankle and yapping in hypomanic excitement an attack.

"Hello, Hercules." Dalton bent down to pick up the small dog, but was unsuccessful.

"Hercules! You guys named that *thing* Hercules?" Colby let out a loud snort. "I-I just... I'm sorry, but... Hercules? Really?" Colby's laughter rolled out of him so hard he was holding his side and swiping at the tears as they rolled out of the corners of his eyes.

Dalton stood up straight, having finally captured the wiggling ball of fur.

“Now, don’t be that way. He’s a wonderful guard dog. Always chasing the strays out of our yard. He’s the only one that doesn’t know that he isn’t a German shepherd.” *It* was blissfully quiet and quite content now that it had been captured and was being scratched under the chin, and between its ears, and down its back.

“Damn, you were right. He’s one hell of an attention whore. I didn’t really get what you were saying until now. Dude, he’s spoiled rotten.” Colby slowly reached over and tentatively pet the dog, only to find himself with an armful of fur that was knocking its little head against his chin, demanding immediate attention. His fingers gently scratched under its chin, and a friendship was made for life.

“Dalton, get your ass in here. I’m not going to hold the door open forever. And put down the damn dog. He’s spoiled enough already without you two making it worse.” Was bellowed by the man standing on the porch, who was the image of what Dalton would look like twenty or so years down the road.

“Okay. Keep your pants on. We’re comin’.” They ducked down to grab their backpacks from the backseat of the car and headed towards the front porch.

Colby

Facing fear...

“Jinx is loose!” The scream came from deep inside the house. Everyone froze. The fur ball lunged for the porch, landed on all four paws, and started with that infernal yapping again.

“What? Jinx? What’s a jinx?” Colby felt a small twinge of fear, which quickly changed to—“Oh. My. God.” What looked to be a white streak, traveling at lightning-quick speed was headed right for him. The ferocious growling and snarling could only mean one thing. Imminent death. More specifically, an excruciatingly painful death. His breath froze in his lungs, and Colby now knew what life-threatening fear felt like.

“That dang she-devil. I’m going to send her to the pound this time. I mean it. The pound.” A woman of short stature was running behind the... dog? Carrying a yellow... flyswatter? It was like a whole other universe, right here in West Virginia.

“For goodness sake. Don’t just stand there. Somebody grab her collar.”

The words sit, stay, stop, and down were rolling out, one right after the other. But there appeared to be no stopping the dog.

Heart in his throat, beating so hard he was surprised it didn't bust right out, Colby dropped to his knees. He decided that if he was going down, he was taking the damn dog with him.

It stopped. The beast just stopped. Colby felt its cold, wet nose as it pressed against his T-shirt covered chest. The low growl that followed wasn't encouraging.

He slowly brought his hand around. Palm down. Mouth so dry he couldn't even swallow. Colby offered the dog a soft greeting. "Hello, Jinx. Good... girl?" A questioning look sent Dalton's way confirmed his guess. Taking a deep breath, Colby turned his hand up to rub the underside of the dog's chin. His hand moved on up, gently rubbing her long, soft ears between his fingers. A small whimper emitted from the dog as she butted his hand. And then his chest was butted with her head in a demand for yet more attention. The battle was won.

The sound of deep sighs was heard from all around him as he continued to pet the beautiful beast named Jinx. "What a pretty girl you are. Oh, yes, you're such a beauty." Over and over, Colby spoke softly, and the dog sent him looks of newly found devotion.

Shock was the only word to describe the look on everyone's face, when he actually found the courage to look away from the dog that was obviously eating up the attention that she was receiving.

"Well. That went... ummm, well? Okay then. Let's all head inside and get you boys something warm to drink. Hot cocoa with marshmallow cream sound good?" Dalton's mother, Colby assumed she was Dalton's mother, turned and made her way back through the door of the house.

"Yeah, Mama, hot cocoa would be perfect. It's great to be home again. Did you make me a peach pie?" Dalton called after her as he shrugged his shoulders at Colby as if to say *welcome to my life* then followed his mom into the house.

"Don't worry, son. That's just the way they are. Sorry about the scare, and umm... Welcome to our home." Dalton's dad patted Colby on the shoulder and turned to trail after the other two.

With his heartbeat finally calmed down to a normal rate, Colby sent a firm glare towards the dog that was now sitting at his feet. "You know that could've

went really badly for me, don't you? If you hadn't decided to be my friend, right?" He reached down and gave Jinx one last pat on the head. Then with a grin, he picked up the discarded backpack and headed in, shutting the door behind the dog as she followed him inside.

The smell of fresh-baked peach pie hit him in the face as he turned to take off his hoodie.

So, this is what a real home smells like.

Colby

Family love...

"Okay, we're heading out. We shouldn't be too late. Call if you need us."

"Bye, dear. You two have a good time. Don't hurry back, Dad and I are going to head up to bed here in just a few minutes. We'll see you boys in the morning."

Dalton bent down and kissed his mother's soft cheek. She then turned expectantly to Colby.

"Son, you may as well just give in. She has a way of getting what she wants every time." Dalton's dad spoke up.

With a strange feeling in his stomach, Colby leaned down and gently placed a kiss on her cheek, catching a slight scent of roses.

"Oh, honey, you better watch out. You might have some competition here," she said as she lovingly looked back at Dalton's father.

"I'm not worried. Have I told you about my gun collection, Colby?"

Dalton and Colby simultaneously turned to each other and burst out laughing. "No sir, you haven't. But I sure would like to have a look at it sometime."

"Hell, you keep flirtin' with my woman, and you might get to see one sooner than you thought." Dalton's dad threatened with a smile.

"Oh my word. Leave the boy alone," Mrs. Harris said while patting both boys on the cheek. "You two be careful and enjoy the movie."

Colby was hit with an unusual sense of longing as he watched Dalton's parents turn to climb the stairs arm-in-arm. How was it that he'd lived with his

parents for over eighteen years and had never seen even the slightest hint of affection shown between the two of them? Shaking his head in confusion, he turned to Dalton and caught a look of what he thought was growing affection on his face.

“What? What’s that look all about?” Colby asked, allowing himself to feel just a small amount of hope for a future with Dalton.

“I just love to watch your face when you’re flabbergasted like you are now. You always seem to know what you want, where you want to go, and how you’re gonna get there. So for once it was nice to see you just a little unsure about something. And remember, I did warn you about the guns.” Dalton finished with what could only be described as a snort.

With a slight strut, Colby walked over and wrapped his arm around Dalton’s shoulder as they made their way towards the front door. “I don’t know that I’d say unsure, but I’ll admit that your parents intrigue me. Their love for each other is so tangible that it just hits you in the gut. Man, it really shines through when one of them is talking about the other. And you know what the greatest thing about it is? They feel the same way about you. Awesome. That’s what it is. Awesome.”

Dalton just stood there with a dumbfounded look on his face, while Colby grabbed his black coat and pulled it on.

“Are you coming? I thought we were going to catch a movie?” Colby asked as he pulled on his thick gray gloves and his matching gray beanie.

“Ah, yeah, sure. Just let me grab my keys, and then we can head out. But, man, let me tell you—my parents? They’re just normal everyday parents. They’re great and all, but... just my parents. You know what I mean?”

“No, Dalton. I don’t think *you* understand. They’re awesome. You’re one lucky guy to have them.”

Colby could see that Dalton finally was beginning to understand what he was talking about when he started nodding his head, and a grin slowly made its way across his face.

“Yeah, man. You’re right. They are awesome parents. I guess I’m just so used to them that I forget and take them for granted sometimes.”

Dalton grabbed his Marshall hoodie out of the coat closet by the door and pulled it over his head.

As he pulled on his Herd beanie and green gloves, Dalton said, still wearing his grin, “Come on, we have a stop that I want to make on the way to the movie theater. I think I have just enough money left over to get my parents an extra special gift for Christmas this year.”

“Wow. That sure was... interesting?” Colby shoulder butted Dalton as he tried to keep the laughter out of his voice.

“Umm, yeah. Well...” The dark shade of red that was covering Dalton’s face had Colby grinning in amusement. “I really should’ve read the reviews before suggesting that movie. But I can guarantee that Makayla would’ve been all over it. Not sayin’ that it was a bad movie. It just was more of a chick flick than I was comfortable with.”

“Yeah, but we survived, and now when Makayla mentions it, we can sound all knowledgeable and she’ll be impressed,” Colby pointed out as they exited the theater.

“Yep. When it comes to Makayla, you gotta grab all the brownie points you can.”

“Hey, do we have to head straight back, or do we have time to grab a bite to eat?”

“Are you shittin’ me? Didn’t you get enough to eat when you had that second helping of Mama’s chicken and dumplings for dinner?” Dalton ducked as Colby took a swipe at his head.

“Ass. Yes, those were some excellent dumplings. But that was hours ago. I was thinking maybe something to satisfy our sweet tooth.” Colby slid down into the passenger seat of Dalton’s Civic and buckled the belt.

Dalton nodded his head and turned the key in the ignition.

“Yeah, I could go for some blackberry cobbler from over at the truck stop. Best blackberry cobbler in three counties. But, don’t tell Mama that I said that,” Dalton added with a wink. “Well, hell,” Dalton muttered under his breath following the *click, click, click* that could barely be heard.

Colby, who had been enjoying the view of how adorable Dalton looked with rosy cheeks, caused by the cold night air and his windblown hair as it fell over his forehead, quickly looked up.

“What? Is something wrong?”

“Yeah, the car won’t start. I’m not sure what’s wrong. Daddy’s fanatical about the upkeep of our vehicles.”

“Pop the hood. Maybe we can figure it out.”

With a look of extreme disbelief, Dalton questioned Colby, “Do you actually know anything about car repairs?”

Grinning sheepishly, Colby tucked his head down. “Well. No. Not actually. But that’s what everyone always says when they can’t get the car to start.”

“Yeah, well, I have no clue about motors and shit. All I can tell you is we have plenty of gas. But, that doesn’t seem to be doing us any good. I’ll just give Makayla a quick call and have her come pick us up.”

“Okay, that sounds like a plan. Damn, it’s cold out here. Maybe they haven’t locked the theater doors yet. How about I go check, while you make the call. It’ll be a hell of a lot warmer in there than it is out here,” Colby suggested as he opened the car door.

With his phone already to his ear, Dalton just waved him off while saying, “*Hey Makayla, you want to come and have some cobbler over at the truck stop with me and Colby?*”

Colby just grinned to himself and continued to get out of the car, shutting the door quickly, hoping to keep as much of the cold out as possible for Dalton.

As he jiggled the two locked front doors to the theater he knew there was no hope for it, they were just going to have to wait it out in the car. He gave his beanie a tug to bring it more securely down over his ears as he turned and headed back towards Dalton and that miserable piece of shit Honda Civic. Colby caught himself as he snorted, because he wasn’t about to repeat that in front of Dalton. His boy loved that girl with a passion. One of the many things in this universe Colby knew he’d never quite understand.

“Okay. Makayla’s on her way. But she said she was going to be twenty minutes or so. Tow truck will pick the car up first thing tomorrow morning. Any luck with the doors?” Dalton slammed the car door closed with maybe a little more force than necessary.

Stuffing his half-frozen hands in the front pockets of his jeans, Colby figured he must’ve dropped his gloves somewhere in the theater. “Nope. All locked up. I guess we’ll just have to wait in the car after all.”

The next thing he knew, Colby could actually hear, what appeared to be, growling coming from Dalton.

“What now?” Colby asked while reaching for the door handle.

“Fuck. Could the night get any worse? I locked the damn keys in the damn car,” Dalton snarled as he pointed to the interior of the car. “See? There they hang in the ignition.” They both bent down to verify that the keys were in fact hanging from the ignition. “I must’ve accidentally hit the *lock* button when I was getting out of the damn car,” Dalton observed with what sounded like disgust in his voice.

While trying hard not to burst out laughing, Colby’s hand whipped up to cover his smile as he took a quick look around. “Hey, you said Makayla was on her way, right? We could just stand over there in the alleyway. That’d cut down on this freakin’ cold wind, and it would just be for a few more minutes.”

“Yeah, yeah. That’ll work,” Dalton mumbled as he walked towards the alley. With a sigh he leaned his back against the rough brick wall, pulling his hood up and pushing his hands deep into the front pocket of his hoodie.

“So, you’ve lived here your whole life?” Colby asked as he moved in close to Dalton, trying to block out even more of the wind that howled down the alley.

“Yep. Marshall is my first time living away from home. I thought it would be different. I figured that I’d maybe loosen up a bit. Maybe check out a party or club by now. You know what I mean? But instead, I’ve come to the conclusion that I’m just a homebody at heart. Can’t seem to find much interest in going out and partying.”

“Not even to meet girls? I noticed that you haven’t exactly been wearing yourself out with the dating scene.” Colby moved in closer still to Dalton’s side, catching a whiff of the wonderfully unique scent that he’d come to associate with only Dalton.

“No, between getting classes figured out and hanging with you and Makayla, I really haven’t had much time to think about dating.” Dalton’s eyes grew wide after Colby leaned in and gently nudged Dalton’s earlobe with the tip of his nose.

“H-how about y-you? C-can’t say I’ve s-seen you out with anyone s-since we m-met,” Dalton stuttered.

Colby had to admit that he was kind’ve enjoying Dalton’s discomfort.

“To tell the truth, I’m interested in someone.” Colby reached up and gently ran his fingers through Dalton’s hair causing the hood to fall back. “The problem is that I’m not sure how he’d feel about it if I told him that I think he’s

the hottest guy that I've ever seen." Then he placed his hand at the back of Dalton's head and stretched up until his forehead was pressing softly against Dalton's. "I'm sorry, but I just *have* to know."

"K-know w-what?" Dalton stuttered, again.

"This," Colby whispered breathlessly as he placed his lips tenderly against Dalton's. Seeing the shock and maybe even a hint of fear in Dalton's gorgeous blue eyes had Colby pulling back slightly as he questioned his decision for a split second. The only sound he could hear was the two of them deeply breathing in the cold night air. Their lips just a breath apart was too much of a temptation to resist. Colby went with his heart and pulled Dalton's head down the rest of the way, and tentatively touched his lips softly against Dalton's lips once more. Then there was no sound at all. Just silence all around them as they stared unblinking into each other's eyes.

Dalton

Giving in to fate...

Dalton stood perfectly still as he tried to reconcile the feel of Colby's lips against his own and the way his heart was attempting to jump right out of his chest. Was it fear? Lust? Whatever it was, he could hardly believe this was happening to him. Sure, he knew his feelings for Colby had been changing, growing over the past few weeks. But, damn. Was he ready for this? His body screamed *yes* while his mind was taking a little longer to reach that decision. The sweet smell of butter from the popcorn that they had just eaten drifted up from Colby's hands as Dalton felt the unexpected soft touch of Colby's lips to his, it was just too much. Dalton could wait no longer for his mind to do battle with his body. *Fuck it!* Reaching up with both hands to grip the sides of Colby's face, Dalton brought their lips firmly together. This time, he took the lead. Throwing all doubts aside, he attacked Colby's mouth with heated passion.

A free-for-all ensued. Hands grabbed. Teeth clanked. Moans echoed through the alley. Gasps of longing reverberated all around them. Kiss after heated kiss. They seemed to go on forever, but at the same time felt like they could never last long enough. Hunger. Desperation. Need. All of these unfamiliar feelings were racing through Dalton's body. Thank god Colby's arms held him tight because without their support he wouldn't have been able to remain standing. He watched as Colby reached down and pulled their lower

bodies even closer together. Dalton groaned and arched his back, grinding his engorged cock harder against Colby's.

He felt his balls rising. He tried to hold back the release that was begging to burst free. Dalton knew he was close and wouldn't be able to last much longer. Colby groaned into his mouth and thrust his rock-hard groin repeatedly against Dalton's erection, bringing him even closer to the edge. Having no clue how to stop it, Dalton just gave into all the mind-boggling emotions and feelings that were taking over every inch of his body. With one final press of Colby's hip, it happened. An orgasm so intense his body seemed to shatter into a million pieces. Satisfaction roared through him as his cock spurting shot after shot of cum. He felt boneless as he collapsed against Colby's still shuddering body, but Dalton managed one last coherent thought. *OMG! I kissed a boy... and I really liked it!*

Chapter Nine

Dalton

The morning after the night before...

Something woke him from a deep sleep. Some noise, or thought. Head under the pillow, still half-asleep. There it was again. *Damn*. The phone. Colby's ringtone, "In This Diary" by the Ataris to be precise. Blindly reaching over to pat the bed, without bothering to remove the pillow. Fingers stretching. Almost there. A slight graze. Barely touching. *Thump*. The phone hit the floor. *Shit*.

Giving in to the inevitable, and with a growl, he flung the pillow off his head. Admittedly, with more force than was necessary. But hell, he just wasn't ready to deal with the reality of the night before yet. He contorted his body around to hang over the side, digging blindly in the pile of clothes that he'd shucked off before crawling into bed last night, or rather, in the early hours of morning. The sweet buttery smell of movie theater popcorn hit him square in the face. *Damn*. He was half-hard just from recalling how the delicious scent had surrounded him as Colby wrapped him in his arms last night. His fingers finally retrieved the phone. With a quick glance down and a swipe of his thumb across the screen, he saw that he was too late. The call had ended. *Fuck*.

Dalton twisted himself back up onto the bed, propping some pillows behind him. Why did it feel like this was it? Now or never. As he ran a hand through his bedraggled hair and leaned back against the headboard, he knew it was time to make a decision. He pulled his knees up to his chest and wrapped his arms tightly around them, letting his head fall to rest there. Flipping his hand over, he stared at the screen of the phone, undecided about what to do. The kiss from the night before began running through his mind like a video stuck on replay. Colby. The shock of feeling another guy's lips on his own. The wonder of how his body instantly responded, and then came the fear and questions. What should he do? The phone dings indicating that a voice mail has come through.

Uncertainty had a firm grip on him, but one thing was for sure, he needed to hear what Colby had to say. Sucking in a deep breath, he quickly went into voice mail and tapped *play* before he could change his mind...

"Hey, Dalton, this is Colby. I mean, I know you know it's me... duh. But, well, I just wanted to call and see how you're doing. I... ummm... I'm not sure if you even want to talk to me. I mean,

you would've answered the phone if you wanted to talk to me, right? Fuck. But, well, I don't want what happened last night to change us. Hell. I mean, yeah... I want things to change. If you want things to change. I really would like to see what all of this means. What it means to us. Shit, now I sound like a freakin' girl. But damn, Dalton. You know what I mean. That kiss last night? It was fuckin' hot. It also made me realize that I need to face the truth and admit that I'm gay. I think I've known for a long time, but... You know, it was easier just to let it slide and not let it mess up my life. I really don't know how my parents will handle this. Hell, I don't even know if they can handle having a gay son. But I'm not willing to just slide any more. I want to be with you. If that's what you want. God, this is so damn hard to do over the phone. I need to talk to you. Fuck. Just call me, okay? We can figure this out. If you think last night was a m-mistake. Th-then we need to talk about that. Because I don't want to lose my best friend. So... Just call me. Please?"

The sound of Colby's anguished voice ripped right through Dalton's heart. He heard the need, the fear, but most of all he heard the caring in Colby's voice. Again the uncertainty from earlier hit him hard. What should he do? He wasn't gay. He had an ex-girlfriend for fuck's sake. If he did call Colby, what would he say? Yes, I'm attracted to you. But—No, I'm not gay. So, what did that mean for them? Could he live the rest of his life without Colby in it? Hell, NO! *That* was unthinkable. There had to be a solution to this problem. There was always a solution. He had a feeling in his gut that Colby's message held the answers to all of his questions. He just had to figure out what those answers were. So...

On his way to the bathroom, he listened to the message.

Pulling on his favorite pair of soft, well-worn jeans, he listened to the message.

As he trotted quickly down the stairs, he listened to the message.

With confidence he walked down the hall as he listened to the message.

With the certainty that he now knew the answers, he opened the bedroom door. He smiled at the astonishment on Colby's face when he looked up from the phone he was still holding in the palm of his hand and saw Dalton standing in the doorway.

Dalton headed towards the bed, every step getting faster as he went, never looking away from those dazzling bright-green eyes. His hands reaching out, he threaded his fingers into Colby's soft, silky hair. Bringing his lips down to Colby's in a gentle, but undeniably passionate kiss, he whispered, "I love you."

Chapter Ten

Ten years later...

Dalton

“There’s my precious darling! Who missed her daddy? No kisses, no kisses!”

Bursts of rich, sweet laughter intermingling with the silly words of love wrapped around Dalton’s heart like a warm blanket on a cold winter night. Colby was home!

Dalton’s chuckle slipped from his lips at the mental image of Colby, down on both knees, being attacked by the wickedly fast tongue that was attached to eight pounds of overexcited dog. Savannah, their rambunctious three-year-old Pomeranian, would be attempting to scramble up his chest to get in a lick or two before Colby could get his hands around the tiny body and pretend to have a semblance of control over her.

A wide grin turned up the corners of his lips as he shook his head, and Dalton quickly returned to his task as he was certain he’d shortly be overrun by both man and beast. He methodically moved each hanger from left to right along the rod as he considered, *and rejected* each shirt. The pink button-down showcased Colby’s pale skin and dark hair, but it was silk, so it wouldn’t wash well. The green pullover was Colby’s favorite to wear when they went to a Marshall basketball game, so that one was definitely out. His hand hovered over the hanger as he considered the white cotton. But seriously, what was he thinking... *white?*

Strong arms encircled his waist from behind. Another chuckle escaped at the touch of soft, warm lips placing tender kisses to that wonderfully sensitive spot just below his left ear. Dalton teasingly pressed his ass back into Colby’s crotch. A smooth twist around allowed him to nuzzle his face into Colby’s neck as he breathed in the intoxicatingly familiar scent of his lover.

“Ummm, very nice,” Dalton moaned. “But what in the world did you do with Savannah? It’s way too quiet.”

“Brought her a new chew toy, and she’s happily attacking *it* in the backyard,” Colby answered, pulling Dalton tighter against him.

Dalton’s fingers threaded through the silky brown hair that lay in soft curls along the back of Colby’s neck. He watched as Colby’s green eyes began to

shine brightly, and his pale skin flushed light pink. *My man is so easy*, Dalton thought as he leaned in and whispered, “Ahh, so, we’re *alone* at last?”

“Yes, we certainly are.” Colby’s mouth dipped to graze the juncture between Dalton’s neck and left shoulder, dropping hot kisses along the way. “So, you want to tell me what you’re searching for in my closet?” he softly asked.

A sexy growl erupted from Dalton as Colby’s sharp teeth playfully nipped at his earlobe. The touch of soft lips and the lavish attention of a warm, wet tongue tracing first the gauge and then the hoop above it soothed the tiny bit of pain away, temporarily wiping all thoughts from Dalton’s lust-filled mind.

“I’m t-trying to f-find...” *Damn*. His man still had what it took to get him going. Clearing his throat, he attempted to get his brain back into some sort of working order. “I’m trying to find the perfect shirt for you to wear on our date tonight.”

“Hmm... I don’t recall us having plans for tonight. Did I forget to put something on my calendar?” Colby inquired, his hand skimmed its way down the front of Dalton’s jeans in search of *something*, but it sure wasn’t a shirt out of his closet.

“N-no... this was something that just came up today,” Dalton breathlessly stuttered out.

Breathe, Dalton. Just breathe, ran through his mind as he tried to form coherent sentences while his lover’s hands made small circles on his belly. “I knew you wouldn’t want to miss a chance to see our godson.” Ahh, success. He’d conquered the fine art of speaking again.

Dalton’s heart pounded in anticipation when Colby’s fingertips reached his zipper and faster still as the tab moved down, tooth by excruciatingly slow tooth. Colby shifted his body, pressing their erections firmly against each other. The temperature seemed to skyrocket as Dalton shoved his hand into Colby’s hair and tugged his man’s head up, capturing his mouth in a hot, demanding kiss. Dalton’s back arched, closing the minute space that still remained between his and Colby’s rock-hard cocks. The sounds of moans surrounded them in the closed-in space of the closet, amping up the level of lust just that much more.

His sexy chuckle ghosting over Dalton’s ear, Colby’s seeking hand slid smoothly into the opened enclosure of the jeans. The gasp that escaped from Colby’s lips and the look of surprise on his face with the discovery of bare skin touching bare skin was something that Dalton never tired of hearing or seeing.

His hand wrapped firmly around Dalton's engorged cock and left a trail of heat with every stroke. Dalton could tell by the mischievous smirk he saw on Colby's face, the search was over. *Oh fuuuck*. Dalton gasped as Colby's finger repeatedly swiped through the precum that was dribbling from the slit of his cock. Dalton groaned as Colby's thumb got in on the action, gathering the creamy liquid and bringing it up to his now thoroughly kissed lips, twirling his tongue around it and sucking it into his mouth.

Dalton had never seen anything so damn erotic before in his life. The feeling of warmth spread through his belly with the realization that—*oh shit!*

He abruptly pushed away and swiveled his head back trying keep away from Colby's tempting, now dark-pink lips. "We really don't have time for this. Makayla and Harper got back from their trip today," Dalton informed Colby, holding back still yet another moan at the thought of the enticing moves of his lover.

"Kayla said they have some very important news that just *can't* wait until the weekend. So, umm... We're supposed to be heading over to their house for dinner in less than an hour. Which means we need to hurry, and if you remember, our last visit with them ended in you throwing out your favorite purple button-down shirt. So I was trying to find you a shirt that'd be babyproof."

"Uh huh, I see. And this is stopping us from sharing a few kisses, why?" Colby questioned as he pulled Dalton's shirt up over his chest to lick and then gently tug on the silver nipple ring. Colby could be extremely focused when it came to giving Dalton pleasure.

"Now, Colby. If I let you go any further with kissing and... you know." Dalton's train of thought was lost once again in the haze of what Colby was doing with his mouth and wandering hands. "Ummm... Like I said, we don't have time for this. We'd never make it in time for dinner."

"Now, Dalton," Colby mimicked with laughter in his voice. "You know that we always have time for a few kisses." Again with the whispering in his ear, "What if I promise that kissing is all that we'd be doing? That should give us plenty of time to get ready."

Dissuading Colby was obviously a lost cause, and really, who was he kidding? Like he had the willpower to deny his man anything. "Okaaay, fine," Dalton caved with an exaggerated sigh. Feeling the shudder that ran through his lover's body as his lips began to nibble their way from Colby's perfectly

shaped ear to his delectable mouth. Dalton slowly started walking them out of the closet. “But we’ll have to move this ‘kissing session’ to the shower, or we’ll *never* make it to their house on time,” he said, playfully smiling against Colby’s lips as he blindly reached back to grab a shirt.

Chapter Eleven

Surprise, surprise...

They were late. He knew they would be. Dalton whipped their new silver Audi RS7 into the circular drive and slammed on the brakes when they had reached the front of Makayla and Harper's two-story home. Makayla may not be able to cook worth a lick, but she sure could design a fabulous house. Throwing the car in park, he glanced over to see Colby grinning like a mad man.

"Wipe that stupid grin right off your face, you idiot," Dalton snapped, working very hard to suppress the smile that was trying to slip out. "This is all your fault. I told you that we'd be late, but nooooo, 'Just a few kisses' you said, 'We always have time for kisses' you said. Why in the world do I listen to you?" He finished with a growl as his forehead thunked against the soft curve of the steering wheel.

Dalton really, really wanted to give him a hard time, but Colby *really, really* looked great in the pink silk shirt. He truly doubted there'd ever come a time when he'd be able to resist Colby's knock-you-on-your-ass advances that always managed to drive him to distraction.

Damn, he gets to me every time.

Dalton shook his head, growled once more for good measure, and then pocketed his keys as they exited the car. Images of Makayla's frowning face acted as a great motivator to get their butts in gear. Sprinting around the front of the car, Dalton's hand automatically reached out for Colby's.

As their fingers entwined together, Dalton caught the seductive glance Colby gave him looking up through his dark bangs as he brought Dalton's larger hand to his lips, placing quick kisses along the knuckles. Which only earned Colby another glare as Dalton wasn't ready to let him off the hook just yet.

Dalton dragged a chuckling Colby up the redbrick walk that led them to the stained glassed door Harper had designed for his and Makayla's home. The rainbow of rich colors, harvest gold and sapphire blue with touches of emerald green and russet orange, shot out in a striking array as they reflected the light of the late evening sun.

His hand hadn't even made it to the doorbell when the door was dramatically thrown open by a very frazzled-looking Makayla. Her normally well-kempt curls were sticking up in every which way, reminding Dalton of the first day they had met. He wasn't sure if she was going to hug them or slug them as her face went from a scowl to a bright smile before she burst into tears and sniffled. "I'm glad you finally made it." Eyeballing Dalton up and down, she asked, "Where the hell, I mean heck, have you guys been?" With a glance towards Colby and seeing the obvious smirk on his face, she didn't give them a chance to reply. "No, don't answer that. I don't want to know what you two have been up to."

A cloud of sweet-smelling jasmine enveloped Dalton when Makayla grabbed him around the waist and held on tight, letting him know all was forgiven. With a "love you" and "missed you" Dalton leaned back and grinned as he said, "So, what's for dinner?"

A loud sniff was followed by a sharp slap to the side of his head, then a smiling Makayla turned to take Colby's arm. As he watched his lover and his best friend turn to walk away, Dalton caught the sheepishly guilty look on Colby's face as he gazed down at Makayla right before he ducked his head with a grin and a wink towards Dalton. Which confirmed what Dalton had known all along. His man had no shame.

Dalton noticed, as they made their way to the great room, that the pale lavender color Makayla had chosen for the entryway and hall served as a wonderful backdrop to display the framed black-and-white candid shots of the family and reflected her softer side that not all were lucky enough to see. They greeted Harper with manly pats on the back. He may have come around to seeing the light when it came to Makayla's men, but *hugging* just wasn't his thing.

The loud and repeated banging of a plastic toy meeting plastic tray and a demanding "I want to be picked up NOW!" squall brought all the adults' attention immediately to the main attraction of the evening—Bennett.

"Oh my god, look at how he's grown," Dalton exclaimed when he turned towards their godson. "Look at you, all decked out in green and white. Colby, check this out," he said pointing to Bennett's plaid bibbed overalls and the tiny Marshall baseball cap that was tilting at a precariously dangerous angle on his little head. Bennett started to shout "Unc Unc Unc" banging his toy on the jungle-themed bouncer in rhythm with his very vocal shouts as he jumped up and down. Colby playfully pushed Dalton to the side and lifted the, now

squealing, baby up. He gave him a light squeeze that had Bennett giggling and patting his cheeks with chubby little hands.

“There’s Uncle Colby’s big boy. Growing bigger every day. And keeping Mommy on her toes, I bet.”

Dalton stood motionless. Mesmerized. A quiet groan rose from his chest as he gazed at the smile on Colby’s face and the tenderness in his eyes as he carefully lifted Bennett high over his head. Bennett’s shrieks of delight bounced off the walls of the large room as he grinned down into Colby’s face with a look of pure joy. While Bennett continued to squeal at the top of his lungs, Dalton watched the roly-poly legs as they kicked a mile a minute, and his little body was wiggling so hard his arms were flailing left and right, causing his hat to fall to the floor. Colby raised him up... then down. Up... then down. Sounds of a buzzing airplane filled the air as Colby chuckled and brought Bennett down with a safe landing against his chest. His eyes met Dalton’s as he kissed the short, bright-red curls that covered the baby’s head. He returned Colby’s look with a smile and was totally blown away by the thought that he wanted *more*.

Concern gripped him tightly, but he turned and wrapped his arm around Makayla’s waist. Drawing her close to his side, he whispered in her ear, “I see that the son takes after his mother in more ways than one. Ahh, the memories. Ugh, the noise.” Dalton laughingly danced out of reach when Makayla lightheartedly attempted to punch him.

“You know you wouldn’t change a thing about either one of us. We’re perfect just the way we are. You just won’t admit it.”

Harper walked up behind Makayla and tenderly hugged her against his chest and cradled her stomach in the palms of his large hands. With a quick kiss on her head, he announced to the room, “Who cares what he thinks? I know that you’re perfect just the way you are. And I feel blessed for every day that I get to spend with you and our incredible son.”

If he hadn’t seen the change with his own eyes in the man standing before him, Dalton would’ve never believed that Harper could be the loving husband and father that he was today. Talk about how things have a way of changing and still others seem to stay the same.

His eyes shot straight to Colby. His love. His rock. The man that made his life complete. Except, now a little voice niggled in the back of his mind. The one that lets you know when something is wrong, or in this case, may be

missing. Butterflies fluttered in his stomach as Dalton gnawed on his lip with worry. Colby would be there for him. Stand by him no matter what the problem. But, how do you tell the man who has been your everything, for over ten years, that you now need something more?

His thoughts were interrupted when Bennett threw himself into Dalton's arms with only an "Unc Dal!" for warning. Dalton managed to successfully catch the ever-moving baby without dropping him on his head with some quick thinking and a "Whoops, I got him."

Holding on tightly to his delightful armload, he sat down on the cream-colored leather sofa and attempted to get comfortable with the squirming—hands in your hair, down your shirt, fingers up your nose—bouncing ball of energy on his lap. Harper pulled Makayla into his arms to cuddle with him on the matching love seat. And Colby plopped down beside Dalton, all the while laughing at Bennett's antics as he proceeded to totally destroy all semblance of order to Dalton's person.

Catching a strange look being passed between Harper and Makayla, Dalton smiled as he knew the time for the *great reveal* had finally arrived.

Softly clearing her throat, Makayla placed her hands on top of Harper's that were once again resting around her waist. "Colby, Dalton, there is a very special reason why Harper and I wanted to see you tonight. Even though we'd been expecting to make this announcement a few more years down the road..."

"Drama queen, much?" Colby whispered while gently removing Bennett's finger from Dalton's ear.

"Colby Stevens! Would you just shush for a minute and listen to me."

With a smirk on his face, Colby leaned back into the soft leather of the sofa and with a flick of his wrist motioned for Makayla to continue. Dalton and Harper just sat quietly in their seats and watched the scene play out as they tried to hide their laughter behind their hands.

"Now, as I was sayin' before I was so rudely interrupted," Makayla said as she sassily flicked her hair. "Colby, Dalton, in about five months you guys are going to be proud godparents to a precious baby girl."

Colby sputtered, and Dalton gasped at the shock of the news. Dalton knew that Makayla and Harper had both agreed when Bennett had been born over a year ago that they wanted to wait until he was in school before they tried to have another child. A twinge of something—*jealousy?*—raced through him. He

was surprised and slightly ashamed by how Makayla's announcement was affecting him. She was his best friend. This was an exciting moment in their lives. He should be happy for them, and he truly was. Except, why did it feel like they were getting what he and Colby could never have?

"Uh, how? When? How—" Dalton knew he sounded like an idiot, but he couldn't seem to get a damn sentence to form in his confused brain.

Colby, of course, didn't even hesitate. He jumped up, reached down to grab Makayla and gave her a great big hug as he congratulated Harper on a job well done. The evil look Makayla threw his way just egged him on.

"Don't worry, little mama. Your work will begin in a few months."

To which Harper quickly responded, "Thank god my work here is done."

From Daddy's mouth to Bennett's ears. He had caught the sound of his daddy's voice and began chanting as loud as he could, "Dada. Dada. Dada, up."

Harper got up from the love seat, and with a "come here, little man," took Bennett into his arms and held his son close. "Well, I guess when it comes to my kids, my work will never be done. But it'll always be a labor of love."

A loud sob, that sounded like it had risen from the depths of her soul, erupted from Makayla as she abruptly jumped up. All heads quickly shifted to see her swipe a hand across her cheek, trying to stop the flow of tears that were suddenly streaming from her big brown eyes. Pushing past Harper, she ran from the room.

"Oh, crap." Harper frowned as he dropped back down onto the love seat. He handed Bennett a bright-yellow rubber ducky to play with from the selection of toys sitting on the oval coffee table. "I keep forgetting that the smallest thing will upset her for no apparent reason, and then off she runs. I'm afraid this is going to be a very long four or five months."

"Will she be okay? Should one of us go check on her? How long will this last? Why..." Colby and Harper's loud outburst of laughter silenced Dalton and caused Bennett to frantically grab Harper around the neck with his chubby little arms. His chin quivered. A single tear escaped from his eyes slowly working its way down his cheek. A whimper followed, which quickly escalated into full heart-wrenching cries.

Harper rose and began to pace the room while gently rocking and patting the baby on the back. Little sounds of "shhh" and "Daddy loves you" could be

heard in between the wails that were emanating from Bennett's tiny little lungs. Harper's persistence was rewarded as Bennett's anguished sobs began to quiet and finally came to an end with a sniff and a hiccup. The indescribable longing to feel his own child in his arms, to comfort and love, reinforced the idea that this was what Dalton wanted. His own family with Colby. Now the question was, how did he go about getting what his heart desired?

Chapter Twelve

Choices made...

“Dinner’s on the table,” Makayla announced from the dining room. All three men jumped instantaneously to their feet. Dalton felt all warm inside when he caught the look of love and understanding that passed between Makayla and Harper. Colby took his hand, giving it a slight squeeze and led him into the dining room. Dalton glanced over to him just in time to receive a similar look of his own from Colby. Bennett, giggling gleefully as Harper *airplaned* him into the dining room, broke the spell. Everyone quickly sat down with Bennett having the place of honor in his new seat that attached to the table.

“Oh my word, Makayla, this all looks and smells wonderful. Been taking cooking lessons, have you?” Colby asked with a smirk on his face.

“Colby Stevens, shush your mouth. You know I can’t cook worth a damn,” Makayla shot back.

Harper jumped in, “Language.” He shrugged his wide shoulders and went on to explain, “Makayla and I are both trying to break our habit of bad language before Bennett’s old enough to start repeating every single word we say.”

“Well, I think that’s a great idea. I’m sure Colby will agree with me, and we’ll be more careful with what we say from now on. Can’t have our little man running around shocking everyone with some of the words that I’ve heard come out of Makayla’s mouth over the years.” Dalton’s hand flew up just in time to catch the warm dinner roll that came flying straight for his head.

“Yes, well then, back to the meal. As you’ll know, Mama and Daddy gave up hope a long time ago of me ever being able to cook. So they take pity on Harper and keep our freezer well stocked.” Makayla’s impish grin had all three men sighing in relief; their happy-go-lucky girl was back.

Everyone dug into the delicious-smelling pot roast with caramelized onions, carrots, and new red potatoes with gusto. The rattle of cutlery hitting the plates was the only sound to be heard in the room for the next few minutes except for the frequent moans of appreciation being made by one and all. The occasional banging of Bennett’s spoon against his favorite green, plastic plate indicated that food wasn’t being placed on it as quickly as he was managing to get it down. Big eyes and a huge, sweet, almost-toothless grin worked their magic as he’d look to Harper or Makayla demanding his fair share of the food.

Pushing his now-empty plate away, Dalton placed his chin on his entwined fingers as his elbows rested on the table contemplating the scene before him. This habit had gotten him into trouble more than once over the years. His mama had a strict “elbows off the table” rule in her home and she enforced it to this day. He watched in fascination as his friends interacted during the meal. Each one sneaking tiny bites of *grown-up* food to Bennett. Harper’s hand finding its way to gently caress Makayla’s on the way to and from Bennett’s plate. Then there was Colby, pressing his thigh against Dalton’s as he’d stretch over for another roll. Or absentmindedly running his fingers along Dalton’s arm as he was making funny faces to get Bennett to laugh.

As the others finished their last few bites of the scrumptious meal, a feeling of melancholy swept through him and must’ve shown on his face because Harper, of all people, called him on it.

“Dalton, you don’t seem to be yourself tonight. Is there something Makayla and I can do to help?”

Dalton watched as Colby’s brows pulled down as he turned to face him and knew that the inquisition was about begin.

“Babe, is Harper right? Is something bothering you? Did I miss one of our anniversaries this year?”

Dalton had to laugh at that last one because Colby never missed an important date. It was always him running around like a maniac at the last minute to get a gift for Colby. And yes, one year he completely missed their the-day-we-met anniversary. Not that Colby allowed him to feel bad about it. He’d just wrapped him tight in his loving arms, made sweet love to him and whispered that every single day they spent together was special.

“No, no... I’m fine, really. Just been having a few rough days at work. I’ve got this one kid that’s really breaking my heart. I know I’ll get it worked out. That’s my job. But, sometimes it just kills me to see the suffering that they’ve gone through.”

Makayla laid her hand over Dalton’s and squeezed gently. “You know that we’re here for you, right? Just like you were there for me the day we met.”

“Harper, have you heard that story?” Colby inquired.

“Oh, please... no,” Dalton exclaimed, his hand flying up to cover his eyes as he unsuccessfully tried to keep a straight face.

“Many times. And I mean many, many times. Dalton the savior of little girls. Dalton the adventurer. Dalton, Dalton, Dalton. They’ve practically been glued at the hip since kindergarten.”

Taking in all the love and joy that was flowing through the room, Dalton couldn’t believe that he wasn’t completely content with his wonderful life just the way it was. Why did he feel the need to complicate everything by possibly asking more of Colby than he may be able to give? The man had given him a life that he could’ve never even known to dream of, and he sure wasn’t going to fuck that up. So, no more thinking about babies and such. He was going to appreciate the blessed life that he had and leave it at that.

“...if he hadn’t been gay, Makayla probably would’ve had a ring on his finger before the end of first semester of college,” Harper was saying as Dalton became aware that the conversation had continued on without him, “and if you guys hadn’t set me straight all those years ago, no pun intended, I might have lost the love of my life to plain stupidity.” Harper took Makayla’s hand and lifted it to his lips before placing gentle kisses on each knuckle.

Dalton leaned over to playfully nuzzle Colby’s ear and whisper, “Love you, babe.”

“I know you do. So, why don’t you quit trying to sidetrack us and tell me what’s bothering you, and don’t start that *I’m fine* shit... uhh, crap, either,” Colby told him, a blush coming over his cheeks from Makayla’s stern frown.

“No. Shit. I mean shoot. Sorry, Kayla.” Dalton shrugged his shoulders and turned to Colby. “Don’t think that. I love you. Our life is great.”

“Yes,” Colby agreed, his voice so quiet, Dalton was sure that no one else at the table could hear. “Our life *is* great.” He brought his forehead over to rest on Dalton’s. “And you know that you’re my life. Now, tell me, babe, what the hell is wrong?”

The sincerity in Colby’s words made Dalton’s heart swell to almost bursting. It was obvious that his decision to let the issue drop wasn’t going to work, nausea churned in his gut, and yet at the same time, he felt relieved.

Knowing it was now or never, he pointed to Harper and Makayla, and the words just shot out.

“I want what they have.”

Colby’s questioning eyes instantly shot towards Makayla and Harper. With dumbfounded looks on their faces, they both were shaking their heads, Makayla mouthing, “I have no clue.”

“Dalton. Honey. What do Harper and I have that you want?”

Fuck. This wasn't how he'd intended to tell Colby, as usual, he'd been putting it off, hoping something would just pop up in conversation during the evening that would've led to the perfect time to say—*Hey, let's have a baby!* But, of course, that never happened.

“I want us to have a baby,” he said softly, his gaze bouncing from face to face.

Fuck, now I sound like a freakin' girl.

Dalton's forehead hit the table with a thump.

He desperately needed to know what Colby was thinking. Even though his love, his need for Colby would never change, his desire to have a child with him would change their lives forever. Was Colby *ready* for a change like that? Hell. Was *he* ready for a change like that? *Yes.* So, after digging deep down for the courage he needed to see him through this, Dalton did the manly thing. He peeked up through his bangs and there it was... that smile. Colby's beautiful smile that could light up any room.

Between that smile and the feel of Colby's hand as it rubbed lovingly up and down his back he was reminded that Colby was always there for him no matter what, and he began to think that this just might work out.

“Have I ruined everything?” Dalton asked while watching Colby closely.

“Oh love, how about you and I talk this over first? Before you start worrying that our relationship is doomed. Okay? Does that sound like a plan? 'Cause you know how much I like having a plan.”

“Yeah, you always seem to have one... or three,” Dalton said with a slight smile as he raised his head.

“Come on, babe. I think this is something we need to talk about in private.”

And in the blink of an eye, they were up and moving.

“Guys, congratulations! Totally excited about the wonderful news. Dinner was great. We'll call. Dinner at our place next time.” Colby kept up a running commentary while dropping a quick kiss to the top of Bennett's little head as he rounded the table. Hugs for Makayla, and well... a handshake for Harper. Then he and Dalton were making a beeline for the front door in no time at all.

“Come on. Let's go figure this out” was all Dalton heard as he was being pushed towards the front door by a very determined Colby.

Chapter Thirteen

Questions asked...

Within minutes they were zooming down Third Avenue, and the silence was so loud that it was driving Dalton crazy.

“Turn here,” Colby demanded. “Make a left onto Hal Greer. Please?”

With a frown, Dalton made the turn, glancing over to see what Colby’s plan was now. Because, like he’d said earlier, he always had a plan. Heading through the viaduct, Dalton was ready to demand an explanation, when...

“Make a right—right now!” Colby’s excitement was evident not only by the tone of his voice but also by the fact that he was practically bouncing in his seat.

What the hell is he up to?

He made the turn, slowed the car to a stop, then Dalton rolled his eyes and pointed at the building.

“Davis’ Place? Seriously? You want to stop for a freakin’ drink? Why didn’t you just say so in the first place?” Dalton asked with a growl.

Throwing his door open, Colby yelled, “Come on, have a little faith here. Have I ever steered you wrong before?”

Climbing out of the car, Dalton quickly tapped the *lock* button and barely got his keys into his pocket before Colby was around the front of the Audi grabbing his hand with a jerk. He barely managed to keep from being yanked clear off his feet.

“Come on. Come on. Right over here will be perfect.”

As his lover pulled him into the partially darkened alley behind the sports bar, the realization of what was happening became clear to Dalton, and finally he knew exactly where Colby was going with this. His man certainly did have a plan.

“Yeah, this looks about right,” Colby said as he quickly looked right, then left. “Do you remember the first time we were in an alley together? And look how great that plan worked out for us.” Colby’s eyes were shining bright, even in the dim glow of the dirty streetlight above them. He gently pushed Dalton’s back against the cinder block wall and moved in close while inching one hand

firmly around Dalton's waist and the other one softly caressing Dalton's cheek. Colby touched his lips to Dalton's. His kiss gentle and sweet. "Now, love, tell me. Tell me exactly what you want."

"Okay." Dalton tilted his head back against the hard wall and squinted up at the star filled sky. "Okay, I'm not sure where to start. Damn, you're determined to be my *first* everything, aren't you? You were the first guy to kiss me."

"And I'd better be the last damn man to kiss you." Colby growled, sending shivers of excitement through Dalton.

"Yeah, well, not seeing that being a problem in our future. Then there is the fact that you were the first guy to love me. But, what I really need to know... are you ready for another first? To have a baby with me?"

The cheeky grin should've been his first clue of what was coming, but he still was slightly shocked by Colby's response.

"Hey, love, I have an idea." Colby leaned in and began placing soft, featherlight kisses along Dalton's slightly stubbled jawline. "I know this is coming from way out of left field, but, here goes. Why don't we have a baby?" Colby asked as he raised his brows in a comical questioning manner as if he had been the one to think of it first.

The true meaning behind Colby's joking response was enough to make Dalton want to laugh and cry at the same time. With the joy rising up inside of him, he pulled his wonderful partner in to give him a totally "knock your socks off... I can't live without you" kiss. The feel of Colby's erection, quickly growing longer and harder by the minute, brought a grin of what could only be called smug satisfaction to Dalton's face. To his way of thinking, it was irrefutable proof that even after all these years together, he still had what it took to get his man going.

He had no idea why he'd ever doubted Colby. This was his man. The one that had stood by him every day for the past ten years. Why did he think this would change that love and support?

"Seriously? You want to have a baby with me? Don't just say that because you think it's what I want to hear. Babies are... Well, they're... I mean. They're loud!"

"Savannah is loud," came the snarky reply.

"And need lots of attention."

"Savannah demands lots of attention."

Dalton chose to ignore that comment.

“Things. They need lots of things, and did I mention that they’re loud?” Dalton gently placed a hand on each side of Colby’s face. “I love you. You’re my world. I’m afraid you’ll think that…” Dalton’s eyes filled to almost overflowing with tears as he tried to put into words his greatest fear.

“Babe. I know. I understand.” Colby, rapidly blinking, trying unsuccessfully to clear the tears from his eyes, pressed his forehead against Dalton’s. “Please, trust me when I say there is nothing I can think of that I want more than to have a family with you. Savannah needs a couple of brothers or sisters to give her the love and attention she feels she deserves.” Colby finished with a grin. He placed his hands over Dalton’s and leaned in for a kiss.

With the touch of Colby’s lips to his, Dalton could feel the love, the caring that Colby felt for him and he allowed himself to accept that it would all work out.

The soft caress of lips on lips. Warmth radiated through him as they kissed and murmured words of love to each other accompanied by gentle touches here and there. Dalton ran his fingers through Colby’s soft hair, noticing that with the long hours Colby had been putting in at the hospital, he needed a haircut.

Oh, my god. Here I am being thoroughly seduced by my one and only love, and I’m thinking about him needing a haircut? What the hell? That makes us sound just like we’re an old married couple.

Then it hit him. It was like being struck by lightning. Yes, he wanted to have a baby... or two with Colby. But, in his heart he knew there was something even more important that he needed.

Dalton slowly pulled away from Colby’s lips. It took great effort. But this time, Dalton was the one with a plan.

First, he looked to the right down the alley and then left towards the street. Dalton saw no one, not even a pedestrian walking by. There was no nervousness, no jitters. Dalton knew this was right. He took Colby’s hands in his own and dropped to one knee.

“What the hell?”

“Shh, my love. It’s my turn to be a first for you,” Dalton said with a wink and gave Colby a smile bright enough to light up a whole city block. “Now, where was I? Colby Matthew Stevens... I’ve loved you for over ten years, from the very moment our eyes first met. I’m thankful that you had a plan... or three

and that you never gave up on me. The feelings that you stirred in me back then are only a fraction of what you've come to mean to me today. So, what I'd like to know... Will you marry me?"

Dalton could barely hold back his grin when he saw the shock on Colby's face. *Yes!* He'd done it. His man hadn't seen that one coming. Dalton had spent the last ten years following Colby's lead with his plans and take-charge personality because Colby made life so easy. But this? This was the one time Dalton knew he had to step up to the plate and make the first move. If the smile on Colby's face and the tears rolling down his cheeks were anything to go by, he knew he'd made the right choice.

Damn. He'd actually done it. Proposed. In a freakin' alley of all places. The love that he felt for this wonderful man made all things seem possible. He didn't even try to hold back his own flood of tears.

Epilogue

Colby

Questions answered...

Unashamedly allowing his tears to fall, Colby didn't even hesitate before answering the most important question of his life when there was only one response that he'd ever want to give. "Even though you may have not realized it, you've been my *first* many times over in our life together. Believe me when I say, you've always been *my* first. You were the first person to truly love me. So, yes. A hundred times over. Yes! Nothing would make me prouder than to call you my husband. Ten wonderful years together, and one thing has never changed. You are *my* dream. You'll always be my dream. A baby? Marriage to you? They'll just make my dream even more spectacular."

As Dalton's grin began to grow, Colby was happy to see the confident man that he knew and loved was back. Tugging on both of Dalton's hands, Colby pulled him to his feet and clasped his arms firmly around the love of his life.

"Thank you," Dalton whispered as he brought his lips a breath away from Colby's.

"Thank you for always being there for me." Millimeter by millimeter those lips drew closer until they pressed gently onto Colby's. His lips tempting him now as they had tempted him ten years ago.

"Your love has been the one thing that has seen me through the rough days these last few years and as you know, with my work, I've had more than my fair share of bad days." Slightly pulling back, the tip of his tongue peeked out and lightly brushed across Colby's bottom lip. Then he proceeded to place tiny kisses across the smile that Colby couldn't seem to hold back.

"The love that you've shown me..." His mouth covered Colby's, gently pressing in, his tongue exploring.

Dalton drew back, and his lips curved into a smile. "I'm really glad that we both agree that now is the right time to start a family."

"Maybe we could begin by giving a child without a home... one that's full of love and understanding?" Colby asked as he let all of the love that he felt for his wonderful caring man to shine through.

“I promise I’ll never doubt your love for me again. But please, don’t expect too much planning from me in the near future. I think it’ll be hard to top this.” Smug. Yes, smug would be the word to describe his man, his *husband-to-be*.

Colby just gave in and let his heart lead him. Nothing existed except his focus on Dalton’s tantalizing mouth. His hands wrapped around Dalton’s shoulders to pull him in tight. Colby captured his lips in a demanding kiss as he pushed his tongue in and tangled it with Dalton’s. Nose’s bumping. Teeth nipping. Hands frantically grabbing. Gasps of breath quickly being drawn in. Neither one of them willing to break the heated contact of mouth on mouth. This was a moment in his life that he wanted to remember forever. The feel of being surrounded by his man’s love. Knowing with certainty that for the first time, he was the most important person in someone else’s life. The joy and love he felt was indescribable.

Finally, Colby had no choice but to pull his head away long enough to take in some much needed air. His heart racing so fast that he thought it was going to leap right out of his chest. A kaleidoscope of emotions had him babbling under his breath as he dropped tender kisses along the curve of Dalton’s neck, “My heart, my soul, my life.”

The feel of Dalton softly brushing his lips across his ear sent another wave of longing through Colby’s body. Then he heard Dalton whisper.

“Do you know what made all of these wonderful things possible? The most extraordinary thing of all? Ten years ago I met a guy. He came barreling into my life. He shook me up, and when I came down, I landed right where I was meant to be all along... in your sweet loving arms. My life is better than any dream that I could’ve ever imagined... because you kissed me.”

The End

Author Bio

Lexzi Jerald hails from a small town in the mountains of West Virginia. She enjoys spending time with her friends, family, and especially, her two amazing grandchildren. On those rare occasions when she finds herself alone, she is usually curled up and reading a book about sweet men and even sweeter kisses.

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